



## **Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas**

# **Report on Bright Start, the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare: a Strategic Framework and Key First Actions**

**December 2013**



Foyle Women's  
Information  
Network



## *Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas*

This research has been undertaken collaboratively by the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas, which is funded by the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland.

The Consortium consists of established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups working in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. The seven groups are as follows:

- Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project Lead
- Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- Women's Support Network (WSN)
- Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- Women's TEC
- Women's Centre Derry (WCD)
- Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

The Consortium will be the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas (D&RA) including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium will ensure that there is a continuous two way flow of information between government and the sector. It will ensure that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium will ascertain the views, needs and aspirations of women in D&RA and take these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which will ultimately result in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

## **Contents**

	<b>Page</b>
1. Introduction	3
2. Research objectives	4
3. Methodology	4
4. Content of Bright Start	5
5. Responses to <i>Towards a Childcare Strategy</i>	8
6. Conclusion, recommendations and summary of findings	19
7. Bibliography	28
8. Appendices	30

## 1. Introduction

The overall aim of this paper is to critically examine, from the perspective of women in disadvantaged and rural areas in Northern Ireland, the content of the latest childcare policy document issued by the Northern Ireland Executive - namely, *Bright Start, the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare: a Strategic Framework and Key First Actions* (hereafter, Bright Start).

Bright Start is presented by the Executive as a key stage toward fulfilment of its commitment to develop 'a strategic direction and actions that will deliver joined-up and affordable childcare',<sup>1</sup> ultimately culminating in the planned publication of a substantive childcare strategy in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Both Bright Start and the planned full strategy are part of the Executive's *Delivering Social Change* agenda, which seeks to tackle poverty and social exclusion on an interdepartmental, 'cross-cutting' basis.<sup>3</sup> Bright Start follows directly on from another key stage in the development of the government's childcare policy: its consultation on *Towards a Childcare Strategy: a Consultation Document* (hereafter, TCS), which was released in December 2012.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially and consequently, Bright Start has also been presented as 'fully taking into account' insight into the precise nature of the gap between childcare supply and demand in Northern Ireland gained from research, consultation events and written responses in respect of TCS.<sup>5</sup> More precisely, provision under Bright Start is characterised by the Executive as having '*been developed in line with priorities that emerged from responses*' to TCS.<sup>6</sup> Included among the latter were responses from three members of the Women's Regional Consortium: WRDA, WSN and TWN, which contained policy recommendations that addressed the specific childcare

---

<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, *Bright Start, the Northern Ireland Executive's Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare: a Strategic Framework and Key First Actions*, NIE: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Towards a Childcare Strategy: a Consultation Document*, OFMDFM: Belfast, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> NIE, *op. cit.*, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

needs and interests of women in rural and disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland.

Against this background, in order to examine the extent to which Bright Start takes account of substantive childcare issues affecting women in rural and disadvantaged areas, the paper will critically compare the document's proposals with those recommendations contained in Consortium members' responses to TCS.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The central research question addressed in this paper is this:

- to what extent does Bright Start take account of the specific childcare needs and interests of women in rural and disadvantaged areas, as captured in policy recommendations contained within Consortium members' responses to TCS?

In light of this question, three research objectives present themselves:

- to explore the extent to which Bright Start addresses the specific and particular childcare needs and interests of women in disadvantaged and rural areas in Northern Ireland;
- to identify key omissions from Bright Start that indicate a lack of responsiveness to these needs and interests; and,
- to formulate recommendations in respect of the development of the Executive's substantive childcare strategy, which could compensate for these omissions.

## **3. Methodology**

The principal methodological approach employed in this paper is comparative analysis, whereby the content of Bright Start is critically compared with the substance of policy recommendations contained within Consortium members' responses to TCS.

As noted, three Consortium members submitted responses to TCS: WRDA, WSN and TWN. In addition, three others were partners in the organisation of focus groups that informed two of these responses: Women's Centre Derry, FWIN and NIRWN.

Women’s Centre Derry was among the partners involved in the organisation of focus groups that informed WSN’s response, whilst FWIN and NIRWN were among the partners behind the organisation of consultation events that informed WRDA’s response. The policy recommendations contained within these responses are summarised and examined in sections 5 and 6, while Appendices 1-3 detail them verbatim.

Following the publication of Bright Start, NIRWN held a focus group to collate the views of women in rural areas on the document’s content. These views are also summarised and explored in sections 5 and 6 and then set out verbatim in Appendix 4.

In sum, the comparative approach employed in this paper seeks to explore the shortfall between what was recommended for childcare policy by the women’s sector in Northern Ireland in respect of TCS, as captured by Consortium members’ responses, and what was actually delivered under Bright Start in terms of its key proposals.

We begin by laying out first the content of Bright Start and then the content of Consortium members’ responses to TCS. Both are then critically compared, resulting in the identification of key inclusions within, and omissions from, Bright Start that determine its level of responsiveness to these responses. The findings from NIRWN’s focus group on Bright Start are then introduced, providing a critical rural perspective on the document. The paper concludes by setting out policy recommendations to take account of these omissions and then summarising the project’s key findings.

#### **4. Content of Bright Start**

Bright Start sets out the framework for delivery of the Northern Ireland Executive’s ‘vision’ for ‘joined-up and affordable childcare’, described as a ‘framework of high quality provision and associated parental choice’.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, this provision includes a range of fifteen ‘first key actions’, including pilot schemes, which *‘have been developed in line with priorities that emerged from [stakeholder] responses’* to TCS.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.14.

Delivery proposed under these schemes aims at potentially providing for ‘up to’ 7,000 childcare places at a cost of ‘up to’ £15m.<sup>9</sup>

This proposed provision cuts across the following categories of delivery: community childcare; ‘wraparound’ childcare;<sup>10</sup> school age childcare; rural childcare; childcare information; childcare workforce development; and, provision for children with a disability. It is intended that the actions will be implemented over a phased basis and that their implementation will be monitored by a stakeholder forum prior to the publication in 2014 of the substantive childcare strategy. Table 1 reproduces the document’s own summary of these first key actions.

It is important to note that the budgetary provision supporting Bright Start was never intended to support existing projects from departmental baselines, but rather was exclusively reserved for new childcare initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 1 – Bright Start - First Key Actions<sup>12</sup>**

<p><i>School age childcare</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Commitment to ‘sustain and create’ 3,000 childcare places for ‘families in need’ across the 25% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland within social enterprise providers; a figure which may increase subject to demand.</li><li>▪ Commitment to pilot wraparound care in the schools estate across Northern Ireland: initial target is 2,000 places, with potential for additional 1,000, dependant on demand.</li><li>▪ Tariffs for places under Wraparound and Community Programmes will be ‘based on ability to pay’.</li></ul> <p><i>Rural childcare</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Commitment to the phased introduction of a ‘Rural Childminder Start-Up</li></ul>
---

<sup>9</sup> NIA, Official Report (Hansard), Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Bright Start: Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, 2 October 2013, NIA: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Provision before and after the school day.

<sup>11</sup> NIA, Hansard, AQW 26655/11-15, 2 October 2013.

<sup>12</sup> NIE, op. cit., pp.13-14.

Package', with potential to create up to an additional 1,000 places.

- Commitment to support 'locally based transport schemes in rural areas, servicing networks of childminders in rural locations'.
- Commitment to a social enterprise programme, potentially generating up to 1,000 new affordable, school age childcare places.

#### *Childcare for children with a disability*

- Commitment to fund two additional phases of the DHSSPS-led pilot 'Improving Outcomes for Disabled Children', providing modest capital grants and training provision for registered childcare providers for children with a disability.

#### *Better access to information on childcare and related financial support*

- Commitment to upgrade the Family Support Website to a 'central source' of childcare information at local levels.
- Development of a social media application (App) for childcare information.
- Promotion of above through a publicity campaign.
- Promotion of the financial assistance available to the many parents who find the costs of childcare a challenge, with a view to stimulating uptake, perhaps through an awareness-raising campaign.

#### *Workforce Development*

- Support for a training programme for childcare workforce.
- Promotion of 'good quality training' of unemployed people as pathway to childcare employment.
- Promotion of continuing professional development in childcare sector and increased employment from among currently under-represented groups.

#### *Management Arrangements*

- Establishment of a Childcare Strategy Management Forum to scrutinise and review how the key first actions are being implemented.

## 5. Consortium Members' Responses to TCS: Policy Recommendations

This section sketches the policy recommendations contained within Consortium members' written responses to TCS.

As previously observed, the policy recommendations contained within WRDA's and WSN's responses to TCS captured the views of women in rural and disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland on how their specific childcare needs should best be publicly addressed at the level of policy. While TWN's response focussed on many of the same issues, its response was not directly based on focus group or consultation event engagement.

Inevitably, since all three responses identified and addressed shared challenges faced by these women, there was a considerable degree of convergence in the substance and emphasis of their policy recommendations. Consequently, all three comprised suggestions that urged the Executive to address:

(a) specific issues pertaining to different categories of childcare *demand*, including provision for: rural communities; children with disabilities; ethnic minority and Traveller families; and, families in poverty; as well as,

(b) specific issues pertaining to different categories/types of childcare *supply*: nursery (0-3); pre-school (3-4); and, school age childcare (5-14), including workforce development issues for childcare providers.

The rationale underlying these policy recommendations had two primary overlapping dimensions. Firstly, the recommendations appealed for childcare provision expressly geared to protect and promote the best interests of children, fulfilling their developmental and play needs while also safeguarding their well-being. And, secondly, they further appealed for provision intrinsically geared to promote the

economic participation of women in the public sphere, by supporting their entry, retention and advancement in the labour market, training and education.<sup>13</sup>

The content of these recommendations may be broadly summarised as follows:

- *the Northern Ireland Executive was urged to provide for 'joined-up', strategic childcare, which responds meaningfully and comprehensively to the particular and specific childcare needs and interests of women and families in disadvantaged and rural areas in Northern Ireland, i.e. available, accessible, affordable, high quality, age-appropriate, sustainable, integrated, diverse and flexible childcare, underpinned by commitment to the principle of equity in provision across all 'constituencies of need'.*<sup>14</sup>

Of course, as is widely accepted, the substance of these recommendations merely reiterated and underscored information that had already been presented by the women's sector, and more widely the voluntary and community sector, to the Northern Ireland Executive 'over many years',<sup>15</sup> whether through research reports,<sup>16</sup> or in response to other consultation exercises, on childcare and related issues.

The remainder of this section sets out these policy recommendations in more detail.

## 5.1 WRDA Policy Recommendations - Summary

WRDA's response to TCS contained 37 policy recommendations in total, termed 'suggestions for improvement'. Table 2 captures these suggestions in paraphrased and summarised form, while they are listed more fully and verbatim in Appendix 1.

**Table 2 - WRDA Policy Suggestions in Response to TCS: Summary**

- Commitment to learn from Scottish childcare model
- Replication of South Armagh Childcare Consortium model
- Lead department on childcare replete with minister for childcare
- Improved, integrated, readily available childcare and financial support information, with special consideration for 'hard to reach' groups

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between childcare and maximising the economic participation of women see R. McQuaid, H Graham & M. Shapira, *Child Care: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase 'constituencies of need' is borrowed from Bright Start.

<sup>15</sup> WSN, *A Response to: Towards A Childcare Strategy*. WSN: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Women's Centres' Regional Partnership, Childcare Mapping and Research Report 2010*, WCRP: Belfast, 2010.

- Affordable, flexible, accessible, childcare
- Expansion/reform of tax credit and childcare voucher systems
- Further subsidy of provision
- Incentivisation of childminding among benefit claimants
- Improved, integrated transport in support of 'wraparound' childcare provision, emphasis on rural
- Extension of Sure Start provision
- Extension of school day; standardisation of school terms
- Provision outside core working hours
- Incentivisation of provision for children with disabilities and/or special needs
- Use of schools estate for wraparound childcare, to include use of classroom assistants
- Improved use of summer schemes
- Enhanced rural provision
- Workforce development for childcare staff
- Integrated/sustainable provision

## 5.2 WSN Policy Recommendations - Summary

The concluding section of WSN's written response to TCS underscored the key policy recommendations contained within the main body of the response. Table 3 summarises these recommendations, while they are listed more fully in Appendix 2.

**Table 3 – WSN Policy Recommendations in Response to TCS: Summary**

- Age-appropriate childcare
- 'Proper sustainable funding' for childcare provision in women's centres
- Choice-based, affordable childcare that plugs gaps in provision
- Improved access to information
- Integration of education and care
- Review of holiday childcare provision
- Provision outside core working hours
- Improved quality of childcare training and increased funding of same

- Provision to meet specific needs of children with disabilities and/or special needs and also those from ethnic minority families
- Simplification of tax credit system
- Proper provision in rural areas: access to affordable, local childcare; and, improved transport
- Childcare strategy, once drafted, should be consulted on
- ‘Major injection of funding’ required
- Impact of welfare reform on supply/demand should be properly addressed
- ‘In-depth appraisal of the sector’
- Lead department on childcare supported by cross-departmental working

### 5.3 TWN Policy Recommendations – Summary

Table 4 summarises the policy recommendations contained in TWN’s written response to TCS, while they are listed verbatim in Appendix 3.

**Table 4 - TWN Policy Recommendations in Response to TCS: Summary<sup>17</sup>**

- Policy must ‘take into account specific situation of women’, including vulnerable mothers
- An ‘effective and accessible childcare strategy’, comprising provisions that ‘fight discrimination against women in the labour market’
- Provision ‘must suit the needs of working parents’
- A more ‘flexible, informal childcare system’, including tax credit scheme
- Adaptation of childcare provision, training, qualifications and information to meet specific needs of ethnic minority communities
- Gender awareness training for childcare staff
- Lead department required, but childcare provision should be treated as a cross-departmental issue
- Incentives for employers to provide childcare facilities
- ‘Widespread and easy access’ to childcare information

<sup>17</sup> TWN, Towards a Childcare Strategy. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.twnonline.com/policy-research/response-to-consultations/349-towards-a-childcare-strategy>

- Need to 'keep an eye' on ongoing childcare challenges
- 'Integrated and prioritised childcare strategy'

#### **5.4 Comparative Summary: Inclusions and Omissions**

This section pulls together and compares information from the preceding sections on (a) the actual content of Bright Start; with (b) the content of WRDA's, WSN's and TWN's responses to TCS.

Recall that the rationale underpinning the policy recommendations contained in these responses was characterised by two overlapping ambitions: first, to realise childcare provision that promotes the best interests of the child; and, second, to realise provision that also maximises the economic participation of women in the public sphere. Bright Start affirmed this rationale by noting how, through implementation of the framework and the full strategy, the Executive 'will address the developmental needs of children and [also] ... help the many parents who want to work, train, or study, to do so'.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, it is projected that both Bright Start and the planned comprehensive 2014 strategy should facilitate 'enhanced levels of economic activity, greater gender equality, and reduced child poverty'.<sup>19</sup>

Within this context and on the positive side, as Table 1 above illustrates, the first key actions outlined in Bright Start broadly address many of the recommendations contained within the three Consortium members' responses to TCS. This includes addressing key recommendations in respect of rural provision and transport; use of schools estate for 'wraparound' childcare; affordability; flexibility; school age childcare; accessibility; workforce development in childcare provision; childcare information and financial support; provision for families in poverty; and, childcare for children with disabilities. Additionally, Bright Start addressed a further key recommendation by affirming that a lead department with overall responsibility for the childcare strategy will be identified when the latter is published in 2014.

---

<sup>18</sup> NIE, op. cit., p.10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.11.

That said, there are substantive omissions from Bright Start provision, which leave unaddressed a range of central policy recommendations from Consortium responses to TCS. Among the most glaring of these omissions is, of course, consideration of 0-3 nursery provision, which Bright Start indicates will be provided for under the full strategy. Among the key recommendations left unaddressed by this particular omission are proposals in respect of Sure Start provision, and the appeal to secure funding for community based childcare in women's centres. We return to this important point later, when we consider in more detail the serious implications for community based childcare in Northern Ireland of this particular omission.

Other key recommendations left unaddressed by Bright Start, due to its restricted scope, include suggestions in respect of the following:

- the expansion and simplification of the tax credit system;
- the standardisation of school terms;
- gender awareness training for childcare staff;
- specific measures/commitment to take account of the impact of welfare reform on childcare;
- incentives for employers to provide childcare facilities
- 'financially incentivising childminding' for benefit claimants;
- replication of the South Armagh Childcare Consortium model;
- childcare provision to meet the specific needs of ethnic minority communities and Traveller families; and,
- a commitment to borrow from other childcare models, notably the Scottish and Scandinavian models.

Although the document does not specify provision targeted at the particular needs of ethnic minority and Traveller groups, it does suggest that this provision will be addressed by the full strategy, since it will cater for 'particular constituencies of need', including these minorities.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the above omissions, the framework document suffers from a general lack of clarity/detail on two fronts, which frustrates efforts to arrive at a proper critical

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.12.

analysis of its content. First, there is insufficient statistical information to explain the rationale behind the Executive's targeting of 7,000 childcare places. Without this kind of transparency, there is a risk that this choice of figure might appear arbitrary.<sup>21</sup> We return to this important point later. Suffice for now to note that the NIRWN-facilitated rural focus group raised this issue as a key concern.

Second, there is insufficient logistical detail around the implementation of the first key actions and how that implementation is to be evaluated. For example, it is a matter of some concern that shortly after the publication of Bright Start, OFMDFM officials publicly acknowledged they did 'not yet have a detailed evaluation framework' against which to measure the success of the key actions, but that 'by the time the strategy is published [they] will definitely need specific indicators to measure'.<sup>22</sup> In addition, when asked what was meant by the plan to introduce the rural childcare scheme on 'a phased basis', an official affirmed before the OFMDFM Committee that the department '[did] not have an actual timeline for the phasing in of the rural childminder start-up package, but ... could certainly develop' one.<sup>23</sup>

The important point here is this: this lack of detail in Bright Start frustrates a full and proper critical analysis of what is proposed, precisely because it is difficult to meaningfully interpret the proposals without first having clarity regarding the precise nature of the supply/demand findings and logistical particulars *against which the department is itself working/planning*.

The effective implementation of Bright Start provision will invariably rely logistically on sustained interdepartmental work, reflecting the Executive's commitment to 'joined-up' childcare provision within the wider *Delivering Social Change* context of 'targeted actions to achieve smaller numbers of *cross-cutting* and strategic

---

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that a question directed at OFMDFM about the rationale underlying the choice of 7,000 places was tabled in the Northern Ireland Assembly by Steven Agnew, MLA, on 14 November 2013. As yet (at 8 December 2013), it remains unanswered.

<sup>22</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Official Report, (Hansard) Committee of OFMDFM, Bright Start: Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, 2 October 2013, NIA: Belfast, 2013 [Online]. Available at:

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Committee-Minutes-of-Evidence/Session-2013-2014/October-2013/Bright-Start-Strategy-for-Affordable-and-Integrated-Childcare/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

objectives'.<sup>24</sup> Consortium members' responses to TCS affirmed the importance of, and appealed for, a greater degree of interdepartmental working over childcare in order to enhance the effectiveness of the government's approach and implementation processes. Interdepartmental collaboration and cooperation over childcare policy development, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review is ultimately required to challenge 'institutionalised 'silo' thinking' within the Executive, which in the past has prevented departments from working effectively in partnership to improve childcare.<sup>25</sup> On this view, the implied increased reliance on interdepartmental working through Bright Start delivery is to be very much welcomed.

That said, there is insufficient detail in Bright Start about precisely how these collaborative arrangements will work in practice, which further limits any critique of the first key actions. For example, OFMDFM officials have acknowledged the requirement for collaborative and cooperative working between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Regional Development to implement the proposed rural transport initiative,<sup>26</sup> but there is insufficient detail as to precisely how this fundamental dimension of rural support provision might be effectively implemented. As we shall see in the next section, the absence of this detail has served to raise concern among rural stakeholders as to precisely how the proposed transport initiative might improve on previous interventions, which according to 'local knowledge' were ineffective.

The document reflects the Executive's commitment 'to balance the need for a strategic approach with the need to demonstrate early actions'.<sup>27</sup> An inherent danger of proceeding in this way is that a concentration on early actions could come at the expense of proper planning. The examples outlined above, involving the absence of an evaluative framework and timeline, evidence this danger.

---

<sup>24</sup> NIE, *op. cit.*, p.43.

<sup>25</sup> McQuaid, Graham & Shapira, *op. cit.*, p.viii.

<sup>26</sup> NIA, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> NIA, Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Official Report, (Hansard) Programme for Government Delivery Plans: OFMDFM Briefing, 3 July 2013, NIA: Belfast, 2013.

## Summary

In sum, so far we have set out and then compared the content of Bright Start with the content of Consortium members' responses to TCS in order to identify the extent to which the former responds to the latter. The comparative has revealed that whilst the framework document does indeed respond positively to several policy recommendations contained within these responses, it also neglects certain others. Most notably, it neglects 0-3 provision and detailed provision for ethnic minority and Traveller families. Although, as noted, the document does, of course, indicate that these particular omitted areas will be directly addressed in the development of the full strategy. However, no such assurance has been given about the future funding of community based childcare provision in women's centres.

### 5.5 Rural Provision: NIRWN-facilitated Focus Group on Bright Start

This section introduces a rural perspective on Bright Start provision.

On 14 November 2013, NIRWN organised a focus group at the Cullyhanna Community Centre to capture the views of women in rural communities on the content of Bright Start. The following community groups and organisations were represented at the event: South Armagh Childcare Consortium; South Armagh Rural Women's Network; Women and Family Health Initiative; Rural Health Partnership; Cullyhanna Women's Group; Southern Health and Social Care Trust, Community Development; Southern Health and Social Care Trust, Childcare; NICMA; and, Sure Start, South Armagh.

While the group welcomed several aspects of Bright Start, it raised concerns about several others. Table 5 paraphrases and summarises these views, whilst they are reproduced in full and verbatim in Appendix 4.

#### Table 5 - NIRWN's Rural Focus Group on Bright Start: Summary<sup>28</sup>

##### What was welcomed...

The group welcomed many aspects of Bright Start delivery, including the targeting of families in need; support for start-ups; inclusion of specific rural actions; flexibility regards sustainability; the rural childminder package and places; provision for

<sup>28</sup> NIRWN, Bright Start: Focus Group Notes, NIRWN: Cookstown, 2013.

children with disabilities; workforce development; support for existing facilities to expand; social enterprise model places; and, action on information provision.

### **Concerns expressed...**

The group had a number of reservations about Bright Start delivery, as follows.

#### *School age childcare*

- Criteria for delivery across the 25% most deprived areas: the group called into question the appropriateness of relying on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010 for assessing rural deprivation and poverty given that deprived people can live in affluent rural areas.
- For this reason, it was felt that there could be 'major implications' for rural provision following reliance on NIMDM 2010.
- The group queried the rationale underlying the figure of 3,000 places in wraparound childcare.
- Concern was expressed that tariffs based on ability to pay might result in 'middle income' families 'bearing the brunt of the cost'.

#### *Rural childcare*

- Group voiced concern at the criteria of delivery across the 25% most deprived areas.
- Group identified poor working/low income parents as 'a big issue for rural' delivery.
- Concern was expressed about the potential effectiveness of the proposed rural transport scheme given perceived difficulties with similar ongoing schemes. It was suggested that rural childcare providers should be consulted regarding the development of the scheme.
- Group queried why another pilot needs to be run, following the proven success of the previous pilot: DARD's Rural Childcare Programme 2010.

#### *Childcare for children with a disability*

- Group noted the particular difficulty of finding childcare providers with the requisite skills in rural areas.

#### *Childcare Management Forum*

- Group felt that to ensure urban/rural equity of delivery 'a strong rural representation on the Management Forum would be essential'.

#### *Additional*

- Concern raised at criteria for targeting community childcare schemes at those living in the 25% most disadvantaged areas.

Bright Start acknowledges that rural communities experience ‘particular and distinct challenges’ accessing childcare related to ‘insufficient critical mass to sustain services, isolation and logistical/transport’ difficulties.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the document also acknowledges the risk to rural community life that these challenges pose, for example, that unmet local demand can preclude the integration of children into their local communities. Moreover, Bright Start recognises the association between localised childcare provision and decreases in rural poverty and social exclusion. But in reviewing this document it is, of course, analytically important to distinguish between, on the one hand, the acknowledgement of rural issues and, on the other, the effective addressing of these issues through targeted delivery and provision.

In the absence of sufficient background detail about how the Executive has arrived at the content of its delivery plan, notably, the number of targeted places, and sufficient logistical detail about how this provision will be implemented in actual practice, rural stakeholders have questioned some key elements of Bright Start and their implications for equity in rural provision. Accordingly, as Table 4 illustrates, the focus group queried: the rationale underlying the numbers of places designated for rural and other provision; the appropriateness of relying on NIMDM 2010 to target delivery in disadvantaged areas; the logistics of the proposed rural transport schemes, in light of locally acknowledged logistical difficulties with similar interventions; why another pilot was required given the proven effectiveness of a previous incarnation; and, implications of the proposed tariff systems.

### *Summary*

The rural perspective on Bright Start provision captured at NIRWN’s focus group suggests that rural stakeholders have ‘mixed feelings’ about the first key actions: while they welcome some key aspects of this provision, they are reserving judgment on some others in the absence of sufficient logistical and statistical detail within the document to allay their concerns. These concerns are also informed by local knowledge of how other rural transport schemes failed to work effectively; the identification of poverty among working families as a ‘big issue’ for rural delivery; and, dissatisfaction with the choice of deprivation measures used to target delivery.

---

<sup>29</sup> NIE, op. cit., pp.18-19.

As suggested by the group, a strong rural representation on the proposed Childcare Management Forum could help address some of these reservations.

## **6. Conclusion, Recommendations and Summary of Findings**

This paper aimed to critically compare the content of Bright Start with the content of policy recommendations contained within Consortium members' responses to TCS. In so far as it represents a further key stage in the development of a substantive childcare strategy for Northern Ireland, the framework document is to be generally welcomed. Furthermore, as we have seen, the first key actions broadly address many of these recommendations and, for this reason, are to be particularly welcomed by women in rural and disadvantaged areas. That said, as we have also seen, the restricted scope of the document has resulted in certain omissions, which means that other central policy recommendations are neglected.

The remainder of this section explores some of the major implications of these omissions in more detail, setting out policy recommendations that would allow the Executive to compensate for these omissions in the development of the full childcare strategy. The implications and recommendations fall under four categories of consideration: funding for community based childcare provision in women's centres; rural provision; the economic participation of women; and, welfare reform. The section then concludes by summarising the project's key findings.

### **6.1 Childcare Provision in Women's Centres: Towards Secure Funding**

The Women's Regional Consortium is concerned at Bright Start's failure to address the question of the future funding of community based childcare provision in women's centres in Northern Ireland. Addressing this question constituted a central recommendation in WSN's response to TCS.

The future of community based childcare provision in women's centres is intrinsically precarious because 'the greatest challenge for [these] centres is securing enough funding each year to pay for the staff required for all aspects of work with children'.<sup>30</sup> In large part, this uncertainty is attributable to the as yet undetermined future of the Women's Centres' Childcare Fund (WCCF). Comprising an 'emergency package of funding' provided by the Department for Social Development, WCCF represents a vital element of the overall picture of women's centres' childcare revenue.<sup>31</sup> Yet, worryingly, this package is only in place until March 2014, with the promise of further funding to March 2015. The Consortium is deeply disappointed that the future of WCCF beyond 2015 remains an outstanding issue.

We, of course, recognise that in large part the omission of this substantive issue from Bright Start is explained by the restriction of the document's scope to new initiatives and the absence of a focus on 0-3 provision. But we would draw particular attention to the fact that the strategy is part of the Executive's wider *Delivering Social Change* agenda, which targets outcomes to tackle poverty and social exclusion. From this perspective, it should be expected that this issue will be properly addressed *in tandem with the development of the full childcare strategy*, given the 'unique' role played by women's centres' childcare provision in helping to address marginalisation and exclusion in rural and disadvantaged areas.<sup>32</sup>

Childcare provision in women's centres helps marginalised and excluded women gain access to educational, training and support programmes, which can ultimately enhance their prospects of economic participation in the public sphere and which, in turn, can help enhance the life chances of their children.<sup>33</sup> Demand for this provision among women remains consistently high, as underscored by waiting lists for places. Without this kind of support, the already innately constrained work-life balance choices of these women would be further restricted, and their already reduced economic participation opportunities would be further jeopardised. Research affirms this correlation by showing how community based childcare provision in women's centres has 'played a major role' in the implementation of government policies in

---

<sup>30</sup> WCRP, op. cit., p.5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

respect of delivery areas that include gender equality, inclusion, family support and poverty alleviation.<sup>34</sup>

OFMDFM acknowledges that ‘existing [childcare] provision is likely to come under greater pressure in the years ahead’.<sup>35</sup> Sustaining the funding of women centres’ provision through extending WCCF is therefore also vital to accommodating anticipated rises in demand in rural and disadvantaged areas, for example, rises associated with the removal of the minimum hours’ threshold for reclaiming formal childcare expenses through the tax credit system.

In short, securing the future of community based childcare provision in women’s centres is integral to helping to tackle poverty, social exclusion, marginalisation and deprivation in rural and disadvantaged areas and thus integral to the full and effective implementation of the Executive’s wider *Delivering Social Change* agenda.

### **Recommendation**

- The Women’s Regional Consortium urges the Executive to take the necessary steps to secure the future of community based childcare provision in women’s centres, by sustaining current funding arrangements under WCCF within the present DSD framework, acknowledging the unique role of this provision in helping to promote *Delivering Social Change*’s targeting of poverty and social exclusion.

### **6.2 Rural Provision**

As we have seen, Bright Start recognises and seeks to directly address specific needs that characterise the gap between rural childcare demand and supply, as articulated in Consortium responses to TCS and reiterated by participants in NIRWN’s rural focus group on the first key actions. The focus group affirmed that rural stakeholders welcome many aspects of the framework document including, for example, provision for rural transport and additional capacity. But it further affirmed that rural stakeholders have serious concerns about other key aspects of planned rural provision; most notably, the implications for rural equity of using the NIMDM

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> NIE, op. cit., p.7.

2010 to target delivery; and, the logistics of proposed transport schemes, in light of perceived failings in similar interventions. It has been suggested that a strong rural representation on the proposed Childcare Management Forum would be 'essential' to ensuring equity in rural provision under all of the first key actions.<sup>36</sup>

### **Recommendation**

- As it progresses with the development of the full childcare strategy, the Executive should give due consideration to the concerns expressed in rural communities in respect of Bright Start provision and omissions, committing to the continuous improvement of rural childcare provision in sustainable ways as part of a long-term view of interdepartmental collaboration and cooperation.

### **6.3 Economic Participation of Women**

While each of the three Consortium members' responses to TCS called for childcare provision that not only promotes the best interests of the child, but also maximises the economic participation of women in the public sphere, TWN's response placed particular emphasis on the latter. Clearly, addressing this substantive issue in impactful ways will require the availability of sustainable job opportunities, such as proffer individuals the possibility of moving into the labour market to positions that provide a living wage.

This imperative holds particular implications for women given the relationship between the nature of their participation in the labour market, the nature of the gender pay gap and the gendered division of labour within the home, which can reinforce stereotypical views and, often the reality, of women's role as primary carers.<sup>37</sup>

The nature of participation of women in the labour market in Northern Ireland, in no small measure due to their constrained work choices as primary carers in families, is such that women, compared to men, continue to disproportionately participate in part-time, low paid and sporadic work. For example, 2012 labour market figures for Northern Ireland indicated that 92% of female employees worked in the traditionally

---

<sup>36</sup> NIRWN, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> McQuaid, Graham & Shapira, op. cit.

low paid service sector; that 80% of part-time employees were female; and, that median female hourly earnings of part-time workers, excluding overtime, were 69.9% of full-time workers.<sup>38</sup> The nature of the gender pay gap in Northern Ireland is such that women continue to earn less than men across a range of sectors. Latest figures, for the period 2011-2012, indicate a widening of the gender pay gap for all employees in Northern Ireland.<sup>39</sup>

The interaction between the gender pay gap, women's perceived/actual role as primary carers and the nature of participation of women in the labour market is affirmed by research from the Government Equalities Office, which shows that 16% of the gender pay gap is attributable to 'the negative effect on wages of having previously worked part-time or of having taken time out of the labour market to look after family'.<sup>40</sup>

Recent research commissioned by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland affirms that, in addition to increased job availability, increased levels of sustainable publicly funded/provided childcare, and measures to address cultural stereotypes of women as primary carers are also prerequisites of efforts to effectively address this relationship between the gender pay gap, the gendered division of labour in the home and the depressed nature of women's economic participation.<sup>41</sup> Addressing this correlation and its implications for childcare in meaningful and substantive ways is a considerable challenge, which should be examined holistically by the Executive as it progresses the development of the full childcare strategy.

## **Recommendation**

- The Consortium reiterates a substantive point underlined in its members' responses to TCS: the Executive should give further consideration to maximising the economic participation of women through the expansion of publicly supported childcare provision as it develops the full childcare strategy. Within this context, it

---

<sup>38</sup> NISRA/DFP, Labour market statistics bulletin: women in Northern Ireland, September 2012. NISRA/DFP: Belfast, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> NISRA, Northern Ireland statistics & research agency results from the Northern Ireland annual survey of hours and earnings 2012. NISRA: Belfast, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Government Equalities Office, The gender pay gap in the UK: 1995 to 2007, Research Findings No. 2010/2, GEO: London, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> McQuaid, Graham & Shapira, op. cit.

should commit to tracking the relationship between the proposed key actions and the changing nature of economic participation of women, through the cross-departmental collation and provision of pertinent gendered disaggregated data.

#### **6.4 Welfare Reform**

As noted, Consortium members' policy recommendations called for childcare provision that would take due account of the impact of welfare reform on women and families, such as the reduction of tax credits.

Research strongly suggests that the cumulative impact of benefit and tax reform is likely to have an egregious impact on the well-being of vulnerable women and families in Northern Ireland. For example, research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies shows that concurrent tax and benefit reform will '*disproportionately affect*' households at the bottom of the Northern Irish income distribution scale, as compared to their counterparts in the rest of the UK.<sup>42</sup> It is forecasted that these households will lose almost 10 per cent of their income.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, University of Ulster research affirms that the combined effect of multidimensional tax and benefit reform in Northern Ireland could be deepening poverty for children or, worse still, severe poverty.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, NICVA-commissioned research suggests that welfare reform will result in a loss of £750m a year from the Northern Ireland economy, equivalent to £650 a year for every adult of working age; and, that this loss 'is substantially larger than in any other part of the UK'.<sup>45</sup>

Women in Northern Ireland could be disproportionately affected by welfare reform given the aggregate impact of a range of gender imbalances and other factors, which can contribute to benefit dependency.<sup>46</sup> For example, the lack of available and

---

<sup>42</sup> J. Browne, 'The impact of tax and benefit reforms to be introduced between 2010–11 and 2014–15 in Northern Ireland, IFS Briefing Note 114', Institute for Fiscal Studies: London, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> G. Horgan, 'Welfare reform: implications and options for Northern Ireland', University of Ulster: Belfast, 2013, p.2. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/irss/documents/KESS2-2.docx>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> C. Beatty and S. Fothergill, The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland: a research paper, NICVA: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> See, Bronagh Hinds/Women's Resource and Development Agency, The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge? A Comprehensive Analysis of the Impacts of the Financial Crisis, WRDA: Belfast, 2011.

affordable childcare, combined with women's roles as primary care givers<sup>47</sup> and the fact over 90 per cent of lone parent households in Northern Ireland are female-headed,<sup>48</sup> can have the aggregate effect of further restricting women's participation in the labour market<sup>49</sup> and increasing benefit reliance.

The combination of cuts under austerity measures, rises in the cost of living, and static or stagnant incomes imposes exceptional additional financial burdens on families, further constraining the work-life balance choices for women, for example, by further reducing the capacity to pay for childcare. Austerity cuts in social spending can tend to impact disproportionately on women in their capacities as primary carers, and on the urban and rural poor, given their specific levels of need. This danger is underscored in Save the Children research, which forecasts that the advent of Universal Credit in Northern Ireland will have an egregious impact on childcare access and affordability among poorer working families.<sup>50</sup>

To ensure that the full strategy is responsive to this substantive issue, it is important that the Northern Ireland government makes sufficient provision to properly assess, monitor and quantify, on a cross-departmental basis, the wider impact of welfare reform on childcare factors underlying the already constrained work-life balance choices for women in rural and disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland.

## Recommendation

- The Executive should sponsor appropriate measures to statistically track, and take account of, the aggregate impact of welfare reform on childcare provision affecting the already constrained work-life balance choices for women in rural and disadvantaged areas.

---

<sup>47</sup> According to research published by Carers' UK, there are over 207,000 carers in Northern Ireland, 64 per cent of whom are women. Carers' UK, *Valuing Carers: Calculating the Value of Carers'* Support, CUK: London, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Of the 63,900 lone parent households with dependent children recorded in the 2011 Census, 91 per cent were female-headed. R. Russell, Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service Research Paper - Census 2011: Key Statistics at Northern Ireland and LGD level, NIA: Belfast, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> See Department of Finance and Personnel for NI, 'Women in Northern Ireland', (September 2012). Available at,

[http://www.detini.gov.uk/women\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland\\_september\\_2012\\_final\\_version.pdf](http://www.detini.gov.uk/women_in_northern_ireland_september_2012_final_version.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Save the Children, Making work pay – the childcare trap: high childcare costs are affecting parents' ability to work, Save the Children: Belfast, 2011.

## 6.5. Summary of Key Findings

- The policy recommendations contained within Consortium members' responses to TCS merely reiterated and underscored information on childcare needs in rural and disadvantaged areas previously presented to the Executive 'over many years' from the women's sector and civil society at large.<sup>51</sup>
- What these recommendations called for may be summarised as: available, accessible, affordable, high quality, age-appropriate, sustainable, integrated, diverse and flexible childcare, reflecting equity across all constituencies of need: including, rural; urban; families in poverty; Traveller families; families with children with special needs or a disability; and, ethnic minority families.
- There is insufficient detail in Bright Start about the research findings and logistical assumptions against which the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister is itself working/planning. This dearth of detail frustrates a full and proper critical analysis of what is proposed and risks making some dimensions of these proposals seem arbitrary. For example, this lack of transparency has meant that the precise factors underlying the targeting of 'up to' 7,000 places are not readily discernible. This point was underscored in the NIRWN-facilitated focus group, where women in rural areas questioned the rationale underlying the selection of this figure.
- Rural stakeholders also expressed concerns about the implications for rural equity of: using the NIMDM 2010 to target delivery; the logistics of the proposed transport schemes; and, the tariff system for school age childcare. To ensure equity in rural provision under all of the first key actions, it has been suggested that a strong rural representation on the proposed Childcare Management Forum would be 'essential'.<sup>52</sup>
- Although Bright Start's first key actions broadly respond positively to several proposals within Consortium members' responses to TCS, other substantive proposals are left unaddressed due in large part to the restricted scope of the document, as follows.

---

<sup>51</sup> WSN, 2013, op. cit..

<sup>52</sup> NIRWN, op. cit.

- The absence from Bright Start of 0-3 provision has meant a key recommendation from WRDA to expand nursery provision under Sure Start was not addressed.
- Consortium members' responses to TCS contained several recommendations in respect of provision for children from ethnic minority families; this provision is not detailed in Bright Start, although the document does indicate that it will be catered for in the full strategy in 2014.
- Reform of tax credit and benefit system for childcare: Bright Start neglects a range of key policy recommendations in respect of such reform.
- Welfare reform: Bright Start does not include any specific commitment to track and take proper account of the potential impact of welfare reform on childcare demand and supply in rural and disadvantaged areas. This omission leaves unaddressed a central policy recommendation in WSN's response
- A single, coordinating department with overall responsibility for childcare, though absent from Bright Start, is promised in the full strategy. All three Consortium members' responses underlined the importance of this policy commitment. While the particular department has yet to be designated, the women's sector, and in particular the women's centres, expressed a strong preference that this responsibility should be given to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the nature of its role and experience in childcare.
- The question of the future of the Women's Centres' Childcare Fund, currently provided for by DSD, is a substantive issue not considered under Bright Start, in large part due to the fact that the budgetary commitment supporting the document was never intended to support existing projects. But as WSN's response to TCS highlighted, securing the future of this funding stream is integral to tackling poverty and social exclusion in rural and disadvantaged areas and as such integral to the effective implementation of the Executive's wider *Delivering Social Change* agenda.

## Bibliography

Beatty, C. and S. Fothergill. (2013). The impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland: a research paper. NICVA: Belfast.

Browne, J. (2012). 'The impact of tax and benefit reforms to be introduced between 2010–11 and 2014–15 in Northern Ireland, IFS Briefing Note 114', Institute for Fiscal Studies: London.

Carers' UK. (2011). Valuing carers: calculating the value of carers' support, CUK: London.

Department of Finance and Personnel for Northern Ireland. (2012). Women in Northern Ireland, DFPNI: Belfast.

Government Equalities Office, The gender pay gap in the UK: 1995 to 2007, Research Findings No. 2010/2, GEO: London, 2010.

Hinds, B. (2011). The Northern Ireland economy: Women on the edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the financial crisis, Women's Resource and Development Agency: Belfast.

Horgan, G. (2013). Welfare reform: implications and options for Northern Ireland, University of Ulster: Belfast.

Lidell, C. (2009). The caring jigsaw: systems of childcare and education in Northern Ireland, Save the Children: Belfast.

McLaughlin, H. (2009). Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation, Women's Centres' Regional Partnership, Belfast.

McQuaid, R., H Graham & M. Shapira. (2013). *Child Care: Maximising the Economic Participation of Women*. Equality Commission Northern Ireland: Belfast.

NIA (2013). Official Report (Hansard), AQW 26655/11-15, 2 October 2013.

NIA. (2013). Official Report (Hansard), Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Bright Start: Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, 2 October 2013, NIA: Belfast.

NIA. (2013). Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Official Report (Hansard), Programme for Government Delivery Plans: OFMDFM Briefing, 3 July 2013. NIA: Belfast.

NIRWN. (2013). Bright Start: focus group notes. NIRWN: Cookstown.

NISRA/DFP. (2012). Labour market statistics bulletin: women in Northern Ireland, September 2012. NISRA/DFP: Belfast

NISRA. (2012) Northern Ireland statistics & research agency results from the Northern Ireland annual survey of hours and earnings 2012. NISRA: Belfast.

Northern Ireland Assembly. (2013). Official Report (Hansard), Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Bright Start: Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, 2 October 2013, NIA: Belfast.

Northern Ireland Executive. (2013). Bright Start, the Northern Ireland Executive's Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare: a Strategic Framework and Key First Actions, NIE: Belfast.

OFMDFM.(2012). Towards a Childcare Strategy: a Consultation Document, OFMDFM: Belfast.

Russell, R. (2013). Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service Research Paper - Census 2011: Key Statistics at Northern Ireland and LGD level, NIA: Belfast.

Save the Children. (2011). Making work pay – the childcare trap: High childcare costs are affecting parents' ability to work, Save the Children: Belfast.

TWN. (2013). Towards a Childcare Strategy. [Online]. Available at:  
<http://www.twnonline.com/policy-research/response-to-consultations/349-towards-a-childcare-strategy>

Women's Centres' Regional Partnership. (2010). Childcare Mapping and Research Report 2010, WCRP: Belfast.

WRDA. (2013). Towards a Childcare Strategy, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister: Consultation Response, March 2013, WRDA: Belfast.

WSN. (2013). A Response to: Towards A Childcare Strategy. WSN: Belfast.

## Appendix 1: WRDA's Response to TCS: 'Suggestions for Improvement'<sup>53</sup>

### *Methodology: consultation event details*

To inform our response, we organised the following consultation events to gather the views of our members and other stakeholders on the document: Clooney Hall, Derry/Lderry on 14 February 2013 (in partnership with Foyle Women's Information Network, Employers for Childcare and the Women's Policy Forum convened by NICVA); and, Belfast, Holiday Inn on 26<sup>th</sup> February. To include a rural perspective, we have incorporated the findings of the following consultation event held in Mullaghbawn Community Hall, Mullaghbawn on 20 February (Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network on NICVA Women's Policy Forum).

### *General views*

- NI Executive should examine 'Getting it Right for Every Child' – the Scottish model, and identify if there are aspects that would be good to replicate in NI.
- The South Armagh Childcare Consortium model exists and could easily be replicated across rural areas - no need to reinvent.
- There is a need for legislation and a statutory duty to cooperate to ensure and adequate information service e.g. free phone for child services.

### *Childcare information*

- There should be a one stop shop for information services in relation to childcare and support for working families to include financial guidance, consistent childcare information, maternity rights etc. Family Support NI could be a hub for this information, but this should be widely promoted.
- Development of online web resources - signposting people to information on childcare providers, on how to access financial assistance, access to quality guidelines for parents and also access to good practice guides for child care providers; e.g. 'Compare the childcare.com' – a search facility for families.
- Information could be circulated by midwives and health visitors directly to parents of new babies. Health visitors could have a role with providing information; however, their caseload is often very heavy. Information should be also timely i.e. don't bombard families in the delivery suite.

<sup>53</sup> These 'suggestions for improvement' are reproduced here verbatim. WRDA, Towards a Childcare Strategy, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister: Consultation Response, March 2013. WRDA: Belfast: 2013.

- Employers should have a role in sharing information on childcare and family support. The use of childcare vouchers should be promoted amongst employers, particularly rural employers.
- Special consideration must be given to targeting 'harder to reach' groups.
- Online information is not accessible for everyone. There will be a need to publicise information on posters, etc.
- Government should fund information being put in Bounty packs.
- Statutory agencies could send out information on childcare e.g. with childcare benefit.

#### *Cost of childcare/affordability*

- Information on financial help available is very important – tax credits and childcare vouchers
- There is a need to undertake research on what 'affordable' childcare is.
- Allow tax credits and childcare vouchers to apply to relatives childminding children with disabilities/special needs.
- Allow childcare tax credits to be paid to grandparents.
- Government must further subsidise childcare provision.

#### *Flexibility*

- There should be more flexibility for people on benefits who 'child mind'. For example, there should be a more generous taper system, allowing them to keep more of their money/benefits/tax credits. Essentially, childminding should be further incentivised.
- Childcare providers should provide for later pick-ups.

#### *Transport*

- The better integration between education and afterschool childcare could happen by expanding the role of the classroom assistant to take responsibility for the children in the time when school ends and afterschool care begins (obviously recognised through remuneration).
- School buses could be used to transport school children to afterschool childcare provision. This would be particularly useful in rural areas.

#### *Gaps in childcare provision*

- Government should sponsor more childcare provision.

- Extend nursery provision through Sure Start.
- Extend the school day.
- More use of classroom assistants.
- PEAGs places in rural areas. It was suggested that qualifying for free places for the age range 0-4 outside of and including playgroups could support parents particularly to access training, reduce social isolation.

*Provision outside core working hours*

- It is really important that parents have a choice of flexible, local childcare and after school service provision.
- There is a real need for more extended schools clubs that are open for longer hours.
- Flexible childminders who can look after children after 6pm are needed.
- Example of good practice was of youth workers brought into 20 youth centres to provide afterschool care for 10-14 year olds. There is no need for capital costs – just being efficient with what is already there!

*Childcare for children with disabilities and/or special needs*

- Childcare providers should be encouraged/incentivised to create places for children with disabilities.

*Use of the schools estate to provide 'wraparound childcare'*

- School facilities should be made accessible to external child care providers. There is a need for after schools in local areas as children will mix locally.
- A very simple and practical suggestion is for ESA should impose set standardised school holidays and midterm breaks across all schools. This would be particularly helpful for parents who have children at different schools.
- All new schools in Scotland have to have holistic 'community rooms', which meet the need for afterschool childcare provision.
- Better use of volunteers in childcare settings/summer schemes.

*Childcare: a valued profession?*

- We need workforce development through the development of skill sets, qualifications, accreditation and professionalisation of child care underpinned by adequate pay structure.

*Integration/sustainability*

- Creating a Minister for Children would signal high value attached to children and the childcare profession.
- A designated lead department which will have overall accountability and can hold other departments to account is needed to deliver the childcare strategy.

## Appendix 2: WSN's Response to TCS – Key Points<sup>54</sup>

### *Focus group details*

*This response was informed by feedback provided by meetings held with key staff members at women's centres located across Belfast, as well as by two WSN focus group discussions organised by the WSN Policy Coordinator and Outreach team, where women from disadvantaged areas deliberated on the questions asked in the discussion document, and, finally, by six focus groups run in partnership with Surestart, which were held around South Belfast. The first focus group was held in the Women's Centre Derry, and the second was hosted in Ballybeen Women's Centre. The six joint focus groups received very high numbers of concerned parents.*

- There should be ... a lead department [with] a special unit devoted fully to childcare.
- There must be a commitment from all Executive ministers to co-operate and work in partnership on childcare... a more systematic, integrated approach to cross-departmental working.
- WSN strongly recommends that the Government, before drafting any Strategy, consider the definition of childcare.
- Any potential impact of welfare reform cuts on childcare provision and the affordability of childcare should be continuously revisited when developing the ... childcare strategy.
- Insufficient choice [should be addressed].
- Improved access to information.
- Integration of education and care.
- Proper/extended provision for parents who work atypical hours.
- Decisions around funding should focus on areas of need and incorporate opportunities for both capital and revenue support.
- Reduce ratios of trained staff to children.
- Improved funding to support quality training in sector.
- Childcare policies [should] recognise the tensions which exist between working and caring for children (and other family members) and also reflect due regard for the fact that families will have differing

<sup>54</sup> WSN, 2013. These points are reproduced here verbatim.

preferences as to the balance between work and care, which will vary over time depending on the age and stage of the children.

- Governments must undertake a review of holiday childcare provision, in order to address the question of whether adequate affordable provision exists to meet the needs of children of different ages, and to help construct a plan that will target the gaps that continue to prevail.
- A review should also be conducted to determine new methods to tackle the shortfall in affordable childcare for those who have to work atypical hours.
- Children with disabilities and from ethnic minority families: government ... should ensure that within the childcare sector professionals are equipped to provide for their needs, medically and linguistically
- Proper provision for women's centres to enable them to offer local women extended community-based childcare facilities... [the] level of support and service, provided by the centres, should be encouraged and developed by the Executive through proper sustainable funding.
- Recommends the system currently operating in Sweden.
- Commitment to creating more childcare places and to reducing the cost of places for a child with disabilities or one from an ethnic minority.
- The current system of tax credits...is complex and ... government must make every attempt to simplify the process.
- More use [should] be made of community-based centres ... in that trained staff could have a role in helping families to access entitlements.
- The assumed preference for part-time work ...should not... be taken as a given in the setting up of a childcare strategy.
- Proper provision for those parents living in more rural parts of Northern Ireland: it is imperative that these parents or guardians have access to affordable childcare, which will enable them to enter employment or education. Every attempt must be made to improve transport systems and infrastructure across Northern Ireland.
- Childcare strategy, once drafted, [should] be put out for consultation.
- [Childcare should be given] maximum consideration, careful planning and a major injection of funding.
- We would suggest that what is called for now is an in-depth appraisal of the sector as it currently runs (with due regard to all previous submissions made to the Executive, and in light of the proposed

Welfare Reform Bill).

- Comprehensive, accessible, affordable, integrated and good quality provision.
- In-depth appraisal of the sector as it currently runs.

### Appendix 3: TWN's Response to TCS - Key Points<sup>55</sup>

- Childcare provision mainly concerns women and policy must take into account their specific situation.
- An effective and accessible childcare strategy should allow provisions that would not only free many mothers from familial obligations and traditions but also help fight the current discrimination against women in the labour market.
- A strategy is a necessity insofar as better childcare facilities can both unleash women's economic potential as well as boost birth rates.

#### *Need to develop a more flexible, informal childcare system*

- Childcare provision needs to take into account the working patterns of women and therefore needs to offer more flexibility.
- The tax credit scheme has to be made more flexible and adjustable to specific situations and experiences of women and care takers in general.
- Qualifications should also be reviewed in the light of ethnic minority communities needs in terms of language.
- There is a need to take into account the specific situation of more vulnerable parents and especially mothers, such as teenage mothers.

#### *Adapt childcare provision to the specific needs of ethnic minority communities*

- Minority ethnic women are less likely to find childcare that is sensitive to their cultural needs. A solution could be to recruit personnel from their communities, to train the current personnel to specific cultural needs and to deal with racist behaviours between children, and to improve premises specific to cultural contexts.

#### *Gender awareness training for staff*

- The objective of good child development is strongly linked to the level of gender awareness among the childcare takers. Individuals who take care of young children are therefore crucial to this process and must receive proper training on the issue.

#### *Development of partnerships across all sectors*

- The issue of childcare concerns many sectors and should be addressed as a cross-cutting issue. All stakeholders should be integrated into the strategy, beginning with employers.
- Employers should be made aware of the childcare possibilities so that

<sup>55</sup> TWN, 2013. These points are reproduced here verbatim.

they spread the information and not discriminate women against, and should be enticed to offer such facilities.

- Work needs to be done to train career advisers on gender issues and barriers women face when trying to enter the labour market such as the lack of childcare provision.
- Childcare provision does not only concern one department but many of them and should be treated as a cross-departmental issue. There is a need for a coordinated action between each department concerned.

#### *Widespread and easy access to information*

- Concise and clear leaflets should be made available in all schools and job agencies.
- Teachers and other employees in schools as well as employers should be made aware of the different possibilities of childcare and should spread the information to parents.
- A global website can be designed where all information about different types of childcare provision throughout the country is available.
- As far as ethnic minorities are concerned, there is a need to make the information available in different languages.

#### *Conclusion*

- There is a need to keep an eye on ongoing challenges [outlined above].

## Appendix 4 NIRWN's Focus Group on Bright Start - Overview<sup>56</sup>

**Context:** the focus group was held on 14 November, 2013 at Cullyhanna Community Centre.

Community groups/organisations represented at the event: South Armagh Childcare Consortium; South Armagh Rural Women's Network; Women and Family Health Initiative; Rural Health Partnership; Cullyhanna Women's Group; Southern Health and Social Care Trust, Community Development; Southern Health and Social Care Trust, Childcare; NICMA; and, Sure Start, South Armagh.

Facilitator: NIRWN

### **Action 1: School Age Childcare**

The group welcomed the target of sustaining and creating 3,000 places for school age childcare targeted at families in need.

1. They were concerned at the criteria of delivery across the 25% most deprived areas. This has major implications for rural delivery. Local knowledge would say that the NIMDMs 2010 are not an accurate measure of deprivation and poverty in rural areas. Deprived people in rural areas can live in affluent areas. As the 2010 NIMDMs are unlikely to be reviewed until after the reform of local government, it may well be 2016 before we have new measurements of poverty and deprivation.
2. Attendees also queried the figures of 3,000 places in wraparound childcare, and questioned the basis for these figures.
3. The group welcomed the business support for all new and existing enterprises, and the incentive package and support with start-up costs. The inclusion of flexibility in regards to sustainability of level of provision was welcomed.
4. The offering of places as a tariff based on the ability of the parent to pay: this action was welcomed, however there was concern as to how this will roll out. Will people of middle income be unduly targeted and bear the brunt of the cost?

### **Action 2: Rural Childcare**

1. The group welcomed the specific inclusion of rural childcare actions in the Bright Start document.
2. They were concerned at the criteria of delivery across the 25% most deprived areas. This has major implications for rural delivery.
3. Group felt that childcare should be local to ensure the fabric of rural society and a sense of place is not lost.
4. Group agreed that there is a lack of affordable flexible rural childcare, and

<sup>56</sup> NIRWN, 2013. This is a verbatim account of NIRWN's focus group notes.

welcome the document's reference to shortfalls in the accessibility of childcare in some rural communities. Local knowledge would say that there is a concern regarding the poor working/ low income parent, they are aware that this is a big issue for rural.

5. The intention to implement on a pilot basis the setting up of a rural childminder start-up package similar to DARD's Rural Childcare Programme 2010 was welcomed. There was discussion that as this programme was already piloted by DARD, why does it need to be run as a pilot again, it was successful as the DARD project evaluation report demonstrated?
6. The proposed one-to-one mentoring support was previously piloted by NICMA in the last DARD Programme and was a resounding success. The group welcomed this proposal. The addition of 1,000 registered childminder places in rural areas as part of the key actions was welcomed.
7. Concern was expressed regarding transport, as local knowledge would say that rural transport schemes, as they are currently operated, will not meet the needs of transporting children from rural schools to childcare provision. Suggestions that rural childcare providers be consulted regarding the locally based transport schemes.
8. Support for up to 1,000 school age new affordable childcare places in rural areas through social enterprises was welcomed.

### **Action 3: Childcare for Children with a disability**

1. The group welcomed the inclusion of issues in respect of children with a disability.
2. The difficulty of finding childcare providers with the requisite skills is especially difficult in rural areas.
3. All of the concerns discussed previously by the group in relation to rural childcare provision are relevant and important for provision of childcare for children with a disability.

### **Action 4: Bright Start Childcare better access to information on childcare and related financial support**

1. The proposed actions under this action were welcomed.
2. The promotion of the financial assistance available, with the aim of increasing up take was welcomed.

### **Action 5: Workforce Development**

1. The proposed actions under this area were welcomed by the group.
2. The professional development of the childcare sector was seen as essential to delivering quality childcare.

### **Action 6: Establish a Childcare Management Forum**

1. The group felt that a strong rural representation on the Management Forum

would be essential to rural equity of delivery.

Additional comments

2. Again the group were concerned with the Bright Start community childcare schemes being targeted at those living in the 25% most disadvantaged areas. They discussed what the agreed methodology for this target being developed will be.
3. Support being offered to existing facilities to expand where need was demonstrated was welcomed.