



**nirwn**  
**Northern Ireland  
Rural Women's Network**

**Northern Ireland  
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)  
Response To**

**Delivering Social Change Through Childcare**

**A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and  
Integrated Childcare 2015-2025**

**Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister  
(OFMDFMNI)**

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NIRWN

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## 1 Introduction

**1.1** NIRWN's vision is a rural community where women are respected and valued and where they have the opportunities, confidence and ability to visibly take up positions of power and influence in all areas of life.

NIRWN key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme, funded by DSD and DARD to give a voice to rural women

### **Mission**

NIRWN's mission, as a rural regional support organisation, is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We will ensure rural women are recognised and supported to fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society.

**1.2** NIRWN, as a member of the Women's Regional Consortium funded through DSD, welcome the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on Delivering Social Change through Childcare, A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025.

**1.3** This response is informed by our membership views on childcare through our research and stakeholder engagement and those views articulated at a focus group held specifically to

discuss this Strategy; in Eskra Childcare Centre on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015

## 2 Comments:

### 2.1 Overview: Aims & Objectives

NIRWN supports the need for a Strategy for affordable and integrated childcare. NIRWN agrees with the seven key objectives as set out in the Strategy.

NIRWN agrees with the first main aim of the Strategy: ***Developmental: To give all our children the best start in life...*** The second aim: ***Employment: To enable parents to join the workforce...*** is much too narrow in our view. Provision of and access to; flexible, affordable childcare for parents is about much more than 'Employment'. Childcare needs to be viewed through a more holistic lens. Access to flexible, affordable childcare is imperative to allow access to training and education; to facilitate social interaction with other adults; engagement in public and political life. Lack of appropriate childcare is the single biggest barrier to women's engagement in education and training, work and public and political life. The research shows that childcare provision is much more than a useful extra which 'helps' women to participate: it is more correct to say that without it, many women from disadvantaged and rural areas are entirely unable to consider education or work at all<sup>1</sup>. We do not disagree that the Strategy should aim to *'enable parents to join the workforce...'* but argue that it should widen this aim to include, education, training, address social isolation and engagement with community, public and political life.

### 2.2 Rural Proofing Rural Impact Assessment

NIRWN is disappointed that this Strategy has not been rural proofed and does not contain a rural impact assessment. Guidance from DARD<sup>2</sup> asks that all new policies and programmes be rural proofed at the *'outset of your policy development'*. The final Strategy and actions must take account of rural needs through this process.

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<sup>1</sup> Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation; compiled by Dr Helen Mc Laughlin 2009 <http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/e-library/women%E2%80%99s-living-disadvantaged-communities-barriers-participation>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/guide-to-rural-proofing.pdf>

### 2.3 Cost of Childcare/Affordability

According to Employer's For Childcare latest Childcare Costs Survey, the typical cost of an average full-time place costing £162 per week<sup>3</sup>. The cost of childcare is often the main factor prohibiting access.

Evidence<sup>4</sup> has also shown that for working parents the costs of childcare can be a route to in-work poverty. The region of N Ireland needs a Childcare Strategy to mitigate against in-work poverty for low income families. NIRWN believes that if the first Aim of the Strategy '**Developmental: To give all our children the best start in life...**' is to be realised then the cost of childcare should be linked more closely to the child and their needs not to their parents income and benefits.

Calculating benefit entitlement can make it very difficult for families to assess whether a return to work or education and training is a financially viable option for them in their particular circumstances. This is an advice and support area that needs to be addressed.

### 2.4 Sustainability

NIRWN agree with the Strategy that providers should be aiming to develop sustainable provision. Feedback from our consultees and membership would suggest however that this is simply not possible within the current economic climate for providers who serve areas of need and where many families are on low incomes and/or in receipt of benefits. Sustainability within the period of grant receipt is particularly challenging especially for newly established childcare solutions.

NIRWN supports the Strategy Intervention to enable childcare settings to offer places to low income families on allow or no fee basis. We do query however, the impact that this could potentially have on sustainability of the provision both within the grant funded period and beyond.

The NI Executive must ensure that future interventions do not duplicate existing services. Our consultees clearly articulated that there should be 'a level playing field' in the childcare sector between statutory providers, community and voluntary and private settings. All should have the same regulatory processes, support, training etc.

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<sup>3</sup> Employers for Childcare (2014) Childcare Costs Survey

<sup>4</sup> Working at the Edge: Childcare 2014

[http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014_FINAL.pdf)

## 2.5 Transport

NIRWN is pleased that under; Intervention X: Transport Services Supportive of Rural Childcare Provision, the Strategy identifies transport as a barrier for rural families accessing childcare and other basic services. It is disappointing however, that the Strategy includes no practical, tangible actions on this Intervention to comment on.

Over the past 50 years the need to travel has become greater and more complex as society has become organised around the car and average distances to work, learning, hospitals and shops increased. Car ownership allowed the majority of people to keep pace with these changes, but people without access to cars have been disadvantaged. Past policies have contributed to greater car dependency and inadequate public transport.

The lives of rural women are affected directly and indirectly by their access to transportation. The absence of public transport in most rural areas makes the vast majority of women dependent on private automotive transportation. Rural women, like youths and seniors, are one of the groups that are most often 'transportation disadvantaged'. Research indicates that rural women have more limited access to family vehicles than do men.

The disadvantage women face in accessing reliable transportation affects their livelihoods, access to social services and impairs their ability to undertake the role of caregiver to family members. Lower incomes for women in rural communities mean that maintaining a vehicle may be beyond the reach of individuals, even when they need one to get to work<sup>5</sup> or access childcare.

Female youth and seniors are doubly disadvantaged. Young women are less likely to have access to a car than their male friends, making them dependent on rides to work and social activities, sometimes with young men who have been drinking, or have already lost their licences.<sup>6</sup> It is well documented that women isolated on farms are especially vulnerable to abuse<sup>7</sup>, a situation worsened without a means of transport to allow for a quick exit.

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<sup>5</sup> Leach 1999; Winson and Leach 2002 *Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives: Labour and Community in the New Rural Economy*.

<sup>6</sup> Dunkley 2004 *Risky Geographies: Teens, Gender, and Rural Landscape*

<sup>7</sup> Hornosty and Doherty 2004 'Resistance and change: Building a framework for helping abused rural women'

Rural women's experience of work in the "new economy" often means multiple jobholding<sup>8</sup> highlighting the need for transportation options. Without reliable access to transportation, rural women face challenges in; getting to job interviews, maintaining employment outside the home, accessing childcare, performing household tasks and taking on voluntary activities.

Recent research conducted by NIRWN<sup>9</sup> identified lack of access to transport as a major issue for rural women accessing education, training work and childcare. One consultee stated: *'Rural transport is vital to be able to access key services and to access friends and family. I have witnessed a significant reduction in rural transport services'*. It was clear also that the picture regionally varies greatly depending on where you live; with West of the Bann having particularly poor infrastructure. Often provision is linked to the school terms, resulting in no service during holidays. In our joint Consultation Event on the Strategy with Rural Community Network clear examples were offered by consultees on the complexity of wraparound transport provision for school age children. In one example provided, children who were not eligible for home to school transport were not then able to avail of a school bus to be dropped off at the childcare provider after school despite free spaces on the bus which passed the child minder's premises. Transport like childcare needs a cross Departmental approach to ensure red tape does not get in the way of practical solutions.

In addition the cost of transport was stated as prohibitive; not just to individual travellers but also to childcare providers trying to deliver an effective service. This is an issue that the Strategy needs to consider and resource for rural provision. The additional cost to rural childcare providers of integrating transport solutions for childcare users needs to be resourced and factored into any future grant allocations; particularly if sustainability is to be achieved.

## **2.6 Austerity (Tax Credits)**

The Ten Year Strategy is being developed and introduced in a period of economic crisis which has witnessed; huge changes in the labour market; reduction in funding to community/voluntary sector and Welfare Reforms which are compounding the difficulties for the most vulnerable in our society. The Strategy is also being consulted on at a time when the full impact and roll out of Welfare Reform: Universal Credit, and Tax Credit changes are not yet

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<sup>8</sup> Fuller 1999; Ames et al. 2006; Leach et al. 2006 "I'm Just Glad My Three Jobs Could Be During the Day": Women and Work in a Rural Community. Volume 55, Number 1, pp. 119-131(13)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women\\_s%20manifesto%20final%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women_s%20manifesto%20final%20(1).pdf)

clear for our jurisdiction which makes the Strategy difficult to comment on and the message from our consultees was clearly that they are very concerned about the impacts of these. The proposed changes to Tax Credits will affect not only those wishing to utilise childcare facilities but those too who are running childcare provision; this has the potential to significantly impede the sustainability of childcare services as well as a family's ability to access training, employment etc.

## 2.7 Learning from others

### 2.7.1 Europe (Sweden)

The reports<sup>10</sup> highlight government responsibility in relation to childcare provision and emphasise the need for a mix of financing sources for childcare, focusing on those families most in need. The OECD Social Expenditure database presented above<sup>11</sup> outlines public expenditure on childcare as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). The table presented presents the United Kingdom as having expenditure well below the OECD average, which is 0.7%.

On a country to country comparison, using the United Kingdom and Sweden, major differences in government focus, spending and public attitude towards childcare are evident. Sweden is often considered the benchmark for state childcare in Europe. They have a system, which combines flexible parental leave with affordable childcare. Sweden has a specific family policy<sup>12</sup>, which, historically has been focused on protecting children, redistributing income to ensure an adequate standard of living, compensating for the economic costs of rearing children and giving people the economic resources to have children when they want. The experienced benefits of such a policy are huge and include:

- Promotion of gender equality.
- Focus on best interests of children.
- Facilitation of reconciliation of work and family life.

This family policy, like its social policy is universal, ensuring accessibility for all as opposed to targeting of those who are disadvantaged or in need. The key elements of the policy are

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<sup>10</sup> OECD (2007) Social Expenditure Database 1980- 2003

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> [www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se)

extensive and include, support for early childhood, provision of quality childcare services, extended paid and job protected parental leave following childbirth and adoption, compulsory parenting classes etc. Sweden is among the very few countries that spend the same amount on childcare services as on family benefits.

Childcare in Sweden is regulated through the Swedish Educational Act. Public childcare is extended to children aged 1 – 12<sup>13</sup>. In Sweden, compulsory school begins at the age of seven but prior to that almost all six year olds attend voluntary pre school classes designed to prepare them for first grade. Children who have yet to start school or pre school classes can attend regular pre schools, family day-care homes and open pre schools while their older children have access to leisure time centres, family day care homes and open leisure time activities. Childcare in Sweden has a dual function. It is offered to enable parents to combine parenthood with work or studies and also to contribute to children's educational and social upbringing. This is emphasised by the fact that childcare provisions are included in the Educational Act. This stresses childcare as a component of a life long learning and an educational activity.

In January 2002, a nationwide fee, the maximum fee system was introduced in Sweden<sup>14</sup>. The maximum fee implies that no one pays more than three, two and one percent of the households income for the first second and third child in pre school, the fourth child is without charge. This has led to financial improvements for many families. Childcare in Sweden is financed partly by central government grants and partly by tax revenue and parental fees. The government grants are not specifically ear marked for childcare but are part of a general purpose grant to be used for different sectors. On average parental fees account for just under 17% of the gross childcare cost.

Requirements of quality of childcare are stated in the Education Act. These relate to group size, composition of childcare, activities and requirements regarding staff and premises. A survey conducted in 1999 by the National Agency for Education<sup>15</sup> showed that around 90% of parents were satisfied with childcare. Levels of education of childminders are high and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



increased in the 1990s. In 1999, 71% of childminders were trained.<sup>16</sup>

Comparing Sweden to the United Kingdom, paints an inadequate picture of childcare provision. A lack of government prioritisation in the area combined with a shortfall in budget allocation has resulted in the issue being an extremely complex social and economic issue for parents and employers. Many parents are increasingly put off having children by the high costs associated with childcare.

Such concerns present an urgent need for United Kingdom governments to review their system of childcare to ensure the provision of a system that combines flexible parental leave and working practices with a choice of affordable quality childcare options. While developments have been introduced over the past decades, it would appear that there is still much to achieve if quality childcare is to become a reality for all. A strategic refocus and clear action plan to prioritise these issues will go some way towards aligning the United Kingdom and in particular, Northern Ireland with some of the more progressive European countries.

### 2.7.2 UK (Scotland)

We can learn from Scotland, as devolved UK jurisdiction similar to ours. Scotland has had a Childcare Strategy in place for many years now.

NIRWN has identified from research<sup>171819</sup> that there is learning from the challenges facing Scotland that the NI Executive needs to take account of when developing a NI Childcare Strategy. The first lesson is that no single Department, person or organisation has taken responsibility for ensuring families have access to the affordable, high quality childcare they need in Scotland and this is having negative repercussions. Childcare is provided for at local authority level which effectively means not only a 'postcode lottery' but in addition means that there are not comparable statistics etc to examine to ensure equity of delivery across the region. This has had a particularly negative impact on rural areas. Families in N I need a lead Department to take responsibility for childcare. Undoubtedly the delivery of the Strategy

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.childrenscotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/FinalChildcareCommissionReportJune2015.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> 'Growing Up in Scotland: Growing Up Rural' <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2008/03/12110107/0>

<sup>19</sup> Working at the Edge: Childcare [http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/WAE%20Childcare%20December%202014_FINAL.pdf)

will require cross Departmental responsibilities and a partnership approach between; government, statutory, public, private and community/voluntary sectors; however NIRWN recommends that there is one lead Department to ensure effective roll out of Strategy actions; to coordinate Stakeholders, monitor and evaluate the Strategy and ensure equity of provision across the region.

The lack of rural proofing or, taking account of rural needs in particular, has resulted in consistent evaluations of the Strategy identifying provision in rural areas as inadequate. The Executive here must rural proof this Strategy if our region is not to experience the same outcome. It is not enough to identify rural areas as having inadequate provision; the Executive must take mitigating actions to address these inequalities if rural families and children are to experience equality.

Following its inquiry into Women and Work, the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee recommended that the Scottish Government take action towards the introduction of a statutory right to childcare including older children – up to the age of 15 – as well as disabled children.<sup>20</sup> This was backed by leading children and families organisations that have long campaigned for quality, affordable childcare with support for the childcare workforce.<sup>21</sup> These are actions that our Executive should consider committing to from the beginning of the Childcare Strategy.

## **2.8 Range of Models needed (Rural Childcare Project)**

### **Rural Childcare Stakeholders Report and DARD Rural Childcare Programme**

The previous Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development (Michelle Gildernew) established the Rural Childcare Stakeholders Group in 2007. The Stakeholders group published a report in 2008 entitled “Rural Childcare: Investing in the Future”<sup>22</sup> which the particular challenges of childcare delivery and accessibility in rural areas. The report confirmed that rural areas do face particular and distinct challenges in relation to the delivery of and access to rural childcare services. The report made a number of recommendations for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) along with other Government Departments in how rural

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<sup>20</sup> 4th Report, 2013 (Session 4): Women and Work – Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee, June 2013 <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/64971.aspx>

<sup>21</sup> ‘Right to childcare’ timetable call from MSPs – BBC News, June 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-22943203>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.rdc.org.uk/download/files/pub\\_RuralChildcare.pdf](http://www.rdc.org.uk/download/files/pub_RuralChildcare.pdf)

childcare services could be improved. In particular the report recommended establishing a Rural Childcare Funding Programme “with the aim of addressing rural specific need and circumstance with particular focus on rural access”. Subsequently, DARD introduced a £1.5 Million Rural Childcare Programme to improve childcare provision in rural areas. The Programme was aimed at pilot projects run by community organisations that tackled a number of priority areas including: access to childcare services; early years integration; quality and safety of provision; sustainability and affordability (DARD: 2008, 2).

The evaluation of this Programme illustrated the need for and the value of a variety of approaches to meeting childcare needs. Rural areas are not homogenous and as such each area must assess its own needs and develop childcare solutions to meet these particular needs. NIRWN would ask that the Childcare Strategy ensures that a one size fits all approach is not applied to addressing rural childcare.

## 2.9 Childminding

NIRWN is pleased that the Strategy has identified the need for a Rural Childminding Services Model: Intervention IX. We would question the assertion that *‘affordability of childminding services in rural areas as a bigger problem than the availability of childminding services’*. In ten years of consulting with our members childcare has been identified consistently in the top two issues (together with transport) for rural women. The feedback we have received is that cost and affordability is certainly an issue for rural families but equally is access to quality, flexible provision in many areas. It is our view that the some areas are well provided for, in some cases saturated and in others there are simply no local options. NIRWN would like the Strategy going forward to identify gaps in provision and ensure that rural families have a choice of flexible, affordable provision.

South Armagh Childcare Consortium (SACC)<sup>23</sup> has developed a variety of rural childcare solutions based on the needs of the area. One aspect which has evidenced particular success was their aim to increase the number of registered childminders in their area. This involved a community development approach based on needs identified and local knowledge which resulted in a huge increase in childminders in the area; many of whom had changed from unregistered to registered during the course of their engagement with the Consortium.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.southarmaghchildcare.co.uk/>

This is a model which could be replicated in other areas where the need is identified.

Informal childcare is often carried out by grandparents, particularly grandmothers. NIRWN's 2015 research<sup>24</sup> indicates that the recent economic downturn has had a negative impact on grandmothers, who are increasingly required to shoulder greater childcare responsibilities. These caring responsibilities are unpaid and aside from the social isolation and impact on health and well being they are having; in some cases they are contributing to poverty. Members have reported that the cost of fuel; driving children to and from school and heating extra rooms in the house together with providing meals is creating difficult economic circumstances for them.

### **2.10 Stakeholders Panel**

The Strategy references a Childcare Stakeholder Panel that will be formed. NIRWN and those we consulted with recommend that this panel be reflective of rural; and include childcare providers from a range of delivery settings and sectors.

## **3 Concluding Remarks**

NIRWN are pleased to have a Strategy that has progressed to this point as it has been a very long time in its production, during which time our economic climate has meant that we need a coordinated Strategy for Childcare in NI more than ever. We urge the Department to rural proof the Strategy as soon as possible to mitigate against rural inequalities; it is clear that rural families experience problems with accessing quality, flexible, affordable childcare that their urban counterparts do not.

NIRWN and our membership would like now to see an energetic, time bound progress to developing actions to go alongside a Childcare Strategy. Families in NI need actions, furthermore they need these actions resourced, led by one Department and robustly monitored and evaluated for success. We look forward to supporting you with the development of these actions.

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women\\_s%20manifesto%20final%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.nirwn.org/nirwn%20rural%20women_s%20manifesto%20final%20(1).pdf)

