

Early Years Consultation Response

Draft Northern Ireland Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

Sector-wide response informed by direct engagement with Sectoral Representatives, Parents and Children

Submitted by	Early Years - the organisation for young children
Purpose	Formal response to the public consultation on the Draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy
Evidence base	12 Branch Engagement Events ; Parent survey summary (2,073 responses); Child participation survey (85+) ; Early Years partner workshop activity
Date	23 March 2026

1. About Early Years

Early Years is the leading organisation working on behalf of young children in Northern Ireland. We support, develop and represent the voluntary, community and independent early learning and childcare sector, including daycares, playgroups and Sure Start Services. We work to ensure every child can access high-quality early learning and care, and every family can access affordable childcare that meets their needs.

2. How this response was developed

This response is grounded first and foremost in **direct engagement with the sector**. It draws on twelve consultation feedback papers from Early Years Branch members and sector forums across Northern Ireland, including the **Daycare Forum, PSEP Forum and Sure Start Forum**. These documents consistently highlight lived experience from providers delivering services every day in local communities.

The response also incorporates a **parent survey summary** containing **2,073 responses, child participation findings**, and existing **early years policy work**. Together, these sources provide a rounded picture of children's experiences, parents' priorities, provider sustainability and workforce realities.

The evidence from the twelve direct engagement papers has been brought to the fore throughout all three themes. Where there was consistency across multiple localities or forums, this is treated as a **key sector-wide message**.

3. Evidence base at a glance

Evidence source	Coverage	How it has informed this response
12 engagement feedback papers: 8 Branch events; 2 Daycare Fora; 1 PSEP Forum; 1 Playgroup Forum; 1 Sure Start Forum 1 Early Years Partner Forum Meeting	182 groups/attendees comprising: 83 group provers at Branch meetings 87 group providers at forum meetings 12 Policy members	Primary evidence source on strengths, risks, implementation issues and amendments needed across all themes
Parent survey summary – issued via provider base	2,073 parents across 6 counties.	Quantifies parent priorities on affordability, access, quality, SEND support and workforce sustainability
Child participation responses – direct children engagement programme delivered through Early Years Executive Committee reaching children across diverse setting environments	85 Children (3-12 age group)	Keeps children's lived experience visible, particularly on play, relationships, belonging and staff wellbeing
Previous Early Years papers (including analysis of existing policy papers)	Critique and Alignment; earlier draft response	Provides policy continuity and aligns this response with established advocacy positions

4. Overall position

FUNDING AND EXECUTIVE SUPPORT

On March 4th, Early Years responded to the **Department of Finance Draft Budget Consultation** and welcomed the Executive's move to a **multi-year Budget**, recognising it as an important mechanism to **improve sustainability** and **enable more strategic planning** across government and public services.

However, we are concerned that the draft Budget **does not sufficiently prioritise early learning and childcare**, despite this being central to the Executive's stated commitments to "**Deliver More Affordable, Accessible, High-Quality Early Learning and Childcare.**"

The draft Budget references the development of an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (page 56) and proposes Childcare funding of £55m (2026–27), £65m (2027–28) and £75m (2028–29) (Table 4.2, page 30). **This is insufficient to implement the Executive's draft ELC Strategy**), which we understand requires £85m in year one and £450m over four years.

This creates a significant risk that the strategy will become **aspirational rather than deliverable** - and it will fail to meet the **Executive's Programme for Government "Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most."**

Information from publicly available resources indicates that Northern Ireland will be in receipt of **increased new funding as a direct result of childcare policy within England**, particularly the increases in funding made available from September 2024. These indicative consequentials are **substantially higher** than the draft Budget's planned childcare amounts referenced above. In our view, this mismatch risks a **de-prioritisation of childcare**, which would run counter to the Executive's own policy intent and stated direction of travel.

The Independent Review of Education specifically notes that Northern Ireland would be due to receive Barnett consequentials from childcare expansion in England and recommends the Executive should take the opportunity to **allocate such funding to invest in affordable childcare and expanded early years services.**

Early Years calls on the Executive to make the required funding available to deliver on a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. Our findings are outlined below:

Early Years welcomes the publication of a draft Strategy and supports the ambition to deliver a more affordable, accessible and high-quality early learning and childcare system. The draft includes important commitments on **pre-school expansion, targeted early years interventions, workforce planning, inclusion and affordability support.** However, the draft strategy continually references activity as "**subject to available resources**". If the funding is not made available for the strategy then Early Years deem this as a **failure of the Executive** to deliver on the agreed **Programme for Government.**

However, the engagement evidence is equally clear that the strategy will not succeed unless the final version does five things more strongly:

1. **Fund the true cost of delivery;**
2. **Protect and grow the mixed market across statutory, voluntary, community and independent provision;**

3. **Ensure equality of access for children with additional needs and those facing disadvantage;**
4. **Put in place a funded workforce settlement that improves recruitment, retention, recognition and quality.**
5. **Revise the timing of proposed interventions, rescheduling identified category three interventions as category two actions.**

Across the twelve direct engagement papers, respondents repeatedly welcomed the direction of travel but warned that implementation could **unintentionally destabilise** the very provision the strategy depends on.

The final strategy should therefore move from **broad intent to clear guarantees on funding, parity, timescales, accountability and sector co-design.**

5. Cross-cutting messages from direct engagement activity

- **Parity across provider types** is a consistent and urgent theme. Members repeatedly highlighted that children's experiences should not depend on whether they attend a statutory, community, voluntary or private setting.
- Standardisation and expansion must not **unintentionally remove pre-pre-school provision, reduce parental choice or weaken local community-based services** that currently meet need.
- Any **unintended consequences** of standardisation also require urgent attention, particular for group providers who are not delivering the PSEP.
- Children with additional needs are too often **waiting too long for support**, while settings are expected to manage complexity without timely funding, specialist input or joined-up pathways.
- Parents **need affordability**, but affordability cannot be delivered sustainably if provider funding, staff pay, inclusion support and core operating costs remain inadequate.
- **The workforce is central to quality.** Low pay, weak progression routes, uneven access to training and poor professional recognition are now major risks to delivery.
- **Quality must mean more than inspection or longer hours.** Children's own views emphasise play, relationships, warmth, safety and adults who are happy in their work.

6. Key messages from parent and child evidence

152 settings participated in the parental survey reaching over 2000 parents:

- 62.9% of parents described current childcare costs as **unaffordable or very unaffordable.**
- 80.7% said childcare costs had significantly or somewhat affected their **ability to work, study or increase hours.**
- **95.1% strongly supported** or supported the strategy's direction on **improving affordability.**
- 87.9% said expanding access to **22.5 hours of pre-school education** was **important or very important.**
- 71.7% said it was important or very important to protect and expand targeted programmes for disadvantage and specific needs, **but only 17.6% were confident families could actually access such support.**
- 93.1% said **better information** for parents would be helpful or very helpful.

- 99.6% said consistent **high quality** across all settings was important or very important.
- 96.1% supported the proposed 0-6 **Early Years Curriculum Framework**.
- 96.2% agreed or strongly agreed that a **sustainable sector and valued workforce are essential**.

The **child participation exercise** was an essential component in informing the development of a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. It is critical that a strategy of this significance is shaped not only by the views of adults, systems and services, but also by the **lived experiences of children themselves**. The findings demonstrate clearly that **children's priorities are rooted in play, friendships, warm and responsive relationships, access to stories, creative experiences, outdoor play and a sense of safety, comfort and belonging within their setting**. Children also showed a strong awareness of the emotional environment around them, identifying that adults who smile, play, help, read stories, show kindness and remain calm contribute positively to their experience.

This survey provides direct evidence of what quality feels like from the child's perspective. It reinforces that early learning and childcare policy must be grounded in **children's rights, wellbeing and developmental needs, rather than being defined solely by affordability, parental employment or system capacity**. The responses suggest that the final strategy should give greater weight to **play-based pedagogy, emotionally secure environments, continuity of care, strong adult-child relationships and inclusive, well-resourced provision**. They also highlight the importance of a confident, valued and well-supported workforce, as children are clearly sensitive to staff wellbeing and to the ethos and culture of the setting.

Accordingly, the final strategy should explicitly recognise **child participation as a core source** of evidence and ensure that implementation priorities **reflect what children have said matters most to them** in their daily early learning and childcare experiences.

Children's participation findings reinforce these themes. Children consistently **valued play, friendship, creativity, caring adults and settings that felt warm, safe and enjoyable**. The findings also suggest that children **notice when adults are happy in their work, linking workforce wellbeing directly to the quality of children's daily experience**.

7. Theme 1 - Supporting children in their early years

The direct engagement evidence shows broad support for the **ambition** of Theme 1, but it also demonstrates that quality, inclusion and developmental appropriateness matter as much as expansion. Branches and forums repeatedly stressed that children's needs vary; therefore delivery must **be flexible, child-centred** and **grounded in early years expertise** rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

Objective 1.1: Provide 22.5 hours per week through the pre-school education programme for children in their target pre-school year

Consultation Response	Agree
Summary view	Early Years supports the intention to expand 22.5 hours of funded pre-school education, and parent survey evidence shows this matters strongly to families and communities.

At the same time, direct engagement exercises show that sector support is conditional on implementation being equitable, developmentally appropriate and financially sustainable. Providers **welcomed the possibility of slower-paced days / pedagogy, richer learning experiences and stronger family relationships**, but also highlighted **serious risks around parental choice, the future of pre-pre-school provision, uneven treatment of non-statutory settings and lack of clarity in the standardisation process**.

The final strategy should therefore retain the expansion objective while explicitly protecting **parental choice, the mixed market (mixed economy of provision)** and **local community-based pre-pre provision**.

What our engagement told us:

- Longer sessions can allow **more outdoor play, more flexible routines and deeper learning** where the model suits children well.
- Settings reported **improved communication** with parents when drop-off and pick-up interactions increase.
- Many respondents remain concerned that parents perceive statutory nursery as inherently better, despite community and voluntary settings delivering the same curriculum.
- Several localities warned that if standardisation is mainstreamed with support for **pre-pre provision/places**, some children may lose access and **some settings will become less viable**.
- **Day length may not suit every child**, especially some children with additional needs or children not yet ready for longer sessions.

What should change before finalisation:

- **Guarantee parity of funding, support and professional recognition between statutory and non-statutory providers.**
- **Set out how pre-pre-school children will be protected**, including a funded pathway for provision in community, voluntary and independent settings. This should be included as a category 2 action. **Build flexibility** into delivery for children who are not developmentally ready for the full session length.

- **Make selection criteria, timing and support for standardisation transparent and locally responsive.**
- A full review of Departmental Business Case processes to ensure that **unintended consequences** of wider standardisation on the sector are fully understood and any **mitigation activity fully explored.**
- **Improve communication and implementation support from the Education Authority,** including transition support for settings.

Objective 1.2: Expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs

Consultation Response	Strongly agree
Summary view	Early Years strongly supports expansion of targeted services, but the engagement evidence is clear that the final strategy must tackle access barriers as well as headline funding levels.

Members valued Sure Start, the Pathway Fund, Toybox and other targeted supports, yet repeatedly described current provision as **fragmented, postcode-driven and difficult to access in practice.** Providers are often carrying significant **responsibility for identifying and responding to need without timely specialist input, inter-agency collaboration or secure funding.**

The final strategy should therefore **strengthen universal and targeted pathways together, with earlier intervention, clearer referral routes and equality of access across localities and provider types.**

What our engagement told us:

- There is strong support for continued investment in **Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox**, and recognition that early intervention can make a major difference for children and families.
- Across multiple Branch events, respondents described **Sure Start as valuable but uneven**, with oversubscription, postcode restrictions and rural gaps leading to a lottery of access.
- Many providers highlighted inconsistencies and **delays in annual reviews, specialist placements and health visitor processes, leaving settings to manage complex needs without adequate support.**
- Voluntary, Community and Independent Daycare settings **repeatedly** said they **are excluded from funding streams or access routes** even when they are supporting children with **significant additional needs.**

What should change before finalisation:

- Move away from narrow postcode-based eligibility and introduce **a more responsive approach** that captures pockets of need, rural isolation and families whose circumstances do not fit traditional deprivation thresholds.
- Create faster, clearer and better-resourced referral **pathways for children with additional needs**, including direct routes for practitioners to escalate concerns, **that work in practice for all children.**
- Ensure **all registered provider types can access relevant inclusion and developmental support funding.**
- **Improve inter-agency working** between Education, Health and community-based services so settings are not left coordinating the system alone.

- **Bring forward information-sharing arrangements (Category 2)** at transition points so support does not stop and restart between stages.

Objective 1.3: Expand developmental provision for children aged 2-3 in their pre-pre-school year

Consultation Response	Agree
Summary view	Early Years supports expansion of developmental provision for 2–3-year-olds and sees this as one of the most important strategic gaps to address.

Engagement evidence consistently shows that the sector is concerned **about delay**. Respondents fear that if meaningful investment in 2-3 provision **sits too far into the future**, Northern Ireland could lose local infrastructure, staff and community capacity that would otherwise help deliver this objective.

Developmental provision for 2-3-year-olds must be explicitly play-based, relationship-led and open to delivery across the mixed market, including settings that already have trusted relationships with families. Stakeholders consistently emphasised that education does not begin at school entry but well before birth. The strategy must reflect this reality by explicitly covering the prenatal stage through to age 6, ensuring coherence across early childhood policy and practice.

What our engagement told us:

- Respondents widely welcomed a **stronger 2–3 offer** and noted that existing programmes such as Getting Ready to Learn demonstrate what relationship-based work with families can achieve within a preschool context.
- There is concern that current proposals are **not yet clear enough** on entitlement, provider eligibility, curriculum expectations or funding arrangements.
- **Several engagement events stressed that preschool settings are not always developmentally appropriate environments for pre-pre-school children.**
- Local providers warned that the **community and voluntary sector could lose infrastructure** if this expansion is **delayed until the early 2030s**.

What should change before finalisation:

- **Bring forward delivery of 2–3 developmental provision** (Category 2 Initiative) and set out a phased implementation plan before 2030.
- Make clear that provision for this age group must be **developmentally appropriate, play-based** and shaped by **early years expertise**.
- Allow community, voluntary, independent and daycare settings to deliver where they meet quality requirements.
- **Clarify funding, eligibility and support arrangements, including for children with emerging additional needs.**
- Connect the 2–3 offer with family support, speech and language, and wider early intervention services.

Objective 1.4: Promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers

Consultation Response	Strongly agree
Summary view	Early Years strongly supports the objective of promoting high-quality provision across all providers. Parents overwhelmingly said consistent quality across settings is important, and children's participation findings show that quality is experienced through play, relationships, resources, safety and emotionally available adults.

The engagement evidence shows that providers want a **stronger quality agenda**, but they do not want quality to be reduced to compliance or imposed unevenly across provider types. **Respondents repeatedly asked** for clarity on **who defines quality**, **how it will be supported** and whether **expectations will be genuinely shared across statutory and non-statutory settings**.

Quality improvement will only be credible if it is accompanied by **practical support**, **specialist guidance**, **coherent inspection** and **protected time for leaders and staff**.

What our engagement told us:

- There is **strong support for a more coherent 0–6 framework** and for consistency in pedagogy and expectations.
- Providers highlighted confusion caused by multiple documents, differing messages and uneven interpretation across regulatory and inspection bodies.
- Respondents want quality support to include the **continued role of Early Years Specialists** and **hands-on mentoring, not simply inspection**.
- Several events questioned **how quality will be measured and monitored**, particularly for different provider types and age groups.

What should change before finalisation:

- Early years should be seen as the **natural commencement point** for wider curriculum reform, not an afterthought. We **should not start a wider curriculum review** and attempt to **“bolt on/in” early years reform**.
- **Co-design the 0-6 framework** with the full sector and make explicit how it aligns with existing curriculum expectations.
- Publish a clear **quality improvement model** that includes mentoring, specialist support and implementation funding.
- **Address inconsistencies** between inspection and regulatory expectations across ETI and Social Services.
- Ensure the **same standards are matched by the same support, regardless of provider type**.
- **Recognise that high quality is inseparable from staffing levels, workforce development, leadership time and inclusion support**.

8. Theme 2 - Supporting families/carers with their children's learning and childcare costs

Parents were clear that affordability is the most immediate pressure. The parent survey found that 62.9% described childcare as unaffordable or very unaffordable, and 80.7% said costs had affected their ability to work, study or increase hours. At the same time, provider engagement repeatedly warned that affordability cannot be pursued in a way that destabilises services or leaves providers carrying rising delivery costs.

Objective 2.1: Make childcare more affordable

Consultation Response	Strongly agree
Summary view	Early Years strongly agrees that childcare must become more affordable. This is the clearest message from parents, with 95.1% supporting the direction of travel on affordability and 74.9% saying a higher subsidy would make the biggest difference for their family.

However, direct engagement with providers warns that **affordability cannot rely on demand-side subsidy alone. Without stronger supply-side investment, transparency on fees, staff cost pressures, inclusion costs and local variation, there is a real risk that providers will remain financially fragile while parents continue to struggle.**

The final strategy should therefore set affordability within a **broader sustainability framework** that funds the true cost of quality provision.

What our engagement told us:

- Parents want **more substantial help with childcare fees**, delivered more quickly. Many described childcare as a major **barrier to employment**, especially for mothers and families with **more than one child** in paid provision.
- Many providers indicated that **affordability is relative**, and further consideration should be given to including those on **Universal Credit within the NICSS**.
- Providers reported concern that **public debate** can **frame them as the cause of high fees**, even though many are barely covering wages, rent, food, insurance and utilities.
- Some respondents warned that **publishing fees without context** could create **pressure toward unhealthy competition or price harmonisation, rather than real affordability**.
- There was concern that **inclusion costs, especially for children with additional needs**, are not fully recognised in affordability measures.

What should change before finalisation:

- **Increase investment in affordability support while also funding the supply side**, so lower parent costs do not depend on provider cross-subsidy or staff underpayment. **Ensure that the Department can deliver 20% uplift from April 1 2026, while increasing % subsidy more quickly**
- Recognise **regional, demographic and provider differences** when designing fee transparency and affordability mechanisms.
- **Ensure affordability policies include families using Universal Credit or with atypical hours, multiple children, rural travel costs and children with additional needs.**

- **Monitor unintended consequences carefully, including any impact on provider sustainability or parent choice.**
- Set out a **clearer long-term pathway for affordability** that does not depend solely on UK-wide systems or administrative complexity.

Objective 2.2: Improve the information available on childcare

Consultation Response	Strongly agree
Summary view	Early Years strongly supports better information for parents. The parent survey found that 93.1% would find improved information helpful or very helpful, and engagement papers repeatedly highlighted confusion around entitlements, funding streams, eligibility and where to go for support.

Information reform should not be treated as a minor administrative issue. It is **central to parental choice**, early identification of need and equitable access across the mixed market.

Information must also be **timely, trusted and easy to navigate, not simply a list of schemes or providers.**

What our engagement told us:

- Parents and providers both reported that families **do not always know** what is available locally or what they may be entitled to. **The proposed timelines for the “one stop” hub are too late and should be expedited.**
- Providers described repeated **confusion around Pathway, Sure Start, pre-school applications, SEND pathways and financial supports.**
- Several engagement events said that **information is especially difficult for newcomer families, rural families and parents trying to navigate multiple systems at once.**
- Respondents also linked information to quality, noting that parents need confidence in what different forms of provision actually offer.

What should change before finalisation:

- **Bring forward the delivery timetable (category 2) for a parent information platform** and resource it properly.
- Provide information in **accessible formats** and through trusted community routes, not online only.
- Make sure information covers **childcare, pre-school, targeted programmes, SEND support, financial entitlements and transition points in one place.**
- Use information reform to strengthen parental understanding of the educational value of play-based community and voluntary provision.
- Ensure information is **kept current and aligned across departments and agencies.**

9. Theme 3 - Supporting the early years sector and workforce

Theme 3 is where the engagement evidence is strongest and most urgent. The direct engagement papers, previous Early Years work with partners all make the same central point: affordability and expansion will not be delivered without a stable sector and a skilled, valued workforce. Workforce conditions are not a secondary matter; they are the foundation of quality, inclusion and access.

Objective 3.1: Build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector

Consultation Response	Agree
Summary view	Early Years agrees with the ambition of this objective, but the current strategy does not yet provide the level of clarity or assurance needed on sustainability, business support and long-term capacity.

Across the engagement evidence, respondents repeatedly asked a simple question: **how will this be funded sustainably?** Providers welcome recognition of business pressures, but fear that **under-developed schemes or competitive funds** could increase uncertainty rather than reduce it.

The final strategy should state clearly that **sustainability means funding the true cost of delivery, supporting diverse local models and creating the conditions in which quality can grow.**

What our engagement told us:

- Providers welcomed steps such as **parity for non-statutory PSEP rates, accessibility support and strategic funds in principle.**
- Many respondents questioned whether **business support would focus too narrowly on viability and financial compliance** rather than pedagogy, leadership, quality and governance. This model should include **sector specific support** and not be generic in nature.
- **Rural settings, small voluntary groups and settings in disadvantaged areas** said they **may struggle** most if support is competitive, overly bureaucratic or based on one-size-fits-all criteria.
- Committee-led governance models and **hidden costs** remain major challenges in parts of the community and voluntary sector.

What should change before finalisation:

- Publish a **clear sustainability model** showing how funding, inflation, staffing, inclusion and leadership time can be addressed over time.
- Design **contextualised business support** to include **governance, HR, financial management, quality improvement and leadership development.**
- Avoid competitive models that advantage already well-resourced providers; apply **transparent criteria** that **protect rural, disadvantaged and inclusion-focused settings.**
- **Recognise the mixed market** explicitly and treat childcare and early learning as essential social and economic infrastructure.
- Work with the sector to identify where capital, accessibility and transition investment is needed most urgently.

Objective 3.2: Enhance accessible Early Learning and Childcare for children with additional needs

Consultation Response	Strongly agree
Summary view	Early Years strongly agrees with this objective. Across every strand of evidence, support for children with additional needs emerged as one of the most urgent system weaknesses.

Parents and providers do not describe a **single problem but a chain of barriers: delayed assessment, fragmented pathways, underfunded one-to-one support, limited specialist advice, inconsistent inclusion funding and poor transitions**. Settings often want to include children but do not have the practical support to do so well.

The final strategy should turn aspiration into a practical inclusion offer that is **timely, portable across settings and available at the point of need**.

What our engagement told us:

- Providers repeatedly said **funding should follow the child** and arrive when support is needed, rather than after lengthy processes.
- Several events highlighted **children with complex needs being placed in settings** while waiting for specialist provision, placing pressure on children, families and staff.
- Settings reported **weak access to speech and language, psychology and SEND specialist advice**, particularly in **non-statutory settings**.
- There was consistent concern that inclusion support is too often dependent on locality, provider type or the persistence of individual staff and families.

What should change before finalisation:

- Make inclusion funding **timely, portable and accessible** to all registered provider types.
- **Provide practical specialist support to settings**, not just written guidance or delayed funding decisions.
- Bring forward transition and information-sharing arrangements for children with additional needs. This should be prioritised as a **category 2 intervention**.
- Create **clearer escalation routes** where practitioners have concerns and cannot access the right support quickly enough.
- **Align inclusion delivery with wider SEN reform so early years settings are not left outside the system.**

Objective 3.3: Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce

Consultation Response	Strongly agree
Summary view	Early Years strongly agrees with this objective and considers it foundational to the whole strategy. Parent survey evidence shows that 96.2% agree or strongly agree that a sustainable sector and valued workforce are essential, and children's participation work suggests children notice when adults are happy, calm and engaged in their roles.

The engagement evidence is **unequivocal: current pay, terms and recognition do not reflect the complexity of the work. Recruitment and retention problems are now affecting every part of the system, with particularly acute challenges in rural areas, inclusion roles and smaller non-statutory settings.**

The final strategy must therefore **move beyond broad commitments** and publish a funded workforce settlement, **including pay progression, qualifications, protected CPD time and meaningful professional recognition.**

What our engagement told us:

- Providers described **losing experienced staff** to schools and other sectors where pay, conditions and career progression are better.
- Respondents repeatedly stated that the label of '**childcare**' can understate the professional and relational complexity of the role.
- **Access to training and cover is uneven**, with statutory staff often better able to participate than community and voluntary settings.
- There is support for qualification and career frameworks, but also concern that requirements may rise without the funding or progression routes needed to make them achievable.

What should change before finalisation:

- **Develop and support pay scales** and progression routes linked to roles, responsibility and qualifications. Feedback consistently indicated a clear desire for a professional body to be established, reflecting the sector's ambition for greater coherence, shared standards, and a recognised platform for professional identity.
- Guarantee funded release time and cover for CPD, leadership development and implementation of new frameworks.
- Create a credible professionalisation pathway for the whole workforce, including childminders, daycare and community and voluntary staff.
- Pair workforce reform with provider sustainability funding so staff improvements do not become an unfunded mandate.
- Strengthen professional recognition and public messaging about the value of early years work.

10. Cross-cutting recommendations for the final strategy

- Adopt a clear **long-term investment pathway** that matches the strategy's ambition and funds the true cost of delivery across the mixed market. While early learning and childcare should be **universally accessible**, the system must also provide enhanced support for children and families who may face additional barriers due to **deprivation, rurality, special educational needs, disability, or minority status**. A universal foundation, combined with proportionate additional support, ensures that no child is left behind and that every family can benefit fully from high quality early learning
- Guarantee **parity between statutory and non-statutory provision** in funding, support, inclusion pathways, quality improvement and professional recognition.
- Protect and expand developmentally appropriate **pre-pre-school and 2–3 provision**, rather than allowing it to erode during the shift toward standardisation.
- Bring forward practical measures on parent information, 2–3 provision, inclusion pathways and transition planning where delay would weaken delivery.
- Ensure all **affordability reforms are tested** against provider sustainability, workforce costs, parental choice and equality of access.
- Fund a **quality improvement infrastructure** that includes mentoring, specialist support and coherent implementation of the proposed 0–6 framework.
- Publish a **funded workforce settlement** covering pay, progression, qualifications, CPD and leadership support.
- **Strengthen cross-departmental accountability** so Education, Health, Communities and Economy are jointly responsible for delivery.

11. Conclusion

Early Years **supports the direction of travel** in the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and welcomes the Executive's recognition that children, families, providers and the workforce all need a stronger system.

However, the direct engagement evidence is unequivocal: *ambition alone will not deliver change*

The final strategy should be strengthened so that affordability, quality, inclusion and sustainability are pursued together rather than in competition. In particular, the final document should explicitly focus on what matters most to children, protect the mixed market, bring direct engagement evidence into implementation design, and ensure that the people expected to deliver the strategy are funded, supported and valued.

Early Years stands ready to continue working with Government and partners to refine and implement a final strategy that is practical, equitable and genuinely shaped by lived experience. This means developing solutions for ALL children including pre-natal.

Appendix A - Engagement evidence foregrounded in this response

This response has drawn directly on feedback from the following engagement papers and supporting documents:

- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Armagh & Dungannon
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Belfast
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Craigavon, Banbridge, Newry & Mourne
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Fermanagh & Omagh
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Lisburn & Down
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch North Down & Ards
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch North West
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Northern (Coleraine)
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Branch Northern (Larne)
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Daycare Forum
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – PSEP
- Strategy Consultation Feedback – Sure Start Consultation Event
- Parents Draft ELC Strategy Feedback Summary
- Child Participation Responses FINAL
- Critique and Alignment ELC = Policy Review