early years
the organisation for young children

Strategic Plan
2026-2030





“This Strategic Plan will provide the focus and direction needed to support our continued development and ensure that, over the next four years, we create lasting value and achieve a positive and enduring impact for the people and communities at the heart of our work.”

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Welcome from the Chair



Nemonie Fulton

It is my pleasure to introduce the Early Years Strategic Plan for 2026-2030, which sets out our ambition, direction and priorities for the next four years. This plan represents an important milestone for the organisation, providing a clear and shared vision for the future and a framework through which we can continue to grow, strengthen our services and maximise our impact.

The development of this plan has been shaped by a comprehensive process of engagement and consultation, undertaken in partnership with Stratagem International and involving our Board, Senior Management Team (SMT), Strategic Leadership Team, staff, members and wider stakeholders. I would like to thank everyone who contributed their time, insight and experience to this process. Their perspectives have been invaluable in helping us reflect on our achievements, consider the challenges and opportunities ahead, and define our collective ambitions for the future.

A key outcome of this work has been the development of a revised Mission, Vision and Values, alongside seven interrelated Strategic Priorities that will guide our work over the period 2026–2030. Together, these provide a clear expression of who we are, what we stand for and what we aspire to achieve. They will help us communicate our purpose, impact and ambition consistently, both internally and externally, while ensuring that our decisions and actions remain focused on the outcomes that matter most.

I look forward to working with the Board, our leadership teams, staff, members and partners as we bring this strategy to life. I am confident that this Strategic Plan will provide the focus and direction needed to support our continued development and ensure that, over the next four years, we create lasting value and achieve a positive and enduring impact for the people and communities at the heart of our work.

Nemonie Fulton
Early Years Chair

Foreword from the Chief Executive



Pauline Walmsley OBE

Our strategic planning process has led us to a revised mission, vision and set of values together with seven interconnected strategic priorities that will enable our organisation to strengthen and extend its impact over the next four years. Building on our 60 years in the field, our community development approach enables us to work across the ecosystem in which children, families, carers, providers and services exist.

We can engage and collaborate across multiple levels to strengthen the connections between family, early learning and care, community, education, health, financial administration and advocacy. These strategic priorities will help create the relationships and the conditions that enable children and families thrive.

Our Strategic Plan continues to be inspired by the thinking of Yuri Bronfenbrenner whose ecological approach reminds us that children's development is shaped, not only by what happens immediately around them, but by the relationships and the wider environments in which they live.

We are mindful that no single organisation can create the necessary conditions for children to thrive. Never before has it been more important that the relationships, connections and collaboration within our organisation, and with a wide range of partners are strong, healthy and focused on producing better outcomes for children, families and those who care for them and work with them.

At Early Years our values are at the heart of everything we do. We believe every child, family and carer deserves the opportunity to thrive. That's why we are committed to equity, making sure people get the support they need to achieve their potential. Leadership within Early Years and across the system is critical to ensuring that collaboration, innovation, inclusion and diversity are not simply values we describe, but ways of working that enable us to create greater impact and address inequity.

Our mission is to make a positive and lasting difference in children's lives. Our vision, a thriving and resilient society where all children flourish. Together, our mission, vision and values provide a concise framework for delivery and underpin our partnerships.

They connect our internal culture with our external impact and they support all of us to continue making a positive and lasting difference while working towards a thriving and resilient society where all children flourish.

I want to thank Strategem International, the wide group of members, stakeholders, staff and our Board for your generous contribution to this plan. The plan belongs to all of us and its success will depend on how we bring it to life through our leadership, our collaboration and our everyday decisions. I look forward to seeing what we can achieve together over the next four years.

Pauline Walmsley OBE
Early Years Chief Executive



Our *Mission*

is to make a positive and lasting difference in children's lives.

Our *Vision*

is for a thriving and resilient society where all children flourish.

Our *Values*

- Equity
- Innovation & Impact
- Inclusion & Diversity
- Joy
- Collaboration
- Nurture
- Champion

Our Strategic Priorities



We **nurture** relationships, confidence and potential, creating environments where children and the adults around them can flourish.



nurture

We bring **joy** to our work, because childhood matters and positive play experiences can make a lasting difference.



joy

Priority One
Thriving Child Centred Learning and Care

Belief	**Everything we do centrally locates the needs of the child**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Amplifying Children's Rights** a. Ensure that the Early Learning and Childcare Sector is rights led and informed and promote access to justice b. Collaborate with Voluntary, Community and Independent sector colleagues to champion the rights and needs of children c. Leverage distinct EY programmes to promote and build capacity on children's rights
	2. Growing and deepening our Direct Services provision a. Evolve provision of Direct Services to enable Early Years services to reach more children, families and localities through expansion of ToyBox and Sure Starts b. Harness and leverage learning from Sure Start and FEYC (Fermanagh Early Years Centre) provision to grow understanding of how we "walk alongside parents & carers" and promote the learning across the sector c. Review pedagogy and training services to ensure our offer is meeting evolving needs and bringing evidence-informed programmes to more settings
	3. Building on evidence informed Policy and Research a. Ensure that the needs of children and those that care for them actively inform policy – advocating for children, carers and the sector b. Diversify and increase access to evidence-informed practice c. Undertake Action Research that is specific to the needs of children in this region, understanding and influencing the political and policy contexts
	4. Reducing Inequality a. Work collaboratively with members, stakeholders and other organisations to advocate for and support under-represented or challenged identities b. Innovate services that seek to build capacity and meet need for those experiencing the sharpest end of inequality c. Leverage our platform to ensure children are central to anti-poverty policy and strategy
Values	**Champion, Innovation & Impact, Inclusion & Diversity, Collaboration, Joy & Nurture**

We believe every child, family and carer deserves the opportunity to thrive. That's why we are committed to **equity**, making sure people get the support they need to achieve their potential.









equity

We celebrate **inclusion and diversity**, valuing every child, family and community and ensuring everyone feels welcomed, respected and heard.







inclusion diversity

Priority Two

Thriving, Supported and Informed Families and Carers

Belief	**Families and carers are a child's most important source of love, stability and education**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Support families and carers as first educators** a. Ensure the needs of experiences of parents and carers actively informs policy – advocating for parents and carers b. Develop our training and information services offer to provide practice guidance and support for parents and carers strengthening their understanding of early childhood development c. Reimagine our digital offerings for parents and carers ensuring information is accessible
	2. Support families and carers experiencing poverty and disadvantage a. Leverage learning from Sure Start, FEYC and ToyBox on working with families and parents and carers to promote effective and evidence-informed models of training and practice b. Evolve provision of Direct Services to enable Early Years services to reach more children, families and carers, and localities through expansion of ToyBox and Sure Starts
	3. Reduce barriers to information and support a. Ensure NICSS is well promoted across multiple mediums (including with members and stakeholders) and is accessible to parents and carers b. Develop parent and carer spaces across our digital platforms that provide accessible information and signposting c. Work collaboratively with Statutory, Voluntary and Community stakeholders to advocate for support services for parents and carers
	4. Work collaboratively with others to support parents and carers a. Work collaboratively with members, stakeholders and organisations from across the Statutory, Voluntary, Community and Independent sectors to understand the needs and experiences of parents and carers b. Work collaboratively with Voluntary, Community and Independent organisations to amplify the needs of experiences of parents and carers of children with additional needs
Values	**Champion, Innovation & Impact, Inclusion & Diversity, Collaboration & Nurture**

Priority Three
Thriving Careers and Workforce

Belief	**Early Learning and Care is a valuable, sustainable and respected career**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Promotion of Early Learning and Childcare (EL&C) as a destination career choice** a. Nurturing alliances / collaborative working with sector stakeholders to promote the Early Learning and Care (EL&C) sector as a rewarding and attractive career b. Demonstrate the positive and meaningful impact that a career in EL&C provides c. Collaborate with further and higher education providers to promote streamlined and modernised training and accredited qualification pathways to progression d. Support strategic initiatives that improve recruitment and retention in the sector
	2. Lobbying and Advocacy for the Workforce a. Advocate for remuneration and terms and conditions that are sufficient to award and retain high-quality staff b. Advocate for a curriculum, pedagogy, education, training and CPD that improves quality and outcomes c. Positively represent the sector and raise the visibility of the workforce, their worth and impact d. Engage with members and stakeholders to ascertain workforce needs and represent those needs with policymakers and funders
	3. Championing Continued Professional Development a. Provide evidence-informed training programmes for the EL&C workforce b. Provide CPD programmes that raise capacity and promote career pathway progression c. Collaborate with further and higher education providers to offer needs-based training and development programmes d. Develop reflective practice and supervision capacities across the sector to support employers and employees to manage challenging contexts
	4. Building Sector Support and Shared Learning a. Grow our place as the "Go To" organisation for support for sector providers b. Grow our place as a learning organisation that shares experience, learning, expertise and resources to support the workforce
Values	**Champion, Collaboration, Joy, Innovation & Impact, Nurture**

Priority Four

Thriving Early Learning and Care (EL&C) Sector

Belief	**The Early Learning and Care Sector is a well-regarded and rewarding Sector**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Growing our place as the "Go To" organisation for sector support** a. Continue to develop Support Services that offers advice and support to EL&C providers b. Increase our visibility and representation of the sector c. Advocate for continued growth and expansion of The Pathway Fund
	2. Work towards establishing a Professional Association in collaboration with universities, government and other stakeholders a. Provide strategic leadership, including building cross-sectoral support with Stranmillis University College, to progress the establishment of an independent Professional Association for the Early Learning and Care workforce in Northern Ireland. b. Drive Sectoral Research and Build a Multi Faceted Professional Learning Environment including the development of a Code of Ethics drawing on five nation evidence, international models and practitioner insight. c. Ensure staff, partners and related projects contribute to a comprehensive professional learning environment that strengthens ethical practice, reflective capacity, and professional identity across the workforce.
	3. Support quality improvement within the sector a. Improve, refine and diversify our membership offer b. Increase access to our Quality Mentor and Early Years Specialists Services c. Raise the profile of evidence-informed approaches and increase access to programmes d. Support Good Governance capacity and leadership within the sector at all levels e. Support quality and Good Governance development and training opportunities, including development of family support training opportunities
	4. Support collaboration, shared voice and shared learning across the sector a. Support the development of networking and relationship-building between organisations, policy-makers and funders b. Support and lead on the growth of collaborative networks and locality system approaches for Early Years provision c. Advocate for referral and support access to Health and Social Care Trust, and Education Authority services for children
Values	**Champion, Innovation & Impact, Collaboration**

We believe in **collaboration** - working together with children, families, carers, communities and partners to achieve more.









collaboration

We embrace **innovation & impact**, continually learning, improving and finding new ways to make a positive difference.











innovation & impact

Priority Five
Thriving Communities

Belief	**Communities have stronger capacity, connection and resources to work collaboratively**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Growing collaborations and supporting community networking** a. Leverage learning from existing knowledge and practice supporting the growth of collaborative networks within localities b. Leverage existing programmes such as ASPIRE and ToyBox to support the growth of locality collaboration c. Work alongside and share learning with other organisations in multi-disciplinary settings d. Grow our relationship with international partners though INPB, ECPC and others
	2. Reducing inequality and strengthening respect for inclusion and diversity a. Lobby and advocate for equitable provision and early intervention within EL&C settings b. Increase awareness of and responses to diversity and diverse learning styles and needs within the sector c. Enhance North / South, East / West linkages for mutual learning, joint services and future efficiencies
	3. Growing Community Capacity a. Engage with all provider types to support the development of sustainable community connections and responses to need b. Leverage learning from Sure Start, FEYC and ToyBox on working with families and parents and carers to promote inclusion and diversity in the sector c. Nurture and mobilise Early Years Branches to provide governance space for local advocacy, learning and development
Values	**Champion, Innovation & Impact, Inclusion & Diversity, Collaboration, Nurture, Equity, Joy**

And we champion children, families and carers - listening to their voices, celebrating their strengths and standing alongside them to help create brighter futures.











champion

Priority Six
Thriving Influencing and Engaging

Belief	**Early Learning and Care provision should be needs-led and evidence-informed**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Responding to emerging needs and priorities** a. Engage the sector, parents and carers and stakeholders in action research and evidence-gathering b. Collaborate across the sector and with specialist organisations (e.g. Altram, NICMA, Playboard, Safeguarding Board) on key needs and challenges facing the sector and families c. Increase visibility and voice on emerging needs for the sector
	2. Responding to and informing policy and strategy a. Refine and develop a coherent Public Affairs Strategy that engages elected representatives and decision-makers on the objectives of our Strategic Plan. b. Lead consultations with the sector, including responses to #PublicConsultation and through secondary consultation models c. Listen to and mobilise membership to provide evidence for reform d. Conduct local and comparative research from other jurisdictions on needs and policies affecting children, families and EL&C sector e. Share learning and advocate on policy and research gaps North / South, East / West, and internationally
	3. Sectoral and Public Engagement a. Increase our engagement with members and the wider sector, innovating new approaches (including new digital developments and products) and demonstrate impact and value
	4. Engaging Policy Makers a. Raise needs, priorities and profile of EL&C with: All Party Group, Departments and Ministers, Parties, Shared Island, North / South, East / West and Internationally
Values	**Champion, Innovation & Impact, Collaboration, Equity**

Priority Seven

A Thriving and Sustainable Organisation

Belief	**Early Years is the 'Go To' organisation for young children**
Priorities 2026 to 2030	**1. Ensuring Good Governance, Sustainability and Fiscal Responsibility** a. Secure steady financial growth, viability and sustainable resource management b. Develop a sustainable organisation that prides itself on its all-island and international reach, impact and innovation c. Deliver quality services providing transparent financial information with strong controls and accountability d. Ensure that succession planning is consistent across all departments within the organisation e. Promote environmental sustainability across the organisation, and with members and the wider sector
	2. Growing our Visibility and Representation a. Ensure that we are visibly child-centred b. Implementation of wraparound communications, promotional and engagement strategies that represents the wide-ranging work and aspirations of Early Years c. Grow the visibility of the organisation for parents and carers, providers and policymakers d. Work collaboratively with aligned organisations on communications that positively impact the sector e. Provide information and resources for parents and carers, providers, practitioners and communities f. Grow the organisational place and role as sectoral learning organisation that utilises multiple settings and expertise
	3. Being a destination organisation a. Highlight our place as a learning, positive organisation for those who want to work within the sector b. Embed Reflective Practice approaches and invest in CPD for Early Years Staff c. Ensure Early Years is an appreciative, challenging and rewarding working environment d. Lead training for Staff and the Sector at our many centres of excellence across the region
	4. Working Collaboratively with Statutory Bodies a. Continued effective delivery of government programmes b. Seek to develop other programmes to meet the needs of the sector in partnership with Government
Values	**Champion, Innovation & Impact, Collaboration, Equity, Joy, Inclusion & Diversity, Nurture**

Glossary

Term	Definition
All-Party Group	All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare
ASPIRE	PEACEPLUS ASPIRE (Advancing Shared Partnerships through Inclusive Relationships in Education) is a project which aims to provide direct and sustained contact between children and young people from all backgrounds
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
ECPC	Early Childhood Peace Consortium
EL&C	Early Learning and Childcare
Evidence-Informed Practice	An approach that combines proven research, professional skills, and local context to help young children learn and grow
FEYC	Fermanagh Early Years Centre
INPB	International Network for Peace Building with Young Children
NICMA	Northern Ireland Childminding Association
NICSS	The Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme aims to reduce the childcare costs of eligible working parents by 15 per cent for all qualifying children
The Pathway Fund	The Fund aims to improve the development of children who are at risk of educational underachievement
Pedagogy	The method, practice, and philosophy of how we teach young children and support their holistic development
Professional Association	Professional Association for the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce in Northern Ireland
Reflective Practice	The continuous process of evaluating and improving our methods, interactions and delivery
SMT	Senior Management Team
Sure Start(s)	A targeted programme supporting children under the age of four, and their families, living in the most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland
ToyBox	A project aimed at improving the long-term outcomes for Traveller and Roma children and their families

+44 (0)28 9066 2825
info@early-years.org
membership@early-years.org

6c Wildflower Way, Apollo Road,
Boucher Road, Belfast, BT12 6TA

For more information scan the QR Code or visit www.early-years.org

