

# ANNEX

## *SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION ON CHILDREN FIRST*

### *Introduction*

1. The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy *Children First* was issued for consultation at the end of February 1999. It set out the Government's aim to ensure that good quality, affordable childcare is available for children in every neighbourhood, including both formal childcare and support for informal arrangements.
2. Over 2,000 copies were issued to a range of organisations and individuals. The consultees included Area Early Years Committees, Pre-school Education Advisory Groups, Directors of Social Services in each Health and Social Services Board and HSS Trust, Health and Social Services Councils, Education and Library Boards, education providers, other Government Departments, DHSS central advisory committees and child care voluntary organisations. In addition, views were sought from the political parties, Northern Ireland MPs, members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the universities, and employers and trade union representatives.
3. To ensure that as many organisations and individuals as possible were given the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy, DHSS ran a consultative conference, which was attended by around 150 people, and two smaller workshops which brought together expert focus groups to look at specific areas of the Strategy.



## *Analysis of responses*

4. The consultation ended on 30 April. 69 responses were received. This annex gives a summary of the points raised in the responses and indicates the action proposed.
5. Key messages from respondents were:
  - a general welcome for the publication of a Childcare Strategy;
  - concern that its emphasis appeared to be on economic and employment issues rather than putting children first;
  - support for the commitment to raise quality;
  - concern that the Strategy did not address the holistic needs of families with young children given that Northern Ireland has not issued a document comparable to the Home Office's *Supporting Families* ;
  - criticism of the absence of clear commitment to fund Sure Start or a comparable programme for young children and their families in Northern Ireland;
  - support for an extended remit for the existing Area Early Years Committees to carry out the proposed functions of Childcare Partnerships in England;
  - support for the Strategy to cover a wider age range than the current 0-11 age band, with the majority supporting a remit of 0-14 as in England;
  - concern that some of the funding sources identified in the document to implement the Strategy are short-term and inadequate.
6. A number of respondents were critical that the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years did not intend to publish a final version of the Strategy reflecting the views expressed during the consultation exercise.



## *SPECIFIC CONSULTATION POINTS AND PROPOSED RESPONSE*

### *Raising the Quality of Care - Regulation and Good Practice*

#### *Consultation point 1: Registration and inspection*

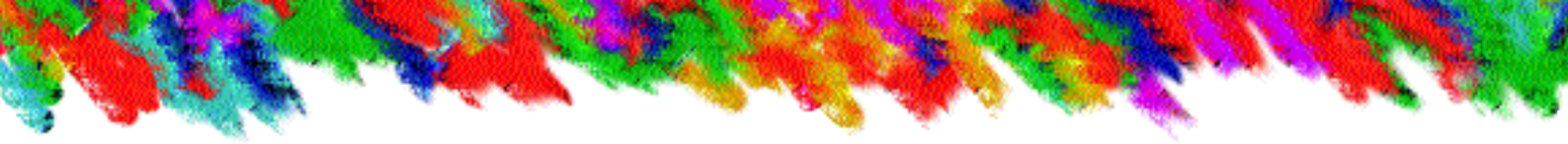
On improving education and social services regulatory standards and inspection systems and co-ordination between education and social services, some of the respondents called for a unified system of regulation and inspection across the two sectors. Others stopped short of this, but called for more consultation and collaboration between education and social services to reach common standards to inform inspection across both sectors. The need for a collaborative approach to inspecting providers in the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme was highlighted by some respondents, as these providers are subject to inspection by both education and social services. There was also support for joint training of education and social services inspectors. Differences between Trusts in interpretation of the regulations and guidance associated with Part XI of the Children Order were also identified as a problem.

#### *Consultation point 2: Accreditation*

There was general support for accreditation schemes as a means of improving quality. Several respondents called for all the main players to be involved in developing a “common scheme” which would be accepted by and accessible to all categories of care.

#### *Consultation point 3: Good practice*

There was general support for the development of Good Practice Networks in Northern Ireland. Respondents stressed the need for robust, regionally agreed eligibility criteria, which should reflect good practice rather than good marketing. Respondents felt that, as well as childcare and early education provision, the Networks should cover a range of services for families with children up to age 14, including childminding, family support, training for parenting, health care and drop-in facilities for



families. The Networks should also provide staff development and training for other childcare providers. There was acceptance that while a single site providing the full range of services might be an option in an urban area, a co-ordinated network as proposed in the document would be more feasible in a rural area. It was felt important that the Networks should build on existing projects and their community links.

- Response:**
- **The Government acknowledges that there are genuine concerns among providers about the different criteria applied by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Health and Social Services Trusts registration and inspection units and that there is a need for closer working to clarify for providers the respective roles and responsibilities of the two inspectorial regimes and the reasons for differences in standards.**
  - **ETI and SSI will work together to develop as far as possible common standards to inform inspection in early education and childcare settings.**
  - **DHSS and SSI will promote training of Health and Social Services Trust registration and inspection staff in the application of the regulations and guidance associated with Part XI of the Children Order.**
  - **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will invite relevant childcare organisations to work together to develop common standards for accreditation in Northern Ireland.**
  - **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will set criteria and invite applications for the establishment of a small number of Good Practice Networks. Initial funding to develop these will be available from the Childhood Fund.**



## *Raising the Quality of Care - Staffing*

### *Consultation points 4 and 5: Supply, recruitment and training of childcare workers*

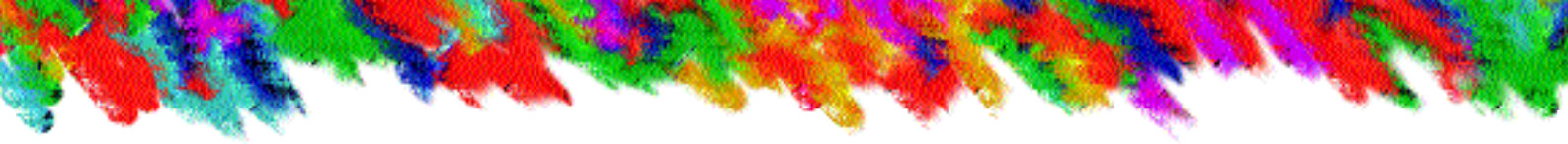
Many respondents felt that childcare should be regarded as a profession and that the status and pay of early years workers should be raised. Suggested ways of achieving this included salaries which reflect higher qualifications and a clear system of career progression. A few respondents suggested that more men should be encouraged to work in childcare.

Many respondents supported the view in *Children First* that working with children requires careful selection of suitable candidates. They therefore felt that this was an important qualification to the suggestion in *Children First* that parents and young people participating in the New Deal were key potential sources of childcare and play workers.

There was general support for the Government's intention to establish a framework for childcare qualifications that would map out equivalencies so that childcare workers could see how their qualifications match up to the NVQ standards. Some respondents called for a fundamental review of training arrangements and the development of a coherent training strategy. A common view was that there were too many training courses at present. Many respondents indicated that long term funding would be needed to underpin training initiatives.

A substantial number of respondents pointed out that the six month training period within the New Deal is not sufficient to allow participants to obtain an NVQ qualification.

- Response:**
- **The Government accepts in principle that higher qualifications should attract better pay. Apart from the Government's introduction of the national minimum wage, pay is a matter for employers.**
  - **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will promote the national framework for qualifications, initially by providing information for existing and potential childcare employers and workers on the framework and how they can use it.**

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- **T&EA will develop a childcare training strategy for Northern Ireland, in consultation with relevant Departments, employers in the sector, the National Training Organisations, and other stakeholders; and will aim to ensure that the resources available are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.**
  - **T&EA is working towards achieving the target of providing 1,250 training opportunities in childcare through the New Deal.**

## *Making Childcare More Accessible*

### *Consultation point 6: Strengthening the quality of care through families and friends*

There was a general feeling that parenting was undervalued in *Children First*. The need for future Government policy to focus on parenting in its broadest sense was highlighted. There was a strong call for the implementation of the Sure Start initiative and the programmes outlined in *Supporting Families*. Respondents supported the provision of more voluntary outreach services such as Homestart and called for adequate core funding to voluntary organisations to implement the Strategy. Other proposals for strengthening care through families included extending the availability of parent/carer and toddler groups and providing training aimed at carers who are not required to register under the Children Order.

### *Consultation point 7: Assistance with childcare costs*

Respondents flagged up a diverse range of families who need help with childcare costs, including parents who are unemployed, parents with a mental illness, people suffering from addictions, people from minority communities, students, teenage parents, and victims of the Troubles.



## *Consultation point 8: Groups requiring special attention*

A wide range of people was highlighted as requiring special attention in planning and providing childcare. These included parents of children aged under 4, people in rural areas, ethnic minorities and families of children with a disability.

## *Consultation point 9: Services for children under 4*

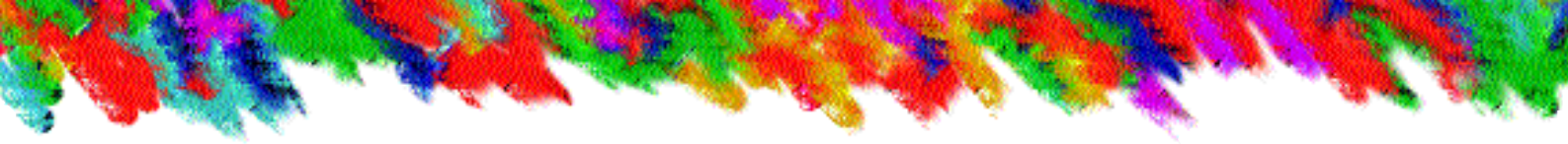
The full implementation of Sure Start was viewed as the main way to strengthen services for children under 4 and their families. Many respondents stressed the importance of placing more value on the roles of parents and health professionals.

There was strong general support for the general principles of Sure Start and the national guidance on Sure Start. The range of services seen as essential include:

- outreach and home visiting support to families;
- good quality play, learning, childcare and child health provision;
- help to access specialised services, for both children and parents.

Respondents thought it important that individual projects should be carefully managed, with one person having overall responsibility to coordinate the work and manage the budget, and that projects should be carefully monitored and evaluated.

- Response:**
- **The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme and the New Opportunities Fund support for out-of-school childcare will bring about major expansions in provision for children aged 3 and over.**
  - **DHSS will identify relevant elements of *Supporting Families* where comparable action has not yet been taken for Northern Ireland and develop proposals for addressing these.**

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- **Additional funding has already been made available to Health and Social Services Trusts to meet their obligations to children in need. DHSS will review the extent to which such funding is actually being used to support childcare for children in need.**
  - **Those groups identified by respondents as requiring special attention will be given priority in the guidance to be issued to Childcare Partnerships.**
  - **DHSS will allocate £9.9m over the period to March 2002 for an initiative comparable to Sure Start, adapted as necessary to Northern Ireland's particular priorities and circumstances, for families with children aged under 4 and will work with Childcare Partnerships to establish a small number of pilots by April 2000.**

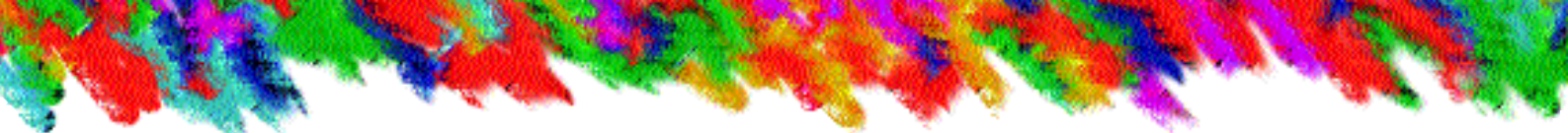
## *Childcare and Work*

### *Consultation point 10: Barriers to employers*

The barriers to 'family friendly' employment practices identified by respondents included:

- cost;
- lack of incentive where the employer has no difficulty attracting and retaining staff;
- size of business and lack of flexibility in running small businesses;
- nature of the business in some cases; and
- lack of information on good practice, particularly for smaller businesses.

Suggested ways to encourage employers included an awareness raising and communications strategy, possibly undertaken by Opportunity Now. Some respondents suggested accreditation/incentive/award schemes and some called for more research to be done with employers and employees to identify what practices would be most helpful. Government's main contribution was identified as providing a role model, as a major employer.

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- Response:**
- **In co-operation with the Department for Education and Employment, Opportunity Now and other relevant agencies, T&EA will develop a communications strategy for promoting family friendly employment in Northern Ireland.**

## *Improving Information on Childcare*

### *Consultation points 11-13: Information services*

There was support for an agreed regional approach to the development of a comprehensive strategy to produce an information service, which could be delivered locally. There was general agreement among those who responded that information held should be comprehensive, covering costs, opening times, vacancies, qualifications of provider staff and that it should be accessible in a wide range of facilities including libraries, schools, community centres, government public offices and primary care centres. Issues of confidentiality and data protection were raised by a few respondents. Some respondents raised issues about accessibility of information to non-English speaking and disabled parents.

- Response:**
- **DHSS accepts the need for a comprehensive system which can operate at local level but to agreed regional standards. DHSS will ensure that a project board with representation from all relevant agencies is set up to identify more precisely what the needs are and bring forward proposals about how they can best be met. Funding will be provided for developmental work at the regional level.**

## *Delivering the Strategy*

### *Consultation point 14: Childcare Partnerships*

The widespread view was that the four existing Area Early Years Committees (AEYCs) represented the best basis for taking forward the Strategy. Some respondents advocated a review of the roles of AEYCs and Pre-school Education Advisory Groups to ensure a partnership approach, while others suggested combining the two. Some suggested that Childcare Partnerships would require dedicated resources to support their work.



## *Consultation point 15-18: Remit and membership of Partnerships*

The changes most frequently proposed in the membership of the AEYCs were to strengthen parent, employer and community representation.

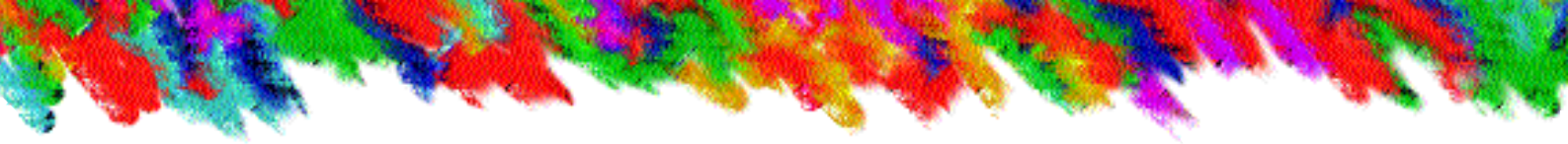
While some respondents proposed wider age groups for varying reasons, the most common response was in favour of 0-14, in line with England and Wales.

In general, respondents agreed with the proposed tasks for Childcare Partnerships in *Children First*, although the timescale for production of the first Childcare Plans was felt to be ambitious.

## *Consultation point 19: Regional structures*

In considering the regional structures required to implement the Strategy, some respondents questioned the need for the continuance of the Regional Consultative Forum on Early Years, proposing instead an expanded Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years which would include the non-profit and private sectors. Others thought that the role and remit of the Forum should be reviewed to take account of the revised remit of Childcare Partnerships.

- Response:**
- **DHSS will establish Childcare Partnerships. and issue guidance on their membership and remit by September 1999.**
  - **The Childcare Partnerships' remit will cover childcare for children aged 0-14, and the guidance will include advice on how parents and employers might best be represented.**
  - **DHSS will commission the first Childcare Plans to be completed by January 2000 to cover the year commencing April 2000.**
  - **DHSS will contribute towards the costs of administrative support for the Childcare Partnerships.**

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- **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years and the Regional Consultative Forum will remain as two separate bodies. The Inter-Departmental Group will review the Regional Consultative Forum's role and membership, in consultation with the Forum.**

### *Further copies*

You can obtain further copies of this document from DHSS Health and Social Policy Unit on Tel: (01232) 520530.

We are making this document available in large print, braille and on audio-cassette. Please contact the Health and Social Policy Unit on Tel: (01232) 520530.

The main document is also available on the internet. The address is:  
<http://www.dhssni.gov.uk>



