

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION


- 1.1 The Government is committed to supporting children and families. The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, as part of a national framework, is an essential component of that support. This document updates Northern Ireland's 1994 policy framework on early years provision, which was published by the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Education to promote the development of provision for children aged under 12, but with a particular emphasis on children aged up to 5. Responses to consultation on the new strategy supported **extending this age range to 14. The age range for this strategy is therefore 0-14.**

Existing provision

- 1.2 Childcare in Northern Ireland is available in a range of settings in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. The majority of places are provided by the community, voluntary and private sectors, many on a part-time basis. Current services fall far short of the Government's vision. Provision is uneven and poorly co-ordinated. Care for school age children and children with special needs is particularly limited.

Structures

- 1.3 Responsibility for the social and economic policy issues associated with childcare currently rests with three Departments: Health and Social Services, Education and Economic Development. It is important that there are structures in place to co-ordinate work amongst them to deliver a coherent overall strategy and an Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years was therefore created in 1995. Its members consist of senior officials from the three Departments, the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Social Services Inspectorate. **This arrangement enables the Departments to work together to promote and develop child care and pre-school education in accordance with international standards of good practice and will therefore remain in place.**



1.4 A Regional Consultative Forum on Early Years was established in 1994 to include voluntary and private sector provider representatives and other relevant interests.

Its remit and membership will be reviewed in the light of changes brought about by this strategy.

1.5 At a more local level, four Area Early Years Committees have been providing an inter-agency forum for the development of childcare and family support to meet the needs of their local population.

These committees will form the basis of new Childcare Partnerships which will be responsible for implementing this strategy at local level.

Why do we need a new strategy?

1.6 Childcare in Northern Ireland faces three main challenges:

- quality is variable;
- the cost is out of reach of many parents;
- in some areas there are not enough childcare places and parents' access to them is hampered by poor information.

1.7 In response to these challenges the strategy document *Children First* was published for consultation at the end of February 1999. Over 2,000 copies were issued. The consultation ended on 30 April. Sixty nine responses were received: a summary is at Annex A.

1.8 In publishing this Policy Statement, the Government's aim is to ensure high quality, affordable childcare for children aged up to 14 in every local community in Northern Ireland.