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Early years and children's services: a brief overview

1 Introduction

This paper considers early years education and care and children's services, and aims to support Committee for Education consideration of potential areas for inquiry. It is not intended to be comprehensive.

2 The early years build foundations for life

Children's early experiences, particularly in the first years of life, mould their development and their future life chances. The brain undergoes its most rapid period of development during this time, and healthy cognitive and emotional development depends on responsive and dependable interactions with adults.¹

¹ Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child (2007) *The Impact of Early Adversity on Child Development* (InBrief) [online] Available at: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-childrens-development/>

3 Socio-economic background influences outcomes, but the link is not absolute

Poverty, inequality and social disadvantage can negatively contribute to children's future; with socio-economic background a key predictor of academic performance at school. Differences between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers are apparent even at an early age. Indeed, research suggests that by the age of two, there is a six month gap in the language processing skills of children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.²

However, the association between socio-economic background and success at school is not absolute. Parents are critical in influencing outcomes for children, particularly in relation to the important home learning environment. Health factors during pregnancy and in the early years, such as pre-natal care, smoking, nutrition and overall health, also play an important role.³

4 Early intervention can mitigate disadvantage

There is clear evidence that ensuring children experience a positive environment during their early years will have a significant impact on their development.⁴

Interventions at this stage to address disadvantage are likely to be more effective and less costly than addressing the implications of early adversity later in life.⁵ They can also help to mitigate the effects of disadvantage and inequality, and to reduce the gap in outcomes for children from different backgrounds. As such, they can also generate long-term savings in public spending. Key areas for early intervention could include:⁶

- Maternal and child health;
- Parenting; and
- Early education and care.

² Fernald, A., Marchman, V.A., Weisleder, A. (2013) "SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months" *Developmental Science* Vol.16, No.2 pp. 234-48

³ Bertram, T., Pascal, C. (2014) *Early Years Literature Review* British Association for Early Childhood Education

⁴ Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child (2007) *The Impact of Early Adversity on Child Development* (InBrief) [online] Available at: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-childrens-development/>

⁵ Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child (2007) *The Impact of Early Adversity on Child Development* (InBrief) [online] Available at: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-childrens-development/>

⁶ Bertram, T., Pascal, C. (2014) *Early Years Literature Review* British Association for Early Childhood Education

5 The Department of Education has taken on additional responsibilities for children's services

Under the Fresh Start Agreement, the Department of Education gained responsibility for a number of additional areas from the then Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister from May 2016, as highlighted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Additional responsibilities transferred to the Department of Education⁷

Area	Key responsibilities and strategies
Children and Young People's Strategy Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing the new Executive Strategy for Children and Young People • Promoting implementation of the Children's Services Cooperation Act 2015 • Developing the Signature Programme on Play and Leisure • Reporting on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child • Developing the Child Rights Indicators Project • Considering the Children's Budgeting Programme
Childcare Strategy Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalising the draft Childcare Strategy for Executive approval and launch • Liaising with HMRC on the introduction of the new Tax Free Childcare initiative • Managing and evaluating the Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme

6 These new responsibilities may present opportunities for more effective and integrated early intervention

The Children's Service Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 requires co-operation among children's authorities in order to contribute to the well-being of children and young persons. This relates to a range of areas, including learning and achievement; play and leisure; physical and mental health; and living in a society that respects children's rights. It also provides for authorities to share resources and pool funds.⁸

The Act also requires the development of a children and young person's strategy. These requirements, together with new responsibilities such as developing the Child Rights Indicators Project and developing the Signature Programme on Play and Leisure, may present new opportunities for the Department to develop and implement integrated, effective and efficient early interventions. However, the draft Programme for

⁷ Information provided by the Department of Education, July 2016

⁸ Legislation.gov.uk *Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2015/10/contents>

Government does not include indicators in relation to joint working or implementation of the Act.

7 Sure Start provides early intervention in Northern Ireland, but challenges exist

Sure Start provides a wide range of services to support children and their families in the 20% most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland, expanding to the top 25% by 2016/17. Over 32,000 children are registered with Sure Start projects. However, a number of challenges exist in relation to the programme, with evidence showing that:⁹

- Most providers believe that their **catchment area is not appropriate** and misses areas of need;
- The Department of Education **collects limited data** on participants, preventing robust assessment of whether the programme is reaching families most in need; and
- **A much lower proportion of Protestants than Catholics avail of Sure Start services** (18% compared to 62% of registered children at March 2015).

8 Delivering Social Change programmes also provide early intervention activities, although their effectiveness is yet to be determined

The Delivering Social Change framework¹⁰ provides for a number of early intervention programmes, many of which are entering the pilot phase. Its Early Intervention Transformation Programme emphasises support for parents and families, with funding of £25m over a three year period. This Signature Programme focuses on government working together for prevention and earlier intervention, and aims to:¹¹

- **Equip parents** with skills to give their child the best start;
- **Support families when problems first emerge**; and
- **Positively address the impact of adversity** by intervening earlier and more effectively.

The Nurture Units Signature Programme involves 30 nurture groups in primary schools. Nurture groups provide tailored intervention for young children showing signs of

⁹ RSM McClure Watters (2015) *Independent Review of the Sure Start Programme* Bangor: DE

¹⁰ The Executive Office *Delivering Social Change – Introduction* [online] Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/delivering-social-change-introduction>

¹¹ The Executive Office *Delivering Social Change - Signature Programmes* [online] Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/equality-and-good-relations/delivering-social-change-signature-programmes>

emotional stress or behavioural difficulties, in a supportive environment. Each participating school receives £70,000 for their nurture group, staffed by a teacher and classroom assistant. A forthcoming Queens University Belfast evaluation may provide useful evidence on their effectiveness and potential for expansion. Funding for the existing groups is secured until March 2017.¹²

9 High quality pre-school has proven benefits, although there is room for improvement in current provision

High quality pre-school provision has positive outcomes for children, particularly in relation to the school readiness and achievement of disadvantaged children. A study in Northern Ireland has found that high quality provision influences children's academic attainment at the end of primary school, but that low quality provision does not have benefits.¹³

Around 93% of all eligible children in Northern Ireland attend one year of Department of Education funded pre-school provision. In the period 2012-2014, 23% of voluntary and private pre-school settings and 10% of statutory settings were not evaluated as good or better. There were also variations in the quality of leadership, with improvement required across a third of all settings.¹⁴

10 The Department of Education may bring forward school starting age legislation

Northern Ireland has one of the lowest school starting ages in Europe. In addition, there is evidence that the youngest children in a year group tend to underachieve compared to older classmates. This 'birthdate effect' is strongest during pre-school and primary school, and diminishes over time. However, it may remain throughout post-primary education.¹⁵

The Department of Education may bring forward legislation to allow parents to defer their child's entry to school in exceptional circumstances in the new mandate. However, this will not relate to a child's month of birth; rather, it will be based on a child's best interests. Evidence on the effectiveness of allowing for flexibility in the school starting stage is inconclusive.¹⁶

¹² Information provided by the Department of Education, March 2016

¹³ Melhuish, E., Quinn, I., Hanna, K., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart B. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI)* Summary Report Bangor: DE

¹⁴ Education and Training Inspectorate (2014) *Chief Inspector's Report 2014-2016* Bangor: ETI

¹⁵ Perry, C. (2011) *Arguments on the school starting age* Stormont: Northern Ireland Assembly

¹⁶ Perry, C. (2011) *Arguments on the school starting age* Stormont: Northern Ireland Assembly

11 Conclusion

Although tackling wider deprivation and social inequality is not within the gift of the education system, the early years present a key opportunity to address the disadvantages many children face. Areas for consideration could include:

- The Department of Education's new responsibilities for children's services, for example how it plans to fulfil its duties and optimise opportunities for more integrated and effective early intervention;
- Development of the new strategy for children and young people;
- How the Department plans to promote implementation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, and overcome challenges to joint working;
- The rationale for excluding indicators on the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 from the Programme for Government;
- How the Department is addressing issues identified in relation to Sure Start;
- Monitoring the effectiveness of Delivering Social Change programmes, including the findings of the review of nurture provision due to be published;
- How the Department is seeking to increase the number of children attending pre-school, including assessments of supply and demand on a geographic basis;
- The quality of pre-school provision and what actions are being taken to improve it; and
- The school starting age and any legislation brought forward to allow for flexibility.