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Childcare Strategy Team
OFMDFM
Room E3.19
Block E, Castel Buildings
Stormont Estate
Belfast
BT4 3SR

8th March 2013

Dear Mr. McGowan

Re: Towards a Childcare Strategy

Law Centre (NI) welcomes the opportunity to comment on 'Towards a Childcare Strategy'. We support the Programme for Government's commitment to develop and implement a childcare strategy to provide the necessary leverage to ensure the provision of a fit-for-purpose childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

We are deeply concerned about the slow progress on a strategy to date given that the target for delivery of a finalised strategy was December 2012. The consultation document usefully identifies a wide range of issues concerning childcare. It does not, however, set out a strategic direction grounded in the knowledge of best practice adopted in other countries. Nor is there a timetable for implementation of the Strategy.

We recommend further consideration as follows:

- The Strategy should set a commitment to the provision of high quality, integrated and affordable childcare;
- The Strategy should set out specific suggested actions to be taken by departments over the lifetime of the Strategy and the resources to be allocated to do so;
- The Strategy should identify and address the particular needs of parents and children experiencing disadvantage.



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In addition, the Strategy should act as a catalyst for

- Development of a statutory obligation along the lines of the Childcare Act 2006 in Great Britain

Law Centre (NI) recognises the importance of cross departmental co-operation and resource contribution on childcare, to reflect the range of policy objectives that should be pursued through the Strategy: tackling child poverty, welfare reform, child development and labour market growth. Nevertheless, we believe that a lead department should assume responsibility for the overall co-ordination of implementation of the Childcare Strategy. Additionally, the Executive should consider enacting similar obligations to those in the Childcare Act 2006, in Northern Ireland, to require local authorities to assess and meet local childcare needs.

Implementation of an effective childcare strategy should be an enabler for lone parents and others to take up work. Childcare provision should be sufficiently flexible and affordable to enable parents to secure jobs that allow them to combine their work and family life. In reality, until the issues associated with our weak childcare infrastructure are addressed, parents will continue to find it difficult to reconcile their work and family life.

Childcare cannot be divorced from the current welfare reform agenda. Many of the proposals are underpinned by the assumption of sufficient readily accessible and affordable childcare. Northern Ireland, however, lacks a developed childcare infrastructure in place to facilitate the large-scale movement to work as envisaged by welfare reform. The Social Development Committee, in its scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill, cited the lack of accessible and affordable childcare as a prominent issue needing to be addressed. The Committee opposed the introduction of a clause which introduces higher level benefit sanctions, recognising the potential adverse on children, and recommended that the Minister pursue the possibility of varying the sanction regime with DWP. Moreover, the Department noted that access to childcare would be taken under consideration as part of the guidance issued to Decision Makers.

The document states that £12 million funding has been allocated to support the development of the Childcare Strategy. We are concerned about the lack of clarity about how this will be allocated and the eligibility criterion attached to this funding. We would welcome further clarification on this matter.

Law Centre (NI) welcomes the opportunity to response to the consultation. We trust you will find our comments helpful. If there is any further way in which we could contribute to this process we would welcome the opportunity to do so.

Yours sincerely

Georgina Ryan – White
Policy Officer

