



# *Does Every Child Matter?*

**A major conference on early-years childcare provision,  
hosted by the West Belfast Partnership, on behalf of the  
Belfast Area Partnerships**

**Balmoral Hotel, Belfast.**

**Thursday, 26 May 2005**

Organized by the West Belfast Partnership & N&W Belfast District Childcare Partnership, with the Belfast Area Partnerships (BAPs).

Funded through the European Union's Building Sustainable Prosperity programme.

*October 26, 2005*



## **Foreword**

The West Belfast Partnership was delighted to host “Does Every Child Matter?” a major conference on the need for early years childcare provision, with the North and West Belfast District Childcare Partnership and the Belfast Area Partnerships.

The conference was supported by the European Union’s Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme.

Tackling social exclusion & poverty, promoting positive educational development and health and well-being are central to the work of West Belfast Partnership. We are therefore firmly committed to supporting early-years development, believing it must be at the heart of local regeneration strategies.

This conference was addressed by a wide variety of speakers from the community, public and statutory sectors. They all highlighted the centrality of early years provision to community regeneration, but more importantly the critical nature of the current funding situation.

The absence of a lead department and a single coherent children’s strategy for the north emerged throughout the day as one the main obstacles to ensuring the future sustainability of many early years programmes.

The need for immediate action by Government to support the early years sector was best summed up by one contributor, Ritchard Brazil, who stated;

***“Our Children simply cannot wait for us to sort these issues out!”***

In the coming months, our Partnership will continue to work with community, statutory and elected representatives towards the goals of the Conference - securing Government commitment to long-term comprehensive support for early years provision.

On behalf of the West Belfast Partnership and the Belfast Area Partnerships I would like to thank the speakers from a range of community and statutory agencies who presented their views at the Conference, the many conference participants who attended and the North and West Belfast District Childcare Partnership who have campaigned relentlessly for the right of local children to enjoy properly resourced early years provision.

Lastly, thanks also to West Belfast Partnership staff, Stiofan Long and Martin Flynn, and Claire Pollock from Belfast Area Partnerships, who organized a very successful conference.

**Geraldine McAteer**

**Chief Executive  
West Belfast Partnership**

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## Executive Summary

The conference heard a range of speakers from across the early years sector and Government Departments.

Themes emerging from the conference included;

- A consensus that Early Years has a significant and long-term impact on the social, educational and personal development of the child.
- Proper early years provision impacts beyond the individual and across the family unit, the local neighbourhood and wider society
- Early Years provision in areas of social, economic and educational need is fundamental to breaking the cycle of disadvantage.
- Early Years can play a significant role in addressing challenges faced by communities that have suffered as a result of the conflict
- In areas of social need there is a legacy of self help and community commitment to supporting young children from the earliest stages. Areas across North and West Belfast boast some of the most effective early years provision on these islands; work often carried out in the most adverse circumstances
- Over the past three to five years many centres and providers have existed on local support enhanced by EU (often Peace II) funding. This diminishes the impact of the sector.
- There has been a decline in provision, often in places of greatest need, exacerbated by the renegotiation of staff terms and conditions across a large number of providers.
- This sector suffers from a fragmented and incoherent policy framework, falling across a number of Departments.
- The apparent gap between the nature of provision within the north of Ireland and existing provision in the UK is alarming, particularly given the greater levels of need here.

## **Conference Recommendations**

- We recommend that a formal comparative analysis between the nature, level and funding for early years provision in N.I and GB is commissioned and completed
- An effective lobbying strategy, targeting key statutory stakeholders, public representatives and the wider civic society is required to shape and influence early years policy.
- A lead government department or a Children's Minister should be appointed with over-arching responsibility for all children's and early years matters within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- The community based early years sector needs to develop an effective communications strategy to showcase its added value.
- Identify children's rights champions across political and civic society here.
- A single Children and Young People's Plan, with explicit targets and goals, should be developed.
- Develop a framework to implement change.

## Introduction

Social Policy makers, educationalists and society in general recognise that the well-being and development of children is the basis for a healthy, vibrant and sustainable community.

In the context of the north of Ireland and North and West Belfast in particular, over the past thirty years of the conflict, communities have sought to protect and support their children from the impact of community strife, which plagued neighbourhoods, communities and families.

In the early years of the conflict, for many communities, local schools provided an oasis of peace and tranquillity in an otherwise traumatised society.

In later years, the emergence of a vibrant and dynamic self-help ethos brought local solutions for families across the Trust area. It is recognised that children socialising early will enhance and stimulate their early learning.

These groups came from a needs basis and evolved into professional, accredited and child-centred establishments.

Within neighbourhoods, local people developed centres focussed on supporting parents, particularly single mothers, to work with their children at the most formative stages of their development.

The conference celebrated the successes of that period, assessed the current needs of the sector and identified policy and practical imperatives for the future.

Over 120 individuals from 72 different organisations attended.

## **The Policy Context**

The early years sector does not sit within a single Government Department.

Indeed, this represents an example of how 'Joined up Government' is critical to addressing the needs of children in a more effective manner.

Government policies such as Children First, Every Child Matters, Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland and Investing in Early Learning, reflect the range of statutory stakeholders with responsibility for supporting the early years sector.

While these policies and strategies seek to shape early years provision at local level, distinct gaps are emerging between policy and practice.

## **Contributions to the Conference**

Mr Gerry Carson

West Belfast Partnership Chairman Gerry Carson opened the conference and set the scene for the day.

Welcoming the delegates to the conference, Mr Cason expressed his delight at bringing together so many statutory agencies and those who provide community-based early years services.

Mr Carson set the context for the day by posing the question Does Every Child Matter?

He stressed his opinion that the fact that this conference was being held at all should bring shame and discomfort to those who would end funding for community based children's services.

Without investment in children's development, Mr Carson believes, we face a future that none of us would wish.

He concluded: "In planning a future that offers fulfilment and wider horizons, our communities play a vital role and they do so most productively by working in partnership with the key organisations of the state. Our children are our future."

Ms Sue Pentel

Sue Pentel, Chair of the North & West Belfast District Childcare Partnership, addressed the conference, outlining her organisations assessment of the problems facing the early years and childcare sectors.

Focus was given to the institutionalised socio-economic deprivation faced by the North & West Belfast communities and the importance of early years in tackling this deprivation

The early years sector provides family support through 131 registered providers, with 3000 childcare places available at present.

Providers deliver a range of services in playgroups and pre-school centres, afterschool clubs, crèche and day care centres that depend upon parental and community involvement to survive.

Families living within deprived area cannot afford to fund places themselves.

By providing family support mechanisms, employment and training pathways and the development of a highly skilled workforce, the sector contributes greatly to tackling social need, promoting social inclusion and building peace.

However, in the 05-06 financial year, 82% of these providers are faced with the threat of closure. To sustain services in North and West Belfast, an urgent injection of £1.25 million is required.

However, failure to secure this funding may result in:

- 500 job losses
- 800 crèche/ childcare places lost
- Closure of 1100 afterschool clubs places

The answers and solutions to these problems are as simple as they are obvious. Strategic approaches to early years that involves mainstream funding and joined up Government thinking are required.

Government must recognise the long-term value of investing in our children.

## **Keynote Address**

**The comments of Mr Nigel Williams, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, have been re-produced in full.**

*Thank you so much for that welcome, and I really am delighted to be here at a conference tackling the crucial topic of early years provision for children.*

*In case there is any doubt at all, can I first respond to the question posed by the title of this conference – Does every child matter? The answer has to be YES!*

*However, and I suspect that this is what the organisers of the conference had in mind when they chose this title, it sometimes seems that by our actions, and the actions of government, that perhaps every child does not matter, or at least does not matter as much as some other child.*

*A good summary of my role as Commissioner for Children and Young People is to ensure that every child really does matter, and that every child matters as much as any other child in Northern Ireland.*

*In order to fulfil that role my legislation has pointed me to an international standard against which I can measure the performance of government in Northern Ireland.*

*That standard is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is essentially a set of promises that the government, (along with nearly every other government across the world) has made to all those under 18.*

*So another way of describing my job is to say that I have to act as a check to ensure that the government keeps its promises.*

*When I was appointed I decided I needed some sort of baseline to help me know how we were doing against this international standard. Queens University won the tender to undertake what was a huge research project to answer that question. The research is published on our website, and there are a number of significant issues which it raises in relation to early years provision including:*

- *Equality of opportunity for children across Northern Ireland to access suitable pre school provision*
- *Differences in practice and quality between voluntary and statutory provision, recognising that statutory provision takes different forms*
- *Problems of funding for the voluntary sector*
- *The need for more full time places*
- *The lack of provision for children with disabilities*
- *The problems for the voluntary sector in having suitable premises as they will struggle to get funding for capital items.*

*Elsewhere in the research, other issues are identified which are very relevant to this topic. In particular, the research points to the value of early intervention to support families who are struggling with parenting, and whose children are at risk because of deprivation or other factors.*

*The research also highlights the huge importance of play, especially for young children, and the sparse provision of suitable play facilities in many parts of Northern Ireland.*

*I know from my meetings with public representatives that this is a very pressing issue in West Belfast. This area is dominated by housing provided by the Housing Executive, but a few years ago they decided to stop providing play facilities themselves.*

*The two councils – Belfast and Lisburn – for whatever reason have struggled to fill that gap. Thus the burden of providing play for young children often falls on nursery schools, and other pre school providers, and it is difficult for them to do more than provide stimulating indoor play – very important but not the whole story.*

*Thus my own research identifies a complex agenda that needs to be addressed to ensure that this vital pre school childcare sector thrives. However, in some cases for voluntary sector groups here today the challenge is not just to thrive, but to survive!*

*I have been very concerned about the extent to which the EU Peace funding and indeed Lottery Funding has been used in Northern Ireland as a substitute for mainstream government funding of key services.*

*It seems to me that the development of the early years sectors is one of those areas that these additional streams of money have been depended on. That is fine as far as it goes, but what happens when those funding streams come to an end?*

*In an ideal world, the government would recognise those areas it considers to be priorities – and early years provision is definitely near the top of the UK Labour government's agenda since it came to power in 1997 – and then ensure that if other funding streams were used temporarily to bolster provision, that the mainstream public expenditure would be there to pick up the tab when short term funding ended. I wish!*

*I really do fear that the Peace Funding which seemed like a huge benefit at the time it came in, might end up creating significant problems with its demise. Instead of helping provide the icing on the cake,*

*Peace Funding in some cases has helped provide the cake – or to mix analogies perhaps I should say it provided the bread and butter services that should be supported by Government anyway.*

*This is a challenge for Government which I have not been slow to confront them with, and to urge that they tackle.*

*Another challenge lies with the disparate nature of government's involvement with this sector.*

*In order to address all the different departments with an interest, the organisers of the conference have had to invite four different departments to*

*attend today. That is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as we have very clear leadership, and a clear plan that shows how each Department contributes to an overall strategy.*

*What we don't want is different departments overlapping, or worse still gaps existing between departments. What we don't want is lack of clarity or confusion in the system.*

*Well I am an ex civil servant (albeit 20 years ago) and I confess I struggle in the area of early years provision to see the overall picture, to see clear leadership, and to be assured that there are not gaps.*

*I have to say that the picture in England and Wales is much clearer to me. There is a Minister for Children, the DFES is the department clearly in the lead in driving through the issue of childcare and early years provision, supported by other departments were relevant. I would welcome such clarity here.*

*What is clear to me is that this is an area where we cannot afford to let things stay as they are, we cannot afford to be relaxed about the problems that exist and the issues that need to be faced such as those I have mentioned. Every child does matter. Every child deserves to have the opportunity to participate in quality pre school provision. Every child should be able to engage in play and fun activities that will provide a firm basis for learning as they grow older and move into primary school.*

*Parents merit support to help their children develop and learn. Parents should have a real choice of where their children can go locally for quality childcare and early years provision. Parents of children with special needs should not be left out or have to travel unreasonable distances for suitable provision. And those providing these facilities deserve better in terms of certainty of funding, quality assurance that means they know the minimum standards they need to meet, and support from Government to achieve its aims.*

*I wish you well with your conference and I hope as the morning progresses, you will perhaps begin to see some good responses to these issues, and be able to chart a way forward for all the children of West Belfast."*

Ritchard Brazil

Ritchard Brazil, a consultant with the North and West Belfast Health Action Zone, offered a comparative analysis of early Years provision between England and the north of Ireland.

The emerging picture of early years provision in England is very different.

Children's Services Departments will provide single leadership on children's issues from April 2008 and significant progress towards creating single departments has already been made.

At the heart of the changes is the National Children's Strategy that has a clear focus and unambiguous goal, for example, halving child poverty by 2010.

This strategy contains clear indicators, drawn from the earlier document "Every Child Matters". This has 5 themes and 24 strands, each with set targets.

How will these targets be achieved?

Integrating services is crucial, with single organisations or Trusts by 2008. Budgets will be pooled and multi-agency teams established with a common skills base. Data and information are to be shared across the sector.

The value of early intervention, family support in promoting good health and emotional well-being is also acknowledged.

Early interventions and family support initiatives, like Surestarts and Surestart Plus, are virtually 100% funded and viewed as integral to achieving policy targets.

Children's Centres will be the physical hub of children's services and Government plans to establish 3500 of these centres by 2010.

In Northern Ireland the situation is far more confusing, There is no high level leadership on children's issues and inter-departmental co-ordination and collaboration is at best fractured.

There is no single all embracing strategy with an emphasis on early intervention and family support. Ongoing reviews of "Children First", the Anti-Poverty Strategy, TSN etc have no clear linkages or focus.

Here, there are 27 Surestarts, receiving only 75% funding and they are not viewed as obvious vehicles for change, even if a strategy was in existence.

### **The community experience**

*"Accessible and affordable childcare and early year services are critical for all children and the key to developing an equitable society. To enable parents to move out of poverty and into work or training, high quality, affordable services are essential. Economic inclusion for parents in the labour market provides a route for their children's inclusion in society.*

Naoimi Eisenstadt – Director of Sure Start

Early years workers and service users from the Upper Andersonstown Community Forum, The Good Shepherd Nursery and the Hobby Horse Playgroup outlined the services they provide and how budget cuts will directly affect their activities.

The services provided by these three groups reflect the diversity and quality of services provided by many community groups throughout North and West Belfast.

**Common themes affecting communities include:**

- Long term unemployment
- Low educational attainment
- Poverty
- Disadvantage
- Social exclusion
- The effects of the conflict.

**Effect of current funding crisis on services:**

- Closure
- Loss of childcare places.
- Job losses.
- Loss of training opportunities.
- Loss of high quality community service.
- Restricted Parental choice
- Loss of community participation & focus

**Views on how to address challenges:**

- Government must mainstream funding.
- A Co-ordinated, cross-departmental, inter-agency approach developed
- Collaborative work with the community and voluntary encouraged
- A long-term strategy should be developed.

## Panel Discussion

Panellists were asked to deliver a short presentation, "How Every Child Matters to My Department!"

Panel members included:

- Mr Alan Shannon, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Social Development (DSD)
- Daragh Shields, Head of Regional Operations- Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)
- Louise Ward/Hunter, Head of Policy Research and Youth Division Department of Education
- Patricia Mc Veigh, Head of the Family Policy Unity at the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Baroness May Blood facilitated this part of the conference.

**Mr Alan Shannon** gave a brief synopsis of the work of DSD, which operates on a large budget.

An outline was given of how the DSD focuses on the needs of individuals and communities, for example, responsibility for the Child Support Agency and the Housing Executive.

He highlighted the NIHE New Build Housing Programme, stressing it was more than just bricks and mortar. Mr Shannon believes it represents a community development approach to addressing issues like fuel poverty and homelessness.

Mr Shannon also spoke at length on Neighbourhood Renewal

Neighbourhood Renewal is a major emerging Government strategy. It is significant because the most deprived areas of NI are to be targeted, committing Government as a whole to work to improve these areas over a period of 10 years.

DSD also has responsibility for funding groups in the voluntary and community sector. In a sense, Mr Shannon believes, DSD are champions of these sectors.

**Mr Daragh Shields**, outlined the functions of the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL).

DEL provides employment and training services and also Further Education provision for Northern Ireland and also has responsibility for employment training, (including the childcare sector), helping to promote social inclusion.

Jobs Development Offices, operated by DEL, now assist clients to deal with the whole issue of childcare needs, approached on an individual requirements basis.

Finally, DEL provides information on what affordable and available childcare exists. The issue of childcare is crucial its one of the biggest issues DEL have in terms of taking down the barriers from welfare to work or unemployment to work

**Louise Ward-Hunter** outlined how the Department of Education's forthcoming three-year education plan will help put pre-school education at the centre of developing every child in Northern Ireland.

This, she believes, will eventually have a wider positive social and economic impact on communities.

Ms Hunter agreed with research that showed children who experience good quality pre-school education are more adaptable to school life, with fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties in later life.

These children are also more confident, social and empathetic.

Endeavouring to provide one year of quality pre-school education for all children was a specific target set by the Department of Education.

The new policy has made available an additional ten thousand pre-school education places.

Ms Hunter believes the review the Children First policy will also provide an opportunity to look at successful programmes elsewhere and examine their potential in an NI context.

**Patricia McVeigh** stated the DHSSPS aim to improve the health and social well being of all the people in Northern Ireland.

DHSSPS has a range of services which impact directly on children. These include the Child Obesity Strategy, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the current Immunisation Programme.

Ms McVeigh also stated her belief that the early years sector has grown in the last ten years as a result of demand from the community and voluntary sectors, as well as parents.

Short-term streams such as the National Lottery and European Fundings have funded much of this growth. However, DHSSPS has also introduced mainstream policies, such as SureStart.

Northern Ireland currently has 25 Surestarts with a further two planned.

Ms McVeigh believes that SureStarts in the north of Ireland have remained true to Norman Glass' perception of what SureStart was established to do.

20,000 plus children have benefited through SureStart, but DHSSPS are not complacent, according to Ms McVeigh and funding remains a crucial issue.

A difficult climate exists, with competing demands on the budget, though DHSSPS has demonstrated its commitment to early years development by making a further £1.2million available to the sector this year.

It is Ms McVeigh's belief that although responsibility for this sector is cross-departmental, previous experience has shown that Government Departments are willing and able to work together to resolve key issues.

Ms McVeigh re-iterated her Department's commitment to the development of the early years sector.

### **Questions and Answers...**

Following the brief presentations from the departmental representatives, Baroness May Blood facilitated a lively questions and answers session.

Key themes emerging from the session are reflected in the executive summary and recommendations of this report.

A sample of the questions asked includes:

- Does the Child Poverty Strategy apply to NI?
- Who is responsible for the provision of services for children with special needs, especially autistic children?
- Is there a need for a Children's Minister or a lead Government Department?
- Was European Peace funding used to provide mainstream services as opposed to additional services?

Reflecting on these questions, the panel unanimously agreed that funding was a key issue determining their department's ability to deliver on their responsibilities regarding early years provision.

All panellists agreed that either a Children's Minister or a lead department would be advantageous.

However, no panellist would speculate as to which department should take the lead for the sector.

Concluding, Baroness May Blood thanked the panel for their participation at the conference and asked Geraldine McAteer, Chief Executive to close the conference.

Expressing her delight at the richness of the day's presentations, Ms McAteer thanked the three individual parents from West Belfast and Shankill that provided a graphic account of how community based early years services positively affected their lives.

Ms McAteer re-iterated the West Belfast Partnership's commitment to help strive for parity and equality for the early years sector, relative to what exists in the UK.

It is McAteer's hope that this will help create a level playing field giving children, young people and their parents the chance to take their place in the newly emerging northern economy.

"We have a unique opportunity" Ms McAteer said, "But without proper early years provision our communities could well be left behind. Our Partnership believes that no child or parent should be left behind."