

Delivering Social Change Through Childcare

A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025

Background to Rural Dungannon Locality Planning Group (LPG)

The Rural Dungannon Local Planning Group was established in 2012. The Rural Dungannon area lies within the new Mid Ulster District Council and encompasses the seven wards of Altmore, Augher, Aughnacloy, Ballygawley, Caledon, Clogher and Fivemiletown.

Membership of the group includes a range of community, statutory and voluntary organisations with a remit for children and young people in the area (see list below). The group aims to improve the well-being of children and young people through a multi-agency planning approach and is taking forward a number of key priorities including addressing the impact of rural isolation on families, raising awareness of Domestic Violence and its impact on children and young people and addressing bullying.

Rural Dungannon LPG is part of the overall Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP), a multi-agency partnership that includes the leadership of key statutory agencies and community and voluntary organisations that have a responsibility for improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The Locality Group's membership includes representatives from the following organisations:

- Ballygawley Area Development Association Ltd (BADA Ltd)
- Belfast Central Mission
- Clogher Valley Community Centre
- Clogher Valley Sure Start
- Community Associations of South Tyrone Area (COSTA)
- Early Years – the organisation for young children
- Galbally Youth & Community Association
- Mid Ulster Policing & Community Safety Partnership
- Mid Ulster Women's Aid
- NICMA - the Childminding Association
- Rural Community Network
- Simon Community
- Southern Health and Social Care Trust
- Youth Action

This response has been informed by the membership of the Rural Dungannon Locality Planning Group.

Response to the Childcare Strategy

Aims and Objectives

Rural Dungannon Locality Planning Group (LPG) supports the vision set out in the Strategy for affordable and integrated childcare. We welcome the emphasis on provision for children with disabilities, the importance of high quality provision being highlighted throughout the Strategy and the acknowledgment of provision for families who work outside normal working patterns. However, Rural Dungannon LPG believes that without substantial investment to support parents, families and all childcare providers the Strategy's vision will not be achieved.

Affordable, High Quality and Sustainable Childcare

The Strategy must acknowledge and address the difficulty that lies ahead with balancing cost effective childcare services with families, whilst providing high quality services. Significant on-going investment will be required in terms of capital investment in facilities, in workforce development and in improving levels of pay and conditions for staff. Rural Dungannon LPG is concerned that the Strategy contains little detail as to how any of the interventions or actions included in it will be funded. The objectives of the Strategy will be difficult to realise in the short to medium term as public sector funding continues to be constrained (as the Strategy acknowledges). The aim of providers becoming sustainable, covering costs from fees, may be achievable in some areas but it will not be achievable for many providers who serve areas of need and where many families are dependent on either benefits or low paid employment.

The Strategy should recognise the uncertainty of the expansion of services which is partly predicated on parental uptake of the new Tax Free Childcare initiative. Until the Tax Free childcare initiative is launched in Northern Ireland and the level of uptake is measured it is difficult to gauge how big a contribution it can make to financing the expansion of affordable quality childcare. The Strategy refers to the need to ensure all parents eligible for Child Tax Credit and the childcare element of working tax credit benefit from it. It neglects to acknowledge that the forthcoming cuts in tax credits will impact on low paid working families who receive the childcare element of tax credit.

Whilst the government's plans for Tax Credit cuts have been thrown into doubt by defeat of the Bill in the House of Lords on 26.10.15 it is likely that cuts to tax credits will be re-visited by the government as it continues to try to meet its target of cutting the budget deficit. Whilst there is still a large degree of uncertainty, the changes brought about by the introduction of Welfare Reform, changes to tax credits and the introduction of the living wage will have significant impacts on the lives of middle and low income families, especially in the Clogher Valley area given the high levels of self-employment, and are likely to affect the affordability of childcare.

Rural Childcare

We welcome the recognition that a one size fits all approach will not be adequate and that a more flexible approach to childminding services will be applied in rural communities. Rural Dungannon LPG is concerned that the Childcare Strategy has not been rural proofed and does not contain a rural impact assessment. DARD guidance on rural proofing states that new policies and programmes should be rural proofed at the earliest possible stage:

“As agreed by the Executive, you must begin the process of rural proofing at the outset of your policy development or policy review. Consideration of rural issues at the outset of policy development complements and enhances the policy making cycle as described in the Practical Guide to Policy Making handbook.”¹

In developing further the interventions on Rural Childcare provision we strongly recommend that the learning from DARD’s Rural Childcare Programme 2009-2011 which invested £1.4M in 19 different projects be incorporated into any new actions (see http://www.rdc.org.uk/download/files/pub_RuralChildcare.pdf).

Rural Dungannon LPG welcomes Intervention IX that acknowledges the need for a Rural Childminding Services Model and the need to look at a more flexible approach to childminding services with respect to rural childcare, but we are disappointed that no commitments to action have been made. We acknowledge that the Strategy states that rural childcare needs will be addressed through mainstreaming across the other actions in the strategy.

Rural Dungannon LPG recommends that actions to address the issues of rural childcare provision are identified and implemented as a matter of urgency in partnership with stakeholders. We also ask that monitoring of the implementation of actions measures the expansion of provision in rural areas achieved across the Strategy and would urge the Department to monitor to ensure a balanced regional spread of quality affordable childcare across the region.

Rural Dungannon LPG is concerned that no actions are identified under Intervention X Transport Services Supportive of Rural Childcare Provision. The challenge of transport services to support rural childcare, especially wrap around provision for school age children, is a particular barrier in rural areas. This is an opportunity missed by the Department of Education to support, in a very practical way, a wraparound childcare service in rural communities. Within rural areas there are very significant challenges around transport and the associated costs. Rural Dungannon LPG recommends that OFMDFM take into account these challenges which impact significantly on rural childcare providers and seek to offset some of these associated costs through additional grant support to rural providers in the critical setup stage.

¹ Think Rural; The Essential Guide to Rural Proofing available at <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/guide-to-rural-proofing.pdf>

Childcare Workforce

Whilst Rural Dungannon LPG acknowledges that it is illegal to operate as a childcare provider without being registered with the local Health and Social Care Trust and that unregistered providers may undercut registered providers by charging lower fees we believe that the Strategy should do more to seek to support and encourage these providers to move into the formal system.

In many rural areas unregistered providers fill a gap in childcare provision and provide a level of care for children that families trust and value. Many of these providers, who are mainly women, have years of experience and should be supported to become formal childcare providers. In our view informing parents of the risks of using unregistered providers will make no difference unless affordable registered alternatives are available locally.

Duplication of existing provision must be guarded against in future interventions.

Rural Dungannon LPG believes that a level playing field for early childhood providers should be created, regardless of the sector and type of setting that the child is in. All providers should have access to funding and fee support, access to training opportunities, inspection and regulation and access to family support services that addresses present imbalances and reflects the ability of providers offering early childhood services across the statutory and the voluntary and independent sectors to deliver high quality provision.