

## Ministerial Foreword by the Chair of the Early Years Work Sector

The early years are fundamental to a child's life chances. If we are to ensure that every child has the best possible start to their life, we must continue to invest in the provision of rich and high-quality early childhood learning and care experiences for all. It was our collective recognition of the importance of the early years to children's life chances that led to the establishment of this work sector in 2008 and it has never been more important.

The events of the past few years have had a profound impact on our children and their experiences. Working together to better understand those impacts, and the actions we can take to support children as they learn and develop, the Early Years work sector has an opportunity to deliver fully on the ambitions of the British-Irish Council. That is, to share policy, research, evidence, expertise and good practice. This collaborative approach will benefit all of us, and most importantly will benefit all of our children.

In 2019, we agreed a series of priorities to be considered over the following years. While the usual approaches we would take to working together were disrupted, the Early Years work sector has continued to meet throughout. This provided an opportunity to progress not only the planned activities, but to take account of emerging findings in each administration that allowed us all to better support the wellbeing of children over this turbulent period.

Since the 2019 work plan was agreed, officials have met in person on four occasions, and virtually on a further six. There have been supplementary meetings between administrations on specific issues and a successful webinar hosted in partnership with the Indigenous, Minority and Lesser-Used Languages work sector. Member

Administrations continue to recognise the significant benefits gained from their collective participation in the Early Years work sector.

This report outlines some of the work undertaken over recent years as Member Administrations continue to invest in the early years of our children, the lives of their families and the services that support them.



Julie Morgan MS,  
Deputy Minister  
for Social Services

## COVID-19 Collaboration

The last Early Years work sector forward work plan was formally agreed by Ministers in October 2019. Just five months later, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation formally declared the coronavirus outbreak to be a global pandemic. By that stage the impacts were being felt across all eight Member Administrations of the BIC, and across the early years services they provided. By the end of March all eight were under strict social measures to reduce spread of the virus, now referred to as lockdown, and the focus was on preserving lives, combatting disease and supporting the most vulnerable in society. In the face of this, the actions included within the agreed workplan were effectively paused.

The response to the pandemic varied across the eight administrations, with differences in population size, geography and spread of the disease influencing policies as the evidence base grew. This also impacted the response within the early years sector. Across all eight administrations there were temporary closures of early years settings as families withdrew children, and staff isolated at home. Efforts focused on maintaining support for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, but also on providing financial support to the early years sector during a period of disrupted service, reduced demand and increased costs as a result of enhanced infection control measures. As well as providing immediate support for the sector, and for children and families, administrations looked to recovery and sustainability support as we emerged from the pandemic, aware of the key role this sector would play in supporting children and families to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Since 2020 there has been a growing body of emerging evidence on the impact of the Covid-19 restrictions on children and young people aged 0-25. While the evidence is of varying quality, consistent themes include impacts on socialisation, communication, emotional and mental health, low levels of physical activity, increased sedentary

behaviour, healthy eating and obesity. We are now also seeing emerging evidence around the negative impact of the Covid pandemic on young children's development, as a result of reduced social interactions and play opportunities and long Covid. Settings are reporting more children with additional needs, more families needing support with parenting and specialist services and more funding being required to tackle these problems.

This is coupled with impacts on the workforce. Across all eight administrations concerns have been raised in the past about the challenges faced with recruitment and retention in what has been, and remains, a low-pay sector. The evidence supports the value of high-quality early years provision, but there are now even greater challenges in recruiting staff to provide those services, and it is these areas where the BIC Early Years work sector has focussed much of its time over the period of the pandemic.

Coming together regularly to share information on impacts in our administrations; actions being taken to support the sector to sustain and to recover; initiatives to support families; and ideas emerging from our respective sectors that they felt would help. Officials shared evidence from research commissioned independently of one another, shared guidance for respective sectors and discussed outcomes of independent initiatives to help find common approaches. In Wales, the learning from the work on play taken forward under this workplan back in early 2020, coupled with the Welsh Government's own policies on play, helped inform thinking around initiatives like the 'Summer of Fun'.

The value of the work sector in shaping responses was felt by all Member Administrations. And while the work sector has not progressed all of the specific activities under the workplan as it would have liked, the work during the pandemic has underlined the importance of collaboration and sharing experience.



## Workforce

Quality early years services improve children's development and, in terms of quality, the early years workforce is among the sector's biggest assets. Workforce planning considers the skillsets and mindsets needed to continue to operate, grow and evolve the early years sector. In this respect, the BIC Early Years work sector focussed on three specific themes: qualifications; professional registration and recruitment; and retention.

The work sector held focused discussions on early years qualifications requirements and

cross-administration recognition. The work sector also discussed the benefits, risks and challenges associated with professional registration, including the cost, infrastructure and resources required for registration, as well as which parts of the early years workforce could and should be included. Officials also shared experiences on the common challenges around recruitment and retention including perceptions about a career in the sector and how to make sure a career in the early years is an attractive choice.

## Professional Registration (Led by the Welsh Government)

The Welsh Government is committed to ensuring every child born in Wales has the best start in life and for Wales to be a wonderful place for every child to grow up. This commitment, which was reiterated in the Welsh Government's 'Children and Young People's Plan', published in March 2022, underpins the Welsh Government's commitment to childcare, playwork and the early years workforce, originally set out in a workforce plan in 2017. That is where the Welsh Government first set out its intention to explore moving towards professional registration of the workforce.

The intention had been to work with the work sector to develop proposals for registration, with a view to consulting in the life of this BIC Early Years forward work plan. As a part of these plans, the Welsh Government had intended to work with other BIC Member Administrations to understand approaches in their areas, learn from their experiences. The intention was to work together both in terms of registration and wider efforts to support and expand the childcare, playwork and early years workforce, as well as to discuss ways to make it easier for the workforce to move between Member Administration areas. Unfortunately, events associated with the pandemic meant that the work sector was not able to move

forward with some of these activities as planned. As childcare, playwork and early years settings across Wales (and beyond) moved rapidly to adapt to the events of 2020, and the shifting delivery landscape over the following two years, the Welsh Government took the view that it was not the time to consult on changes that could be so wide reaching. It remains important to the Welsh Government that the sector has the opportunity to fully engage, and at a time when they have the capacity to do so.

Despite these challenges, the work sector has not, however, been idle on professional registration.

Over 2021-22 the Welsh Government undertook an independent review of the childcare, playwork and early years workforce in Wales to inform its actions and next steps. As part of that review discussions were held around the workforce registries in Scotland, as well as areas outside of BIC Member Administrations, and the results published. The Welsh Government has also committed to reviewing its childcare, playwork and early years workforce plan, and has established a working group to help support us in developing a consultation on registration and some of the wider challenges in the sector.

It is the Welsh Government's intention to progress this work within the life of the next BIC Early Years work sector forward work plan, working with other Member Administrations to consider not just professional registration, but a range of other options open to support the sector. All Member Administrations are seeing challenges in relation to recruitment and retention, and concerns about post-pandemic developmental impacts on children and young people that mean broader and better investment in our early years sectors are required.

On workforce, the UK Government benefitted from discussions among the work sector on childminders, sharing evidence on the issues faced by childminders where there is significant overlap across Member Administrations.

## Children and Young People's Plan.



The Welsh Government is committed to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and to having regard to it in all of the decisions we make. We believe all our children and young people should enjoy these rights.

**We want Wales to be a wonderful place to grow up, live and work, now and in the future.**



Welsh Government Children and Young People's Plan



## Narrowing the Gap

On narrowing the gap, the work sector focussed on two themes: inclusion and special educational needs; and addressing disadvantage. The work sector held focused discussions on effective policies for inclusion, with a particular focus

on special educational needs. Over the period of this work plan, the work sector also shared experiences on practice and interventions which have effectively addressed barriers to learning and improved outcomes for children living in poverty.

## First 5 Strategy (Led by the Government of Ireland)

The work sector visited Dublin in 2020 to learn about the Government of Ireland's 'First 5 Strategy' including the process of developing the strategy and monitoring implementation.

'First 5' is a whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan, covering 2019 to 2028, to help make sure all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life. The 'First 5 Strategy' uses evidence to identify goals, objectives and the specific actions required from across Government to support children (and their families) in the early years of life. 'First 5' commits to major initiatives on family leave, children's health services, parenting supports, child-friendly communities and early learning and care services among a broad range of actions.

'First 5' centres around five 'Big Steps': access to a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring; a new model of parenting support; new developments in child health; reform of the early learning and care system; and a package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty. For this visit, the work sector participated in a 'First 5' workshop comprising a series of presentations on the strategy.

The Government of Guernsey Early Years Team have taken the significant learning, afforded to them by the Government of Ireland teams, to develop further their work on integrated services across States of Guernsey Committee areas.



Government of Ireland First 5 Strategy

## Inclusion and Special Educational Needs (Led by the Government of Ireland)

The work sector visited Dublin again in 2022 to learn about the 'Access and Inclusion Model' (AIM) and observe AIM in practice.



Early Years Work Sector Site Visit, Dublin, 2022

The goal of AIM is to create a more inclusive environment in pre-schools, so all children, regardless of ability, can benefit from quality early learning and care. The model is provided to children in the 'Early Childhood Care and Education Programme', which offers three hours per day of preschool for three-five year olds.

AIM provides universal supports to pre-school settings, and targeted supports, which focus on the needs of the individual child, without requiring a diagnosis of disability. Universal supports are designed to create a more inclusive culture in early learning and care settings, through training courses and qualifications for staff, and targeted supports include specialist advice, equipment, extra staffing depending on the individual child's needs. Since AIM was launched in 2016, over 25,000 children have received over 53,000 targeted supports in over 4,000 early years settings nationally. The meeting included a site visit to Our Lady's Nursery, Ballymun, Dublin, and discussions with the expert advisory service (Better Start) on the implementation of the model as well as the recently completed evaluation of AIM, and to understand the views of some practitioners.

On narrowing the gap, the Isle of Man Government Early Years Team found it valuable to be able to hear about the impact of the 'First 5 Strategy' and AIM model, to hear from parents and see this in practice in an early years setting. The team have taken aspects of learning from the development, implementation and review of AIM to inform strategic planning for inclusion within early years settings in the Isle of Man.



Early Years Work Sector Site Visit, Dublin, 2022

Following the visit to see AIM, the Scottish Government team leading on additional support needs made contact with the Government of Ireland AIM team to see what more could be learned. Similarly the Government of Guernsey, is looking to develop a role similar to the early years specialist role in the AIM model, and were keen to learn more about that role and its impact.

## Addressing Disadvantage (Led by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Welsh Government)

This topic was not progressed wholly as planned due to the re-prioritisation of work as part of the pandemic response in 2020 and 2021.

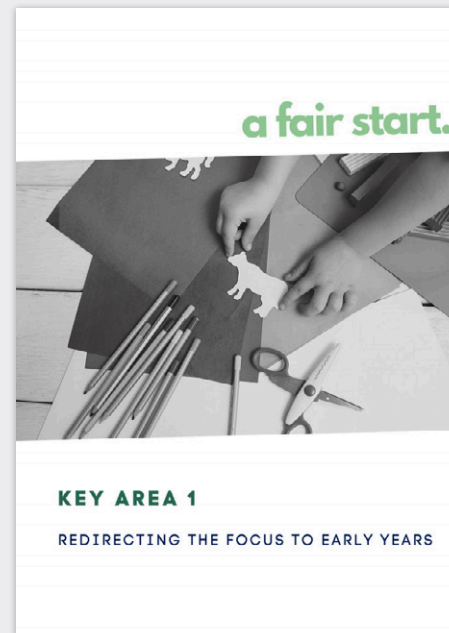
In September 2020, the then Northern Ireland Executive Minister of Education appointed an expert panel to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and draw up an action plan for change that would ensure all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life. The

report of the expert panel 'A Fair Start' was agreed by the Executive in May 2021 and published. The report recognises the link between educational achievement and children getting the support they need from birth and throughout their early years. 'Re-directing the focus to the Early Years' is one of eight key areas identified for action over a ten year period, and within this there are thirteen recommendations spanning from birth to age four. Learning from implementation of these recommendations will inform discussions on this work area in the next forward work plan.



'We want a seamless journey from pregnancy, pre-school, school and beyond, where every child is provided with the appropriate level of support needed in a timely and appropriate manner in order to realise their potential.'

A Fair Start



'It is imperative that early support is provided when underachievement is visible and before it becomes entrenched.'

A Fair Start

Northern Ireland Department of Education A Fair Start Report

Officials in the Northern Ireland Department of Education are in the process of developing an 'Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy'. Key components of this strategy will be the standardisation of the pre-school education programme (PSEP) to full-time hours (4.5 hours per day) for all children and the development of a programme for two year olds. Officials have been able to draw on the experiences of the other BIC Member Administrations in developing and implementing their respective offers, learning about what has worked well, and what has not, and linked with the contacts made through BIC to support the development of actions and costs.

Within Wales, concerns about the impacts of disadvantage on attainment have been heightened in light of the pandemic. The Welsh Government's 'Children and Young People's Plan' commits to ensuring education is accessible and fair for all, and that ahead

of starting formal education the Welsh Government will invest in early years services. The Government's flagship 'Flying Start' programme has sought to tackle many of the impacts of disadvantage to ensure children can have the best start in life and the Welsh Government will be expanding this programme. Opportunities to learn more about the work of other administrations, pooling research and evidence on what works is invaluable in driving forward far reaching policies.

As part the visit to Dublin in 2022, highlighted above, officials had the opportunity to discuss a range of community-led initiatives supporting children in the early years and their families including healthy eating schemes, salary support schemes and targeted support for children through AIM. The BIC Early Years work sector will draw on experience from these initiatives in discussions on how to address the attainment gap.





## Language, Communication and Early Literacy

On language, communication and early literacy, the work sector has focussed on three themes: transition; promoting the acquisition of

indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages; and parental engagement.

### Transition (led by the Government of Jersey)

The work sector met in Jersey in 2022 to learn about the 'Making it REAL' (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) programme. 'Making it REAL' has run for nearly ten years and is based around the ORIM (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction, Model) framework.

The Government of Jersey's delivery model has several strands, including REAL for parents and volunteers and Making Maths REAL and REAL for multi-lingual learners, that all focus on the development of early learning skills with both practitioners and families and both in the home and within the setting. Each child involved receives two home visits and families are invited to attend three literacy events, often scheduled for the evenings and weekends to allow all parents/carers to attend.

The success of the programme in Jersey has been down to a commitment to the aims and principles of the programme, joint investment and on-going evaluation of the impact and outcomes for children and families. The Government of Jersey uses 'Outcomes Based Accountability' as the methodology to demonstrate the impacts of the programme. The Government have extended the programme to childcare students, health visitors and the wider children's workforce. And due to the issue of sustainability on a small island, the Government invests in a 'Train the Trainers' approach which means that it is now self-sufficient and not reliant on external trainers.

The Government of Jersey have a quality assurance system in place to ensure that what is delivered is of a consistently high standard and supports its on-going cycle of improvement and self-evaluation. Progress is evaluated using pre and post intervention questionnaires and facilitated through network meetings for practitioners.

The Government of Guernsey's Early Years Team have completed a three day training in Making it REAL. They have used the specialist knowledge gained from the original Making it REAL training combined with their own expertise and experience and have created a bespoke package of training called Language For Life.



## Promoting Indigenous, Minority and Lesser-Used (IML) Languages in the Early Years (Led by the Isle of Man Government)

The work sector held a webinar in 2021 with the BIC IML Languages Work Sector to discuss and consider shared challenges and opportunities, particularly in

light of the pandemic. The webinar was planned and facilitated by the Isle of Man Government with the Welsh Government.



Over one hundred delegates attended the webinar, with a diverse range of representatives present from all eight BIC Member Administrations, comprising a cross section of both the public and community sectors as well as academia. Delegates heard a range of experience and perspectives from across the Member Administrations, with the aim of sharing expertise, good practice and new evidence. The webinar also provided an opportunity to seek inspiration and build new connections and relations with others who work in the same field.

To enable a rich discussion the webinar programme focussed on three key topics linked to the importance of IML Language acquisition in the early years:

- The cognitive benefits of learning languages in the early years;

- Supporting engagement with the IML/Early Years workforce; and
- Best practice in supporting parents of Early Years children in IML.

A discussion paper on the emerging themes and conclusions from this webinar was written and shared with Ministers at the IML Ministerial Meeting in 2021.

Following the successful joint webinar with the BIC IML work sector, members of the Manx Language Community have continued to make and develop links with some of those involved in presenting and attending this event. This has included reciprocal visits, speaking at events and learning from examples of good practice implemented through other IML languages.



## The Welsh Government's 'Flying Start' programme (led by Welsh Government)

The Welsh Government's 'Flying Start' programme is aimed at supporting child development and focussed on Wales' most disadvantaged communities. It aims to make sure children from more disadvantaged backgrounds receive the support necessary to go forward on the same footing as their peers, and is part of the Welsh Government's approach to tackling attainment deficits. It contains four elements – enhanced Health Visitor support, access to increased Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) support including SLC therapists, parenting support and funded part-time childcare for two-three year-olds. The embedding of Speech, Language and Communication support within the programme recognises that this is a critical factor when looking at longer term outcomes.

The visit to Cardiff in July 2023 provided an opportunity for representatives to visit a 'Flying Start' childcare setting and learn more about the way SLC is woven through the support services offered. Representatives

also learned about the approach to SLC in Wales including the work to develop a new bilingual toolkit. It also provided an opportunity to learn more about Welsh Government's Community Focused Schools initiative aimed at tackling attainment in and engagement with schools. Again, this is aimed at supporting longer term outcomes and ensuring all children are able to achieve their best.

The Government of Ireland found it valuable to see a programme targeted at disadvantaged communities at a time when Ireland is deciding the shape of its Equal Participation Model. Hearing how staff work with local authorities, the advisory teams and others was very interesting. It was also insightful to see both English and Welsh medium delivery in the one environment and how this works in practice.



Early Years Work Sector Site Visit, Cardiff, 2023





## Quality

On quality, the work sector focussed on outdoor play and learning. This strand of work considered how to make sure early years practitioners have

the skills and confidence to lead learning in outdoor environments and, through this, increase children's outdoor play and learning opportunities.

## Outdoor Play and Learning (Led by the Scottish Government)

In Scotland, the Scottish Government's vision is that children in early learning and childcare (ELC) will spend as much time outdoors as they do indoors, and that time outdoors will happen every day, in every setting. Confident, skilled practitioners who are engaged and committed to outdoor learning are key in the achievement of this vision.

In 2020, the Scottish Government hosted the Early Years work sector in Glasgow for a meeting which focused on outdoor learning. The purpose of the meeting was to showcase the Scottish Government's work to embed outdoor learning within its funded ELC offer.

Officials visited two outdoor ELC settings: the Jeely Piece Club, a charity with its roots in Glasgow's southside; and 3D, a charity based in Drumchapel, also in Glasgow. At the Jeely Piece Club, officials saw the Welly Wanderers outdoor nursery in action. At 3D, they saw Muddy Buddies - a programme designed to improve health and wellbeing by encouraging children to learn and play outside.

Officials heard about some of the challenges faced by local families, living in areas of high deprivation, and how each of the outdoor settings had worked to create welcoming environments, embedded within the community. The setting tours showed how the children's

play experiences changed with the seasons, and the enthusiasm, care and understanding they had developed for their local greenspaces.



Early Years Work Sector Site Visit, Glasgow, 2020

The visit to Glasgow, and learning about the Scottish Government's work on encouraging outdoor learning and play helped inform the Government of Ireland's approach including the recently published (2023) guidance document. This guidance is designed specifically for those Early Years Services (both pre-school and School Age) operating fully or mostly outdoors: 'When the Roof is the Sky: Guidance for the registration and inspection of early years services operating outdoors' by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate. Inspired by the Scottish Government example, the Government of Ireland is now considering further how to expand its support and guidance for outdoor provision.

The Government of Guernsey Early Years Team continue to use the Scottish Outdoor Learning guidance to inform and support their inspection processes and quality improvement work. Further work with Inspiring Scotland Thrive Outdoors is planned.

