

# Women's Policy Group NI

## Key Briefings for Ministers: Education Minister

6<sup>th</sup> February 2024

### Introduction

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

There are a number of issues that we have spent several years lobbying for and working towards, that could not be progressed because of the absence of government. Now that the Assembly has returned, we would like to outline our key priorities to every Minister, explain why these issues are important, and highlight what can be achieved if we begin early and focus on the long-term benefits of these actions.

### **Policy Issues: Early Years and Childcare Strategy, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision.**

- **There is an urgent need for a new approach to Childcare and for a Strategy that addresses the exorbitant cost and inaccessibility of childcare in Northern Ireland.**
- **Now that primary legislation on RSE has passed, we need to ensure that the practice is compliant with the primary legislation and the CEDAW recommendations that led to that legislation.**
- **SEN provision is below the standard that what our children, families and communities can and should expect. All SEN children need to have access to the full benefits of education from the same age as their peers.**

*Why are these measures important?*

The lack of accessible and affordable childcare provision in Northern Ireland is a major issue for women and families. For more than 15 years we have operated without a Childcare Strategy, and we do not have the same state support that other UK jurisdictions offer. For many, it is a significant expense, and for others it is simply unaffordable, which keeps many people, particularly women, out of the workforce, and often in poverty. We welcome a broad commitment to addressing this issue in the new mandate and we urge that it be a Day 1 priority.

Following legislation that passed in Westminster in June 2023, Northern Ireland now has a new RSE curriculum. We have concerns that some of the guidance issued by the Department is not in the best interests of children and young people and does not meet the standards of the CEDAW recommendations that led to the legislation in the first place. This issue can and should be resolved quickly.

SEN provision is insufficient to meet the needs of children and families and this needs both a longer-term plan and an immediate improvement; young people who need specialist provision should not be disadvantaged in comparison with their peers. This is particularly true in the vital early years stages.

*What are we asking for?*

- Urgent action on a Childcare Strategy, which must be implemented and funded.
- Ensure that the new guidance on RSE, as well as the content of the curriculum, meets legal and human rights requirements.
- A plan for SEN provision - both short term and long term.

### **Further information**

If you have any questions or queries regarding this briefing, please contact:

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