

**From the Permanent Secretary
Mark Browne**



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Councillor Dominic Molloy
Eileen.Forde@midulstercouncil.org

Our Ref: SCORR-0603-2023

Your Ref: C227/23

12 December 2023

Dear Councillor Molloy,

Thank you for your e-mail of 27 November 2023, calling for a comprehensive childcare strategy to address the costs of childcare for families.

The Department of Education leads on the development of an Executive Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy. The ELC Strategy has dual aims:

(i) supporting child development and (ii) promoting parental employment. The affordability and accessibility of childcare for families, alongside other actions to stabilise the early learning and childcare sector, are being considered as part of the development of the Strategy.

Significant work has been done to identify and cost a range of high-level options for early learning and childcare services in NI, informed by extensive stakeholder engagement and the findings from commissioned external reviews. In addition, my officials continue to liaise with colleagues from other UK jurisdictions and Ireland to better understand their models of support. As actions involve input from a range of Government Departments, cross-departmental sign-off will be required.

A Review of Childcare Services in NI commissioned by the Department of Education was published on 22 June 2023 and it sets out the key challenges which the Strategy needs to address. It can be accessed at [RSM \(2023\) DE Review of Childcare Services in NI - Final Report.PDF \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#).

The timeline for publication and implementation of the ELC Strategy requires Executive agreement on significant policy decisions, including its scope and budget.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Browne", written over a horizontal line.

MARK BROWNE (Dr)



Northern
Ireland
Office

Steve Baker MP
**Minister of State for Northern
Ireland**

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Dominic Molloy

By email: Eileen.Forde@midulstercouncil.org

12 December 2023

Our reference: MC/23/573

Dear Dominic,

Thank you for your letter dated 27 November on behalf of the Mid Ulster District Council regarding the challenges facing the childcare sector in Northern Ireland. I am responding on behalf of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP.

As the Council will be aware, childcare policy is devolved in Northern Ireland, and therefore for the Executive to take forward. It is clear that the absence of a functioning Executive in Northern Ireland is exacerbating the challenges faced by families with regards to childcare.

As the Secretary of State and I have continued to make clear, our focus remains on encouraging all parties in Northern Ireland to work together to restore fully-functioning power-sharing institutions as soon as possible. I remain convinced that a devolved, power-sharing government, in line with the vision of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, where locally elected representatives can address the issues that matter most to the people of Northern Ireland, remains the best framework to deliver governance and prosperity.

Thank you once again for writing to the Secretary of State on this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve Baker", with a horizontal line underneath it.

STEVE BAKER MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

An Roinn
PobalDepairtment fur
Commonities

From: Colum Boyle
Permanent Secretary

Level 9
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1-7 Bedford Street
BELFAST
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Telephone: 028 90 823301
E-mail: colum.boyle@communities-ni.gov.uk
Our Ref: PSC 0884.23
Date: 12 December 2023

Councillor Dominic Molloy
Chair
Mid Ulster District Council

Via email: Eileen.Forde@midulstercouncil.org

Dear Councillor Molloy,

FUNDING FOR THE ARTS SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

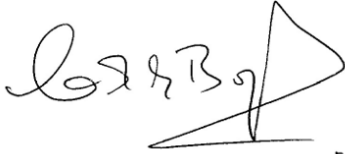
Thank you for your letter of 27th November about funding for the arts sector in Northern Ireland: I have noted the concerns raised by your Council at its November meeting.

The Department recognises and values the impact of the arts sector in areas as diverse as social inclusion, health, education, regeneration, good relations, tourism, the wider economy as well as on the enrichment of the quality of life of people here.

The 2023/24 budget required very difficult decisions to be taken across the public service. In terms of your reference to the future funding position, the Budget process for 2024-25 has not started yet but the position is likely to be at least as challenging as this year.

In that context, I can assure you that the Department will continue to seek to support all sectors within its remit, including Arts, to the greatest extent possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colum Boyle'. The signature is stylized and includes a large, sweeping flourish that extends to the right and then loops back down.

Colum Boyle
PERMANENT SECRETARY

Marie Ward
Chief Executive



Comhairle Ceantair
an Iúir, Mhúrn
agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne
and Down
District Council

Our ref: C/250/2023

13 December 2023

Mid Ulster District Council
Dungannon Office, Circular Road
Dungannon
BT71 6DT

Dear Chief Executive

Re: Notice of Motion – Cystic Fibrosis Medication

At a Meeting of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council held on 4 December 2023 the following Notice of Motion was unanimously agreed:

"That Council notes with extreme concern proposals by NICE to remove its NHS recommendations for Kaftiro, Orkambi and Symkevi due to rising costs; calls upon NICE to reconsider this proposal without hesitation to make such medication available to all in need; and will write to the Department of Health to request an assessment of the efficacy of this drug to help save lives since its introduction in January 2022; and to consider amending the minimum age for recipients of this medication to 2 so as to ensure that all those who suffer from cystic fibrosis have the best start in life."

It was also agreed that Council would write to the other 10 Councils in Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister highlighting Council's opposition to the removal of these drugs and to reverse the decision".

The proposer of the motion asked that the motion be circulated to the other 10 Council Chief Executives asking them to table at a future meeting of their Council.

I would ask that you give this matter serious consideration and I look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully

Marie Ward
Chief Executive

Dear Cllr Molloy,

Thank you for your correspondence regarding Mid Ulster Council's decision to agree to support the motion adopted by Ards and North Down Brough Council regarding Lifelong Learning Campaign.

I can assure you that I, and the SDLP, fully support the Lifelong Learning Campaign.

We recognise the importance of lifelong learning, including non-formal education, in addressing social issues, strengthening communities and building civic engagement.

We also agree that part-time flexible learning is crucial to meeting the skills needed to build a modern, inclusive, and green economy.

At the last Assembly election, the SDLP was the only major party who gave a Manifesto commitment for an above inflation pay rise for teachers.

It is also our clear position that the essential contribution of FE staff must be fairly recognised in their pay and conditions.

If we want to provide the best lifelong education then we need to invest in our schools and colleges, and in formal and informal part-time education.

That's the message the SDLP Opposition will be carrying into any restored Assembly.

I will be happy to consider joining an All Party Group on Lifelong Learning to support and evidence a best practice informed approach to policy making, in collaboration with adult education bodies and other stakeholders to form a voice for Lifelong Learning in the Assembly when an Executive is formed.

Kind regards,

Patsy McGlone MLA



Deborah Erskine MLA

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028 6632 0722 – deborah.erskine@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Eileen Forde
Committee & Member Services Manager
Dungannon Office
Mid Ulster Council

Our Ref: DE2413

3 January 2024

Dear Eileen

Re: Ards and North Down Borough Council motion

I want to thank you for the communication my office received on 2nd January 2024, regarding support for a motion originally passed by Ards and North Down Borough Council. The motion refers to support for access to education within our communities and the need to emphasise the opportunities that exist for lifelong learning.

I fully agree with the sentiments expressed within the motion. We all have a role to play in fulfilling action in regard to promotion of education. Here in this Council district we can boast of excellent, world leading facilities for learning such as the South West College. I know the Council have good links with the College and it is important that we do everything we can to support South West College and all other educational organisations, so that they can promote the courses on offer and indeed provide more training in this area.

Furthermore the importance in organisations on the ground such as First Steps Women's Centre, help provide training for many in society and have been calling for extra funding support to be able to deliver such programmes. They are essential for helping people from a range of backgrounds gain extra skills. I hope the Council can continue to give such support.

As we know in such a rural Council area, having training facilities nearby will help develop our local economy significantly. With training taking place on our doorstep, it does attract businesses towards a where there are increased levels of highly skilled residents. We must do more to promote that. We must also ensure that there is a removal of stigma for those who would like to learn later in life. It is important that gaps are identified and I would suggest, if not already done by the Council, that they work with South West College to understand where these areas may be – whether that is within certain age groups, particular areas of deprivation or indeed culturally.

For my part as a locally elected MLA I will continue to make the case for educational access and for promotion of the educational provision we have in this part of the world, which aids to our overall economy.

Therefore, I support the aims of the motion.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deborah Erskine". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter 'D' being particularly large and prominent.

Deborah Erskine MLA
Fermanagh and South Tyrone

Quality Care - for you, with you

Our Ref: MOK/SW/LMcG

Your Ref: C200/23 & C137/23

4th January 2024

Via email only Eileen.Forde@midulstercouncil.org

Councillor Dominic Molloy
Chair, Mid Ulster District Council
Dungannon Office
Circular Road
Dungannon

Dear Councillor Molloy,

RE: RESPITE PROVISION FOR ADULTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

Further to your letter of 2nd November 2023 I am writing to provide an update, as requested, in respect of short break and respite provision across Children and Young Peoples Services, Adult Mental Health and Disability and Adult Community Services. Apologies in the delay in responding to your queries, your original correspondence from August 2023 did not reach my office for action.

Short breaks Adult Learning Disability

Current Provision:

Adult Learning Disability Short Breaks Service has a total of 23 short break beds available for those with a learning disability:

8 statutory beds and 15 independent sector beds.

This is made up of:

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- 2 Residential Care independent sector providers with a total of 9 short break beds.
- 3 Nursing Care independent sector providers with a total of 6 short break beds.
- 1 statutory facility with a total of 7 Complex Nursing / Challenging Behaviour beds and one bed in a single occupancy unit.

The SHSCT does not commission short break beds for those with a physical disability, however these can be arranged on a spot purchase basis where the need for short break has been identified through assessment/ review. Alternatively, a flexible short break direct payment can be paid to a service user instead of bed based short breaks. For some service users/ families, this is their preferred short break service.

Rebuild of Short Breaks and Current Issues /Actions

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Adult Learning Disability Service had access to 19 commissioned short break beds with independent sector providers, along with 8 statutory beds, totaling 27 beds. Post-COVID-19, 6 beds were withdrawn by residential and nursing homes, mainly in the Newry and Mourne area. The Trust has prioritized rebuilding short break capacity and has in the last 12-months been successful in commissioning 7 nursing and residential beds from new providers, bringing the current bed based short break capacity to 23 (inclusive of the statutory service).

Demand continues to outstrip supply and there has been an increasing number of individuals and their families/carers seeking bed based short break provision. To this end, the Trust is continuing to seek to grow short break capacity, with negotiations ongoing with several independent sector providers. With a rising number of individuals requiring short break respite provision, this has unfortunately resulted in a small reduction in frequency of short break allocations in some careplans. Age

appropriate short break capacity for younger service users is also an area of challenge for the Trust and going forth, we will be seeking to commission beds from independent sector providers with a range of ages in their long term resident population. There is ongoing service improvement work through scheduling and capability/needs planning to maximize short break capacity, as well as offering Direct Payments as a short break option.

Service User / Carer / MLA Feedback

The Trust has received a small number of enquiries, including Assembly Questions and Freedom of Information Requests, alongside a small number of complaints regarding adult learning disability short breaks. Content is usually around case specific issues, frequency of short break offers and questions on how short breaks are offered. All issues have been addressed in line with Trust processes.

Short Breaks Mental Health and Memory Services

Current Provision:

Short breaks are either provided in a care home/residential facility or temporary increase in commissioned services i.e. SDS/domiciliary care (Respite at home).

Rebuild of Short Breaks and Current Issues / Actions

The Trust continues to develop short break services in a variety of means to meet growing demand. The Trust is challenged if short breaks consist of domiciliary care increases due to the pressures on availability and bed based provision is dependent upon availability in the independent sector.

Short Breaks Adult Community Services

In relation to Adult Services, the respite/short breaks provision currently remains as it did pre-COVID-19. However, the number of short break beds available by category of care e.g. nursing and residential care within the independent and statutory Care Home sector is not ring-fenced by Adult Community Services.

The availability of respite/bed-based short breaks in any Independent Sector Care Home facility can change on a daily basis, whereby the category of care available will depend on any vacancies within that particular Care Home. When planned or emergency respite/bed-based short breaks are identified following an assessment, contact is made with the individual Care Home of choice to seek confirmation on availability. In addition to the Independent Sector, short breaks are also provided across the Trust's four Statutory Residential Homes for Older People as required.

Short break requests across all four Statutory facilities and Independent Sector Care homes have been slow to recommence following COVID-19 but anyone assessed and requiring a short break has been facilitated.

There are challenges to providing short-breaks/respite as some Independent Sector Care Homes will only facilitate the booking of planned respite/bed-based short breaks a maximum of two weeks in advance. The choice of facility is determined by the Service User and their carer. If there are no beds available in the facility of their first choice, Service Users may be reluctant to attend a different facility.

Availability of Care Packages

There is significant work ongoing in relation to monitoring and reviewing of existing domiciliary care packages within the SHSCT in order to ensure that all care being provided is required. In instances where care is no longer required, resources are

immediately allocated to other individuals awaiting domiciliary care. The Trust currently remains in a position whereby the demand for domiciliary care is outweighing the capacity.

Whilst recruitment and retention of domiciliary care staff remains a challenge across all sectors, the Trust has continued to be proactive in its efforts to build and maintain capacity within its workforce to meet the increasing levels of demand. In 2023, the Trust organised 3 recruitment fairs, in Banbridge, Dungannon and Newry.

96 individuals were cleared to work from these recruitment fairs, with 90 individuals having commenced. An additional 41 recruits commenced as a result of a rolling programme of advertising vacancies throughout the year.

Issues for the Social Care workforce/sector have been highlighted to NISCC and SPPG regarding rates of pay, complexity of the job, increasing demand for care packages, lone working, costs of running a vehicle and increase in fuel prices, non-contracted staff, and competition elsewhere within the job market e.g. in retail.

Independent Domiciliary Care Agencies in the SHSCT area are also raising issues regarding challenges of retaining and recruiting staff and continue to hand care packages back to the Trust.

Short Breaks Children and Young People's Service

Children with Disabilities Service provides short breaks via 2 residential facilities – Oaklands (Statutory facility) and Willowgrove (Voluntary provider). There are 3 beds available per night in Oaklands and 4 beds available per night in Willowgrove. number of beds per home which can be utilised on any night varies, dependent on the specific

needs of the children being accommodated. The facilities are Trust wide services and placements are matched based on assessed need.

The Children with Disabilities Service also provides overnight short breaks provision via a current compliment in excess of 23 Short break Fostering Placements.

Short breaks provision has returned to business as normal following the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the above facilities have actually increased the number of short breaks currently offered via extended opening and this has now been mainstreamed via additional and recurrent investment in both Oaklands and Willowgrove.

In addition, the Children with Disability Service is continuing to upscale Short Breaks provision via family based fostering services and capacity will increase dependent on successful recruitment of short breaks foster carers.

I hope this information is useful in your discussion around short breaks/respice provision. The Trust remains committed to working with individuals and carers to best meet their needs and looks forward to the outcome of your discussions.

Yours sincerely



DR MARIA O'KANE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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Eileen.Forde@midulstercouncil.org

16 January 2024

Dear Dominic

Re: Your ref: C239.23 - NI Water queries from Council - Reinstatement works

Thank you for your letter, which I received on 2 January 2024, reference above.

I was glad to read of the Council's satisfaction with NI Water's presentation in November, and I will pass the members' thanks on.

On the query which you mentioned had not been fully addressed, from Cllr Kerr regarding the perceived improper completion of surface reinstatements by NI Water contractors; I would first confirm that there is no external contact for our Estates Management Team, who in any case would not be the department overseeing such contractor works.

Any and all queries for NI Water should be addressed to Waterline via our centralised e-mail inbox, waterline@niwater.com. Elected Representatives can also always make use of our dedicated phone number for them on 0345 3006461.

I would also advise that in many cases, ground and surface reinstatements carried out by NI Water contractors following jobs requiring excavation are often temporary, in the first instance. Sometimes the ground is required to settle after and excavation is backfilled, before permanent reinstatement can be successfully completed. In these cases, a temporary reinstatement is carried out, which the contractor may leave, sometimes for as long as 28 days, although they will generally aim to carry out spot-checks in the interim, before they return again to carry out permanent reinstatement.

If Cllr Kerr has any queries about any specific areas where unsatisfactory permanent reinstatement has been completed, necessitating our contractor returning again at additional expense, we would request he please contact us regarding these, as above.



I hope you find this response helpful on this point.

If you or the Council have any further queries, please of course do not hesitate to contact us again.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sara Venning".

Sara Venning
Chief Executive



EMAIL

chief.executive@midulstercouncil.org

Adrian McCreesh
Chief Executive
Mid Ulster Council

Ref: 24/CJS/MMcC/013

17 January 2024

Dear Adrian

As you will be aware the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People was established in 2003, the principal aim of which is ‘to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people’. In carrying out the functions of the office, the Commissioner is to have regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and to raise awareness on same.

I am pleased to inform you that NICCY has worked with colleagues across Europe to develop the ENOC¹ Statement on Undertaking Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) in relation to the development of legislation, policies and strategies affecting children. ‘Introduction to Children’s Rights’ and ‘Conducting Child Rights Impact Assessments’ training modules (also on the NICS LInKs Training platform) are now available on the NICCY website for access by our Councils across NI.

Resources can be accessed using the following links.

- **‘Introduction to Children’s Rights’ and ‘Conducting Child Rights Impact Assessment’ Training Modules – [can be found here](#)**
- **NICCY’s ‘CIA Guidance’ and ‘CIA Template’ – [can be found here](#)**

We have also included on our website, a ‘Child Rights Explainer’ which is a short animation providing an overview of adults’ role in delivering children’s rights.

¹ European Network of Ombuds’ and Commissioners for Children comprising 42 Institutions across 34 Countries.

We hope these resources may inform your work and that of colleagues working with / for children and would encourage you when developing / changing policies and strategies, to apply CRIAs (following the Child Rights training) as good practice going forward.

Should you wish us to deliver a short introductory session on same, please contact us via training@niccy.org

Similarly should you have any queries or comments, we are happy to hear from you.

Yours sincerely



Mairead McCafferty PQH LLM
Chief Executive