



Black and Minority Ethnic  
Women's Network

**Black and Minority Ethnic Women's  
Network**

**SUBMISSION**

**Consultation on Draft Childcare Strategy  
OFMDFM  
July 2015**

**November 2015**

## **Introduction**

- 1.1 The Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Network (BMEWN) is a women-led organisation that advocates for change on issues affecting black and minority ethnic (BME) women in Northern Ireland (NI). The aim of the network is to develop the capacity of ethnic minority women so that they can support and assist their communities in accessing services, furthering their human rights and developing sustainable community-based leadership.
- 1.2 Childcare is an issue that particularly impacts upon BME women living in NI. BME women are especially affected by a number of common barriers to obtaining childcare - such as cost and the lack of flexible services - as well as by specific barriers, such as the lack of high quality, culturally appropriate service provision.
- 1.3 Consequently, the BMEWN welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Childcare Strategy and ensure that future provision meets the needs of BME women across NI.

## **Financial barriers**

- 2.1 Research has illustrated that some BME communities, particularly migrant workers, are more vulnerable to low pay, poor working conditions and obstacles to improving employability (such as lack of recognition of qualifications gained overseas and poor English language skills).<sup>1 2</sup>
- 2.2 This problem has been exacerbated since the economic downturn in NI, which has been shown to particularly affect BME communities, with research based in the North West illustrating unemployment rates far above the NI average of 5.4% (8.6% in Derry, 7.7% in Strabane and 6.9% in Limavady).<sup>3</sup>
- 2.3 Furthermore, BME families also face difficulties in accessing social security, with a lack of awareness of childcare-related entitlements (such as Working Tax Credit, free part-time pre-school places and the childcare voucher scheme) being prevalent amongst BME families in NI.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace, A., McAreavey, R. and Atkin, K., 'Poverty and Ethnicity in Northern Ireland: An Evidence Review' (2013), pp.25-26

<sup>2</sup> Rogers, S. and Scullion, G., 'Voices for Change: Mapping the Views of Black and Minority Ethnic People on Integration and their Sense of Belonging in Northern Ireland' (2014), pp.22, 28 and 39

<sup>3</sup> McAfee, C., 'The Impact of the Economic Downturn on the Black and Minority Ethnic People in the North West of Northern Ireland' (2014), p.33

<sup>4</sup> Kernaghan, D., 'Believe in Childcare? Believe in Children: An Investigation into the Childcare Needs of Ethnic Minority Communities in Northern Ireland' (2014), p.49

- 2.4 A further issue concerns those individuals who have No Recourse to Public Funds as a condition of their visa in NI. This renders persons unable to utilise public funds of any type, including the various entitlements that are typically utilised to support persons in obtaining childcare.<sup>5</sup>
- 2.5 Consequently, it is unsurprising that the cost of childcare has been highlighted as a significant concern amongst BME families seeking services in NI. 88.5% of respondents to recent research focusing on BME communities raised cost as an important factor when choosing childcare services, with 40% expressing dissatisfaction with the cost of childcare in NI.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.6 Thus, the finalised Strategy will need to include provisions that address the cost of childcare, both for those with and those without access to public funding. In terms of assisting those with access to public funding, it will be important to promote awareness of currently available entitlements, as is proposed within the consultation document.<sup>7</sup>
- 2.7 However, further action will be required to ensure that awareness is raised in a manner that accesses BME families in NI. Research has illustrated that BME individuals with language difficulties feel that information about childcare would be more readily accessible if they were able to obtain it from their own community.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a role for community groups in disseminating information is an important consideration.
- 2.8 Any actions taken to raise awareness as part the Strategy may also benefit from targeting areas that BME individuals have stated they are most likely to obtain information on childcare, which primarily include doctors' surgeries and local groups.<sup>9</sup>
- 2.9 It is also important to consider that language difficulties and difficulties in understanding the application process - which are key factors in preventing BME families from accessing available entitlements - will be difficult to overcome without the provision of appropriately tailored advice services, of which there is a dearth in NI.<sup>10 11</sup>
- 2.10 In terms of individuals who do not have access to public funds, it will be necessary to adopt an approach that does not simply rely upon the promotion of Government assistance. This is addressed further below, in discussing childcare as a social enterprise.

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-funds--2/public-funds>

<sup>6</sup> op cit n 4 p.7

<sup>7</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, 'Delivering Social Change through Childcare: A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025' (2015), p.41

<sup>8</sup> op cit n 4 p.47

<sup>9</sup> ibid p.46

<sup>10</sup> ibid pp.47-48

<sup>11</sup> Migrant Centre for Northern Ireland, 'The Welfare System and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in Northern Ireland' (2014), p.7

**2.11 The BMEWN recommends that the finalised Strategy commit to the adaptation of awareness-raising campaigns on available financial assistance, in order to reach BME communities through the translation of relevant materials, cooperation with community groups and targeting of relevant areas.**

**2.12 It is further recommended that the Strategy commit to the development of independent advice services, with associated language support, so that BME individuals may obtain advice on applying for assistance to which they are entitled.**

### **Barriers for those living in rural areas**

3.1 BME individuals living in rural areas may also face restricted access to childcare. As noted in the consultation document, rural areas are subject to a disproportionate lack of provision.<sup>12</sup> This unavailability may in turn exacerbate the extant limited availability of culturally appropriate childcare services in NI, which is a key concern for BME families in NI.<sup>13</sup>

3.2 Furthermore, the cost of transport for individuals seeking childcare in rural areas may prove onerous. The lack of comprehensive transport provision across rural areas may leave residents dependent on costly alternatives, which may particularly impact BME communities with a disadvantaged economic profile.<sup>14</sup>

3.3 Consequently, it is reassuring that the draft Strategy proposes actions to increase the availability of flexible childcare provision and of childcare provision within rural areas, including provision for transport in rural areas.

3.4 However, it is notable that current proposals on rural childcare provision largely rely on the expansion of childminding services. It should be noted that a key concern for BME families in utilising childcare services is the quality of that service, with the vast majority of BME respondents to recent research highlighting this as the most important factor when choosing childcare services.<sup>15</sup>

3.5 Furthermore, there is potential, as has occurred regarding current financial assistance, for a lack of awareness to develop amongst BME communities concerning these services. Thus, it will be of importance to promote future rural childcare provision in a manner that is accessible to those with English language difficulties.

**3.6 The BMEWN recommends that the Strategy commit to ensuring that childminders are appropriately qualified and have training on cultural competency.**

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<sup>12</sup> op cit n 7 pp.30-31

<sup>13</sup> op cit n 4 p.43

<sup>14</sup> Mackey, S. and Hine, J., 'Transport Disadvantage in Rural Northern Ireland' (2004), p.8

<sup>15</sup> op cit n 4 p.42

**3.7 It is also recommended that proposed expanded services and rural transport services are promoted and advertised through materials translated into key minority languages.**

#### **Barriers related to employment**

4.1 BME women who work may also face differential access to childcare where they work irregular hours, as there is a lack of flexible childcare provision in NI. Research focusing on NI suggests that around 28% of BME individuals are employed on irregular shift patterns, which include daytime, nighttime and weekend hours.<sup>16</sup>

4.2 This finding is reinforced by the fact that a disproportionate number of BME individuals across the United Kingdom (UK) are employed via 'zero-hours' contracts, which involve highly unpredictable hours of employment.<sup>17</sup>

4.3 Indeed, around a third of BME respondents to NI-based research have expressed dissatisfaction with the level of flexible childcare provision for those working irregular hours.<sup>18</sup>

4.4 Thus, the BMEWN notes with approval that the draft Strategy proposes to make provision to increase the availability of flexible childcare services. However, it is noted that, as with provision for rural childcare, this proposal is largely based on childminding services.

4.5 As stated above, the quality of childcare provision is the primary concern of BME families living in NI. Furthermore, research has shown that some BME individuals prefer to leave children with family members due to the strengthening of their language and culture that ensues.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if the services proposed by the Strategy are to improve uptake, then cultural sensitivity will need to be considered.

**4.6 The BMEWN recommends that the Childcare Strategy ensure that childminders recruited as part of arrangements to improve the availability of flexible services are appropriately qualified and have training on cultural competency.**

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<sup>16</sup> ibid p.6

<sup>17</sup> Pennycook, M. et al, 'A Matter of Time: The Rise of Zero-Hours Contracts' (2013), p.17

<sup>18</sup> op cit n 4 p.7

<sup>19</sup> ibid p.37

## **Childcare as a Social Enterprise**

- 5.1 The BMEWN notes with approval that the Strategy emphasises the use of community-based childcare solutions as a manner of improving childcare provision, although it is noted that the Strategy currently focuses on community-based childcare as a means of providing cross-community services.
- 5.2 However, the BMEWN would emphasise that the facilitation of BME-specific social enterprise could also improve childcare availability and employment opportunities for BME individuals, including BME women.
- 5.3 Furthermore, supporting BME individuals to develop community-based childcare could improve the availability of services that are flexible and culturally appropriate.
- 5.4 It is notable that promoting such enterprises could also provide more affordable childcare solutions.<sup>20</sup> This could be a beneficial strategy for improving affordability for individuals who have No Recourse To Public Funds and are thus unable to rely on financial assistance to subsidise childcare costs.
- 5.5 Ultimately, promoting and supporting such enterprise could satisfy the Strategy's aim of improving employment opportunities, whilst also supporting its objectives of delivering services that are both available and diverse.<sup>21</sup>
- 5.6 The BMEWN recommends that Intervention VI under the finalised Strategy include a commitment to support BME individuals, particularly women, in developing community-based childcare provision.**
- 5.7 It is further recommended that Intervention XVI, concerning training to enhance skills, include a commitment to raise awareness and encourage the uptake of training opportunities amongst BME communities.**

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<sup>20</sup> Big Lottery Fund and New Economics Foundation, 'How Can Childcare Social Enterprises Bridge the Childcare Gap?' (2004), p.5

<sup>21</sup> op cit n 7 p.8

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