



BETTER4CHILDCARE

Early Childhood Care in Ireland - Minding the Future
Cúram Luath-Óige in Éirinn - Ag Tabhairt Aire don Todhchaí



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Executive Summary

We know that quality, reliable and affordable childcare has many benefits.

For the family, it ensures children are enabled to develop to the best of their abilities, socially, academically and creatively – and that any potential learning or developmental issues can be identified early.

For wider society and the economy, it allows parents, especially women, to return to the labour force and steer clear of potential poverty traps; it sets children on the path to educational attainment; and it provides employment to the many valuable workers in the childcare sector.

So, given we know all this, it begs the question:

Why is the State, under Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil policies, failing so badly at childcare?

In setting out our early childcare policy, Sinn Féin is approaching the issue with two main aims:

1. Developmental: To give children the best start in life and to produce positive outcomes for children and their families.
2. Employment: To enable parents to enter employment and/or remain in work, education or training; and to create employment through jobs in the childcare sector

These dual aims will address a number of policy priorities such as aligning children's overall learning and development with tackling disadvantage, helping to reduce child poverty, improving gender equality alongside promoting employment and growing the economy.

We aim to enhance the quality of early education and childcare services to provide positive experiences and promote opportunities for children to develop. This should build upon existing provision across a range of services such as the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the Community Childcare Subvention programme (CCS). This will also require developing the skills base of the workforce in early education and childcare to ensure services are responsive to parents' needs, be they parents of children with disabilities, ethnic minority parents, urban or rural dwellers.

When it comes to childcare and development, there is currently an overwhelming bias in favour of policies of late intervention - when social and learning problems are well established. Knee-jerk and reactive policies are both expensive and often less effective. There is growing scientific, neurological and economic knowledge which validates the Sinn Féin view that investment in the early years of a child's life leads to greater economic, social and emotional benefits later on, at both an individual as well as societal level. The OECD, with its 'Starting Strong II Early Childhood Education and Care Reviews', recommends a systematic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation, it calls for a clear policy vision for children from 0-8, and a co-ordinated policy framework at centralised and decentralised levels.

There has been little real investment in childcare. Public spending lags behind other OECD countries. Successive governments have made piecemeal efforts to tackle astronomical childcare costs, but during the recession, happily slashed payments for children such as Child Benefit. Budget 2016 saw the Government pressured into addressing some of the concerns Sinn Féin and others have outlined over the years – but the approach is again fragmented and undertaken without full consultation with parents and the industry.



Essentially, we require a cultural shift which will result in incremental percentage increases in Government spending to enable a re-balancing of resources towards a child's early years and early interventions, in order to deliver better outcomes while providing value for money.

In this document, we outline some of the measures we believe are needed to begin addressing the childcare crisis in a more holistic way. This policy is just one aspect of our wider agenda to facilitate quality care for children and their development. It cannot be read in isolation, but must also be considered in tandem with our proposals around improving the education sector and eradicating child poverty – the rates of which in Ireland are exceptionally high.

Where we have identified costs in this document, we are including them in our five-year costed manifesto proposals for the 2016 general election. This manifesto will commit to spending within the fiscal space identified for 2017-2021, and at any point where we would exceed the fiscal space, we outline the taxation measures we would introduce to pay for our proposals. Our overall approach to the economy and public finances in the next five years, however, is to invest in public services over tax cuts for high earners, because we believe this kind of investment benefits everybody equally and provides the most return.

Key proposals:

Affordability

- Ensure the childcare year runs for a continuous 48-week period, and parents aren't left picking up the tab in between sessions, nor workers in the sector left without employment. Total Cost: €86 m
- Open up the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme so that the funding follows the child not the setting. Extend the CCS Programme by making subsidised places available in privately run early-years services. Total Cost in year 1: €50m
- Extend maternity benefit by 6 weeks and allow that portion to be taken by either parent at the end of the current 26 weeks maternity leave. Total Cost €63 million
- Incrementally introduce 52 weeks of maternity or parental leave.
- Commitment to ensure a longer-term increase in the rate of maternity benefit paid to allow mothers to avail of their leave without financial hardship.
- Move to set maximum fees for childcare costs of €180 per week incrementally reducing to €150 per week.

Quality

- Aim for a 60% degree-led ECCE workforce by 2025 as recommended by the EU – i.e. that 60% of all supervisors, managers etc hold relevant degrees.
- Extend the Learner Fund to support progression to Level 7 and 8 qualifications. Long-term cost of this professionalization is €80 million, to be spread over 5 years. Total cost in year 1: €16 million
- Implement the immediate roll out of Síolta and Aistear through County Childcare Committees (CCCs). Total cost in year 1: €5 million
- Appoint Department of Education inspectors using the frameworks of Síolta and Aistear while avoiding a duplication of inspection roles
- Increase capitation grants for the Free Pre-School Year by €5 per week to €67.50, and by €9.50 for the higher capitation rate to €82.50. Total cost in year 1: €20 million
- Initiate a review of capitation payments for the ECCE year with a view to introducing a reformed funding model. This should include paid non-contact time for staff, as well as increased capitation for services in disadvantaged communities and for services supporting children with additional needs.
- Introduce mechanisms to withdraw funding if standards are not met.



Regulation

- Implement all aspects of the Children First Act (2015) immediately
- Ensure services do not open until Tusla has ensured the service can meet standard requirements.
- Move to a person-centred, not service-centred approach to vetting, providing a time-limited passport type document to ensure continued monitoring of individuals' suitability for working with children, but also ease the burden of re-vetting for each new position.
- Review Childcare Regulations to enable the acceptance of a copy of garda vetting certification from a relevant college until a person centred approach is adopted.
- Ensure consistency in reporting standards and cooperation between investigating services and care providers to ensure quality and standards can be achieved in provision.

Accessibility & Inclusivity

- Provide an additional 1,000 SNAs to the ECCE Programme – Total Cost €21m
- Review investment streams to facilitate lower staff-child ratios where services are supporting the inclusion of children with additional needs – both diagnosed and undiagnosed.
- Provide Additional Needs training for all childcare workers working with children with special needs.
- Urgently examine and address the issue of non-inclusivity in education and childcare for children from Traveller backgrounds, working with the Traveller community and their local crèches to provide information and training where needed.
- Establish a National ECCE inclusion policy

Childcare employees

- Implement rights and standards for childcare workers. Initiate progress towards contracts with professional salaries that provide for CPD planning and preparation, and recognise educational attainment.
- Carry out a review in 2016, with a view to introducing salary scales and raising capitation payments accordingly from 2017 onwards.

Departmental responsibility

- Invest responsibility for Early-Years Education and Care in one government department only.
- Review supporting agencies to ensure that they are sufficiently funded and to eliminate any duplication of work.



Achoimre Fheidhmeach

Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil go leor buntáistí ag baint le cúram leanaí d'ardchaighdeán atá intaofa agus ar phraghas réasúnta bheith ann.

Cinntíonn sé don teaghlach go mbíonn na leanaí in ann barr feabhais ina gcuid scileanna a fhorbairt go sóisialta, go hacadúil agus go cruthaitheach - agus gur féidir ceisteanna ar bith foghlama nó forbartha a d'fhéadfadh bheith ann a aithint go luath.

Maidir leis an tsochaí agus an geilleagar ina n-iomláine is amhlaidh go dtugann sé deis do thuismitheoirí, agus do mhná ach go háirithe, pilleadh ar obair agus fanacht ar shiúl ó chruachás bochtaineachta a d'fhéadfadh bheith ann; cuireann sé leanaí ar an mbealach chun gnóthachtála san oideachas; agus soláthraíonn sé fostaíocht do chuid mhór oibríthe luachmhara san earnáil chúraim leanaí.

As siocair go bhfuil sé seo uile ar eolas againn, mar sin, ardaíonn sé an cheist:

Cén fáth a bhfuil ag teip chomh mór sin ar an Stát, faoi bheartais Fhine Gael, Fhianna Fáil agus Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre, maidir le cúram leanaí?

Agus muid ag leagan amach ár mbeartais i leith chúraim leanaí luath-óige, tá Sinn Féin ag tabhairt faoin gceist agus dhá aidhm faoi leith aige:

1. Forbarthach: Chun an tús is fearr sa saol a thabhairt do leanaí agus chun torthaí dearfacha a bhaint amach le haghaidh leanaí agus a dteaghlach.
2. Fostaíocht: Chun thuismitheoirí a chumasú le dul ar ais ar obair agus/nó fanacht ar obair, i gcúrsaí oideachais nó oiliúna; agus chun fostaíocht a chruthú san earnáil chúraim leanaí.

Rachaidh na haidhmeanna seo i ngleic le roinnt tosaíochtaí beartas ar nós foghlaim agus forbairt fhoriomlán na leanaí bheith ag teacht le míbhuntáiste a réiteach, bochtaineacht leanaí a laghdú, comhionannas inscne a fheabhsú agus fostaíocht a chur chun cinn agus an geilleagar a fhás.

Tá sé mar aidhm againn caighdeán an luath-oideachais agus seirbhísí chúraim leanaí a fheabhsú ionas go mbeidh eispéireas dearfach ann agus go mbeidh deiseanna forbartha ann do leanaí. Ba chóir gcuirfeadh sé seo leis an soláthar reatha thar réimse seirbhísí ar nós an chlár um Chúram agus Oideachas na Luath-óige (ECCE) agus clár An Fhóirdheontais Chúraim Leanaí sa Phobal (CCS). Chun an méid seo a chur i gcrích beidh sé riachtanach bonn scileanna na n-oibríthe in earnáil na luath-óige agus an chúraim leanaí a fhorbairt lena chinntiú go mbíonn seirbhísí ag freagairt do riachtanais thuismitheoirí, bíodh thuismitheoirí leanaí míchumasacha iad, thuismitheoirí leanaí de mhionlach eitneach iad, nó thuismitheoirí a chónaíonn faoin tuath nó i gceantar uirbeach iad.

Maidir le cúram agus forbairt leanaí, tá claonadh ollmhór i leith bheartais na hidirghabhála déanaí - nuair a bhíonn deacrachtaí sóisialta agus foghlama neadaithe. Tá beartais frithghníomhacha agus neamhairdiúla costasach agus is minic nach mbíonn siad chomh éifeachtach sin. Tá eolas eolaíoch, néareolaíoch agus geilleagrach atá ag fás agus a dheimhníonn dearcadh Shinn Féin go gcruthaíonn infheistíocht i luathbhlianta leanaí buntáistí níos fearr geilleagracha, sóisialta agus mothúchánacha níos moille ar aghaidh, ar leibhéal an duine agus ar leibhéal na sochaí. Molann an Eagraíocht um Chomhar agus Fhorbairt Eacnamaíochta (ECFE) 'Athbhreithnithe Ag Tosú go Luath II ar Chúram agus ar Oideachas Leanaí Luath-Óige', go mbíonn cur chuige comhtháite agus córasach ann maidir le forbairt agus cur i bhfeidhm polasaí, agus éilíonn sé fíis shoiléir bheartais le haghaidh leanaí ó 0-8 agus creat beartais comhordaithe ar leibhéal lárnaithe agus dílárnaithe.

Is beag an infheistíocht cheart atá déanta i gcúram leanaí. Tá caiteachas poiblí ar gcúl i gcomparáid le tíortha eile ECFE. Tá iarrachtaí déanta píosa ar píosa ag rialtais i ndiaidh a chéile dul i ngleic le costais ollmhóra chúraim leanaí, ach le linn an chúlaithe eacnamaíochta, bhí an rialtas breá toilteanach íocaíochtaí le haghaidh leanaí ar nós Sochar Linbh a ghearradh.



I mBuiséad 2016 cuireadh brú ar an Rialtas dul i ngleic le cuid den ábhar imní atá léirithe ag Sinn Féin agus eile thar na blianta - ach tá an cur chuige arís ina phíosáí agus tugadh faoi gan dul i gcomhairle le tuismitheoirí ná leis an tionscal.

Go bunúsach, is éard atá uainn ná clochú cultúrtha a chruthóidh méaduithe incriminteacha ar chaiteachas an Rialtais ionas go ndéanfar acmhainní a athchothromú i dtreo idirghabhálacha i luathbhlianta leanaí, le go mbeidh toradh níos fearr agus luach ar airgead ann.

Sa cháipéis seo, tá cuid de na bearta a chreidimid atá ag teastáil le tosú ag dul i ngleic ar bhealach níos iomláine leis an ngéarchéim i gcúram leanaí. Níl sa bheartas seo ach gné amháin denár gclár iomlán chun cúram d'ardchaighdeán a éascú dár leanaí agus dá bhforbairt. Ní féidir é a léamh ina aonair, ní mór amharc air i gcomhar lenár gcuid moltaí chun an earnáil oideachais a fheabhsú agus chun deireadh a chur le bochtaineacht leanaí - agus tá na rátaí in Éirinn a bhaineann leis an-ard.

San áit ina bhfuil na costais aitheanta againn sa cháipéis seo, tá siad curtha san áireamh againn inár gcuid moltaí forógra, moltaí atá costáilte le haghaidh cúig bliana le haghaidh olltoghchán 2016. San fhorógra, beidh tiomantas ann do chaiteachas laistigh den spás fioscach atá aiteanta do 2017-2021, agus i gcás ina mbeimis ag dúil le dul thar an spás fioscach, léirímid bearta cánachais a thabharfaimis isteach le híoc as ár gcuid moltaí. Is é an cur chuige foriomlán atá againn, áfach, don gheilleagar agus don chaiteachas poiblí sna cúig bliana atá amach romhainn, áfach, ná infheistíocht a dhéanamh i seirbhísí poiblí in áit ciorroithe cánach dóibh siúd atá ag saothrú tuarastail mhóir, as siocair go gcreidimid go mbeidh an cineál seo infheistíochta le leas gach duine agus go soláthraíonn sé an toradh is fearr.

Príomh-Mholtaí:

Inacmhainneacht

- Cinnte a dhéanamh go leanann an bhliain cúraim leanaí ar aghaidh ar feadh tréimhse 48 seachtain agus nach mbíonn tuismitheoirí fágtha agus billí breise a íoc idir na seisiúin, ná oibríthe san earnáil fágtha gan fostaíocht ar bith. Costas lomlán: €86m
- Clár an Fhóirdheontais Chúraim Leanaí sa Phobal (CCS) a leathnú ionas go leanann an maoiniú an leanbh, ní an áit. An Clár CCS a fhorbairt trí áiteanna fóirdheontaithe a chur ar fáil i seirbhísí príobháideacha luathbhlianta. Costas lomlán i mbliain 1: €50m
- Fad 6 seachtaine a chur le sochar máithreachais agus an rogha bheith ag ceachtar den bheirt thuisimitheoirí an chuid sin a ghlacadh ag deireadh na tréimhse máithreachais 26 seachtaine, atá ann faoi láthair. Costas lomlán €63 milliún
- 52 seachtaine de shaoire mháithreachais nó thuisimitheoirí a thabhairt isteach céim ar chéim.
- Tiomantas lena chinntiú go mbeidh méadú fadtéarmach i ráta an tsochair mháithreachais a íoctar ionas go mbeidh máithreacha in ann leas a bhaint as a saoire gan a bheith thíos leis ó thaobh airgid de.
- Uasmhéid táillí a leagan síos le haghaidh cúraim leanaí ar €180 sa tseachtain agus sin ag laghdú céim ar chéim go €150 sa tseachtain.

Caighdeán

- Sprioc bheith ann go mbeidh céim ag 60% den fhórsa oibre san ECCE faoi 2025 de réir mar atá molta ag an AE - is é sin le rá go mbeidh céim ábhartha ag 60% de mhaoir, de bhainisteoirí, srl.
- Ciste na bhFoghlaimoírí a leathnú le go dtacófar le dul ar aghaidh a fhad le cáilíochtaí ar Leibhéal 7 agus 8. €80 milliún an costas fadtéarma ar an bproifisiúnú seo, le caitheamh thar thréimhse 5 bliana. Costas lomlán i mbliain 1: €16 milliún
- Feidhmiú céimneach Síolta agus Aistear a chur i bhfeidhm láithreach trí Choistí Contae Cúraim Leanaí (CCCanna). Costas lomlán i mbliain 1: €5 milliún



- Cigirí ón Roinn Oideachais a fhostú trí chreatlaí Síolta agus Aistear a úsáid ach dúbláil ar róil chigireachta a sheachaint.
- Na deontais chaipitíochta a bhaineann leis an mBliain Shaor Réamhscolaíochta a mhéadú le €5 sa tseachtain go €67.50, agus le €9.50 don ráta is airde caipitíochta go €82.50. Costas Iomlán i mbliain 1: €20milliún
- Tús a chur le hathbhreithniú ar íocaíochtaí caipitíochta don bhliain ECCE agus fíis ann samhail athchóirithe maoinithe a thabhairt isteach. Ba chóir go n-áireofaí leis uaireanta gan teagmháil bheith íoctha don fhoireann, chomh maith le seirbhísí méadaithe caipitíochta i bpobail atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste agus le haghaidh seirbhísí a thacaíonn le leanaí a bhfuil riachtanais bhreise acu.
- Meicníochtaí a thabhairt isteach chun maoiniú a bhaint ar shiúl muna gcomhlíontar le caighdeáin.

Rialachán

- Gach cuid den Acht um Thús Áite do Leanaí (2015) a chur i bhfeidhm láithreach.
- Cinnte a dhéanamh de nach n-osclaítear seirbhísí go dtí go mbíonn sé deimhnithe ag Túlca gur féidir leis an tseirbhís na bunriachtanais chaighdeáin a chomhlíonadh.
- Bogadh i dtreo cur chuige duine-lárnaithe, ní seirbhís-lárnaithe, maidir le promhadh, agus doiciméad a bhfuil srian ama leis agus atá cosúil le pas a sholáthar chun monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar oiriúnacht daoine atá ag iarraidh bheith ag obair le leanaí, agus chun ualach an athphromhaidh ar gach post nua a laghdú.
- Athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar Rialacháin Cúraim Leanaí ionas go nglacfar le cóip de dheimhniú ar phromhadh ó na gardaí ó choláiste cuí go dtí go gcuirtear i bhfeidhm cur chuige duine-lárnaithe.
- Cinnte a dhéanamh de go mbíonn comhsheasmhacht ann maidir le caighdeáin a thuairisciú agus comhoibriú idir seirbhísí iniúchta agus soláthraithe cúraim ionas go mbíonn caighdeán ann agus gur féidir na caighdeáin chéanna a bhaint amach maidir leis an soláthar de.

Rochtain agus Uileghabhálacht

- 1,000 SNA sa bhreis a chur isteach sa Chlár ECCE - Costas Iomlán €21m
- Athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar shruthanna infheistíochta chun cóimheasa níos ísle foirne-leanaí a éascú ina bhfuil na seirbhísí ag tacú le leanaí a thabhairt isteach a bhfuil riachtanais bhreise acu - atá diagnóisithe agus neamhdhiagnóisithe.
- Oiliúint Riachtanais Bhreise a sholáthar do gach oibriú cúraim leanaí le haghaidh leanaí a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta acu.
- Imscrúdú a dhéanamh go práinneach ar neamh-uileghabhálacht i gcúrsaí oideachais agus cúraim leanaí do leanaí ón Lucht Taistil agus dul i ngleic leis, trí bheith ag obair leis an Lucht Taistil agus a gcreiseanna áitiúla chun eolas agus oiliúint a sholáthar nuair a bhíonn gá leis.
- Beartas Uileghabhálachta Náisiúnta ECCE a bhunú

Fostaithe Cúraim Leanaí

- Cearta agus caighdeáin a chur i bhfeidhm le haghaidh oibríthe cúraim leanaí. Tús a chur le dul chun cinn i dtreo conarthaí le tuarastail ghairmiúla agus deis ann le haghaidh na forbartha gairmiúla leanúnaí, agus aitheantas a thabhairt do ghnóthachtáil oideachasúil.
- Athbhreithniú a dhéanamh sa bhliain 2016, le go dtabharfar isteach scálaí tuarastail agus íocaíochta caipitíochta a ardú dá réir ón mbliain 2017 ar aghaidh.

Freagracht Roinne

- An fhreagracht le haghaidh Oideachas agus Cúram Luath-Óige a bhronnadh ar Roinn amháin de chuid an rialtais.
- Athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar ghníomhaireachtaí tacaíochta lena chinntiú go mbíonn an maoiniú ceart acu agus go mbeidh deireadh le dúbláil ar bith oibre.



Introduction: Children's rights & gender equality

The United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, or CRC, is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. Its implementation is monitored by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Childcare Policies should be developed with regard to the principles and provisions of the UNCRC and in particular to its general comment no.7 "Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood"

For women in particular, childcare can be an essential service. Equality Commission research has identified the availability of affordable and appropriate childcare as a contributor to mothers participation in labour market, thus contributing to greater gender equality. Without affordable childcare, the world of work is closed to many women. That is not just a loss to the women themselves. It is also a loss to our wider society.

According to the Autumn 2015 CSO figures there were approximately 77,000 women seeking either full-time or part-time employment in the state. There were 464,000 women who list their occupation as 'home duties'. By comparison, approximately 10,000 men list their occupation as 'home duties'. Some of this could be addressed by creating flexible work practices for women but the availability/affordability of childcare plays a significant role.

Vision Statement

To provide affordable, accessible, quality and inclusive childcare that focuses on the early mental and physical development of the child and contributes in the short and longer-term to a vibrant, healthier society and economy.

Analysis and recommendations

Childcare should be regarded as a public service for both children and parents. We must address the issues in the sector with the same care that we address similar issues in other levels of education.

We propose a model that is publicly subsidised, of high quality and universally accessible. This model should be combined with a system of paid leave, specifically in the first year of life, which supports both mothers and fathers. We also believe the State should encourage employers to recognise the value of flexible working hours.

Childcare can be delivered by the community, public or private sectors; but presently, the sector is primarily market driven. Consequently, quality and affordability are largely left to the market. Although there may appear to be many options available, these options are not properly funded and they lack cohesion and co-ordination. A new early-years model, which builds on the State's legacy of community provision and child minding, is achievable if childcare is treated as a public service and receives investment accordingly.

Early-years investment will also lay the foundations for long-term economic and social progress. The National Economic and Social Forum estimates that for every euro we invest in childcare, we can expect a net gain between four and seven euro from higher income levels. High quality early-care is good for children, good for society and good for the economy. Substantial investment in the sector makes economic sense.



Current investment and proposed increases

Prior to the year 2000, there was very little investment in childcare in the 26 Counties. Between 2000 and 2010, the State, in partnership with the EU, invested €425 million in creating childcare places across the 26 Counties. From the years 2006 through 2010 the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) became the State's official vehicle for investment in the sector.

The Government spent in the region of €260 million in 2015 on early-years and school-age care and education services. The bulk of this money funded three programmes for approximately 100,000 children. These three programmes are: the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, the Community Childcare Subvention programme (CCS), and the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programme. The remaining €14 million is directed towards funding all city and county childcare committees, the national voluntary childcare organisations, and a range of quality development and training initiatives such as the Learner Fund, Better Start Quality Development Service, childminder development grants, and toddler group grants.

However:

- Public spending on childcare and early education as a percentage of GDP in this state ranks lowest in the OECD.
- The average spend within the EU is approximately 0.7% of GDP. Spending on pre-school services amounts to less than €270million per year an equivalent of just under 0.2% GDP. UNICEF recommends a spend of 1%, with an OECD average of 0.8%.
- The census in 2014 indicates that there are approximately 436,000 children aged between nought and five years and almost 460,000 children aged six to 12 years living in Ireland. Of these about 18.3% live in a lone parent household and 5.8% of them have a disability. The latest data from the EU SILC survey on income and living conditions estimates that some 7.4% of nought to five year olds and 11.1% of 6 to 12 year olds are classified as living in consistent poverty.
- Most recent CSO figures show that the 26 Counties has the highest birth rate in the EU with 14.4 births for every 1,000 people (July 2015). This further emphasises the critical need for proper provision of childcare as our population increases, and if women are to be encouraged back into the workforce.

In Budget 2016, the Minister for Finance announced up to €1.5 billion in tax cuts and public spending - split 50:50 between the two. Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil have all signalled that in future years, they will continue to pursue tax cuts for higher earners over public investment. Sinn Féin believes that, after 8 years of austerity, public finances should be primarily earmarked for investment in much decimated public services, including allowing for a quality subsidised early-years and after-school care system.

Government reviews

In January 2015, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs established the Inter-Departmental Group, which was tasked with assessing policies and future options for improving the affordability, quality and supply of services in the early-years, school-age care and education sectors in Ireland. This group comprises officials from the Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Social Protection, Education & Skills, Justice and Equality, Jobs Enterprise and Innovation, Public Expenditure & Reform, Finance and the Department of the Taoiseach. In July 2015, the group launched its report – Future investment in childcare in Ireland – with recommendations which included the following headline items:



- Introducing paid parental leave as an extension of maternity benefit for children up to the age of 1.
- Extending free pre-school provision to up to two years.
- Making childcare more affordable (including after-school care) by replacing the childcare subsidies with a new income-related subsidy paid directly to services and available in all centre-based services), with parental fees capped according to parents' income level – thereby reducing fees to parents and preventing childcare prices rising.

Stakeholders welcomed the report but emphasised that it lacked clear timelines for its recommendations.

In June 2015, the Minister went on to establish a further Inter-Departmental Group to agree a model that would support access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for children with a disability. This group comprised officials from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Department of Education and Skills, Department of Health, with representatives from Early Years Inspectorate, the National Disability Authority (NDA), and Better Start Initiative represented via the Quality Development Service and Dublin City Childcare Committee. In November 2015, the group launched their report – Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability - with recommendations which included the following headline items:

- An Inclusive Culture - Development of a national inclusion policy for ECCE settings with the identification of Inclusion Co-ordinators from within childcare service staff teams
- Continued Learner Funds – Disability specific training
- 50 Early Years Inclusion specialists – regional/national based
- Equipment, Appliances and Minor Alterations Capital Grant
- 50 Therapeutic Intervention Post locally based within HSE Therapy Services
- Additional Assistance in the Pre-school - additional capitation fee to some service providers

Recommendation

- Dedicated incremental funding increases over the life-time of a Sinn Féin government to bring Irish spending on childcare closer to international averages, using the proposals set out in this document



Affordability

Affordability in the sector and parents' costs

Ireland's childcare costs are considered the most expensive in the EU and are second only to the USA worldwide.

- Childcare costs in Ireland range between €800 - €1,100 per month for a full time place, dependent on location. Urban services generally cost more than rural areas, although there is greater choice available to urban dwellers.
- Childcare will cost parents with two young children approximately €2,000 a month. That can absorb almost a complete after-tax salary of someone on €30,000.
- It is estimated that a lone parent with two children needs to earn €40,000 to cover the costs of full-time private childcare.

OECD figures show that the fees paid by a low-income, dual-earner family in Ireland with two young children, consume at least 35% of the family's net income. For a lone-parent family on the average wage, the fees amount to 40% of income, in contrast to just 10-13% across the EU. In turn, many parents who would otherwise seek employment are kept out of the workforce – and the level of child poverty rises.

Price caps for parents

Price caps guarantee a maximum cost for all families and are a common feature across Europe. 50% of childcare providers in Norway are private, yet providers are legally restricted from charging parents any more than €293 per month. As recommended by stakeholders, an introduction of price caps could happen simultaneously to an increase in capitation payments to the service providers directly for each child – the capitation payments reflecting the cost of caring for that child so that the parent's fee or subsidy is not carrying the whole cost.

The Free Pre-School Year programme (ECCE) and the Training and Employment Childcare programme (TEC), consisting of Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS), After-School Child Care (ASCC), and Community Employment Childcare (CEC), have set caps on fees that services may charge parents. Apart from these two programmes (the ECCE and TEC), there are no caps on fees for parents in this state.

As recommended by Start Strong, if the price cap for parents was fixed at €4.50 per hour, a 40-hour week could be price capped for parents at €180 per week.

Under the current ECCE programme, childcare services can charge parents optional extras for activities such as specialised music/dance sessions/outings/food and extra hours. These 'optional' extras can amount to an extra €10/12 per week. The capitation grant should cover the cost of standard daily care and appropriate programme-based activities. Optional extras should only be for service provision outside of the ECCE session. Capitation rates and suggested increases are explored in detail in the chapter on 'quality'.

Recommendations

- Ensure the childcare year runs for a continuous 48-week period, and parents aren't left picking up the tab in between sessions, nor workers in the sector left without employment. Total Cost: €86 m
- Move to set maximum fees for childcare costs of €180 per week incrementally reducing to €150 per week. The price cap will be paid for by increased capitation payments from the State.



Community Childcare Subvention Programme

The Community Childcare Subvention Programme (CCS) is a support programme for community-based childcare services to provide quality childcare services at a reduced rate to parents. It is a programme which enables Community Childcare Services to give parents in receipt of certain social welfare payments (the majority of which are covered under the CCS Programme), Family Income Supplement, and holders of medical cards and GP visit cards, reduction in their childcare fees. Participation in the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme has been restricted to community/not-for-profit childcare services however changes announced in Budget 2016 mean private childcare providers in areas of need can apply to participate in the programme, though we have yet to see how far this measure will go.

Recommendation

- Ensure the CCS scheme is opened up so that the funding follows the child not the setting. Extend the Community Childcare Subvention Programme by making subsidised places available in privately run early-years services where the private crèche is providing a service in a disadvantaged area and filling the childcare needs of that area. Total Cost €50m

School Age Childcare

School Age Childcare refers to a range of organised age-appropriate structured programmes, clubs and activities for school-age children and young people (4-13) which take place within supervised environments during the times that they are not in school.

School Age Childcare Services occur in a variety of different ways:

- Within childcare services i.e. Crèche / full day care/extension of playgroup/sessional care either privately owned or community based
- Relative or Childminder in their own home.
- Purpose built school age childcare services
- School based After-school care
- Community based projects.

Currently School Age Childcare is subsidised through several of the Government childcare programmes.

The Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme supports disadvantaged parents and provides support for parents in low paid employment and training or education by enabling qualifying parents to avail of reduced school age childcare costs.

Under the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) Programmes, school age childcare is supported under a number of strands. Childcare Education and Training Support Programme (CETS) support parents on eligible training courses and eligible categories of parents returning to work, by providing subsidised childcare places. This programme contributes €45 per week for an afterschool place with maximum fee payable by parents of €5 per week per child; and €80 per week for afterschool with pickup service, maximum fee payable by parents €15 per week per child.

CE Childcare (CEC) Programme supports parents taking part in a CE scheme. This programme provides afterschool care for children up to 13 years of age. The programme contributes €40 per week for an after-school place. The programme also provides a full day



care rate of €80 per week, for a maximum of 10 weeks, to cater for school holiday periods. In all cases, the maximum fee payable by parents is €15 per week per child.

The After-School Childcare (ASCC) programme provides after-school care for primary school children of eligible parents for a period of 52 weeks. Eligibility for the programme is determined by the Department of Social Protection. The programme contributes €40 per week for an after-school place or €80 per week in situations where the childcare service provides a pick-up service that collects the child from school. The programme also provides a full day care rate of €105 per week, for a maximum of 10 weeks, to cater for school holiday periods. In all cases, the maximum fee payable by parents is €15 per week per child.

This year only 433 children are availing of the after-school programme with 339 of these children availing of a pick-up service. This number is hugely inadequate and evidently is not providing a much needed solution to the after school care crisis for parents. According to the Department, funding will be available to support a similar number of children next year but states that the numbers seeking support under the programme in 2015/2016 will only become evident as the school year progresses.

To date the sector remains self-regulated resulting in varied standards of provision across services.

The system, as outlined above, is confusing and doesn't offer much to parents who don't meet the strict eligibility criteria set out.

Recommendations:

- Use existing public funding as a lever to improve quality of after-school care provision for those services in receipt of public money.
- Develop standards and regulations for Out of School Care and Recreation and ensure implementation within a timely fashion
- Carry out a detailed cost analysis of provision and ring fence an appropriate budget that is cognisant of professional pay and conditions. Ensure that this area does not find itself in the same mess that we currently have in early childhood education and care.
- Conduct a mapping exercise of all after-school services run by the state, its agencies, and private /community providers. This will ensure previous capital investment is protected and utilised while also ensuring the current school age infrastructure are easy for parents to access. This exercise will also identify any gaps in provision to avoid displacement. Utilise information through the Childcare Committees to keep costs minimal.
- Agree with Department of Education and Skills the use of school premises to facilitate School Age provision in areas of identified gaps.
- Examine the provision of school age training for all childcare workers involved with working with school age children. This training should not be at the expense of the childcare worker or in his/her own time but made a core module rather than an elective module for FETAC training.

The ECCE Free Pre-school Year

Despite changes in Budget 2016, the current free pre-school provision or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) contract continues to operate with many flaws.

Budget 2016 extended the free pre-school year by allowing an earlier age entry point (from



3 years of age) and introducing multiple entry points during the year – January, April or September. Provision on average will increase from 38 weeks to 61 weeks of free care – but this care is still only provided for 3 hours per day. It is, as of yet, still unclear if the ECCE year will run for 48 weeks continuously to ensure parents aren't left with gap costs and employees without work. We've already committed in this document to ensuring that under SF, the ECCE year will run continuously.

Funding of over €214 million will be provided for the ECCE programme in 2016. Capitation fees are paid to participating services on the basis of this provision.

Sinn Féin proposed in the run-up to Budget 2016 that the ECCE year be increased in length and when its quality was secured, the entry age incrementally lowered. We welcome the extensions made in the budget but are concerned that the multiple entry points in the year may cause difficulties for childcare professionals in the system. Clarification on the enrolment process and how services will manage this is needed.

Maternity Leave / Parental Leave / Paternity Leave

Maternity Leave:

Evidence suggests that children do better when they spend at least their first year with a parent. Extension of leave arrangements must be considered so that children can be with a parent for the first year of their lives. Research, particularly in relation to brain development, indicates that the first year of a child's life should be spent with the primary carer.

Since 2007 women have been entitled to 26 weeks maternity leave. That leave is now paid at the standard maternity benefit rate of €230 per week. An additional unpaid 16 weeks is optional. It is important to note that any entitlement to full paid maternity leave is currently subject to contract. There is no obligation on employers to pay above the standard rate, leaving many women in the private sector facing a sheer drop in income during their leave.

Paternity Leave:

Sinn Féin has long-campaign for at least two weeks' paid paternity leave for fathers when their child is born.

Budget 2016 introduced the 2 weeks of leave but only from September next year. The absence of paid paternity leave to date has been a stain on successive governments parental policy. The new recommendation should be implemented immediately, as proposed in Sinn Féin's Budget 2016 submission A Fair Recovery.

Recommendations

- Extend maternity benefit by 6 weeks and allow that portion to be taken by either parent at the end of the current 26 weeks maternity leave. Total Cost €63 million
- Work toward 52 weeks of maternity or parental leave.
- Commitment to ensure a longer-term increase in the rate of maternity benefit paid to allow mothers to avail of their leave without financial hardship.

Commercial Rates

The imposition of commercial rates on all childcare service providers is a threat to the sustainability of all ECCE services. Until the Valuation Bill 2012 is fully enacted, providers will continue to be at risk of prosecution for not paying the high rates. Providers of the ECCE Programme and Community Subvention Programme providers can be exempt. Private Service Providers cannot. If not tackled, the issue of commercial rates will inevitably result in increased fees for parents.



Recommendation

- Recognise all childcare facilities as educational establishments and not simply as care centres. Progress to remove the burden of commercial rates from all childcare centres. This would support the overall aim of sustainability. Primary, secondary, and adult education centres are exempt from commercial rates; therefore, early childhood care and education should also be exempt.

Tax credits / Tax breaks debate

Public investment must be added to the sector in the form of services rather than tax credits.

A childcare system that uses tax credits does not work. Tax credits do nothing to improve quality or incentivise high quality. According to the OECD, direct subsidies give the state greater “steering control” over quality. Quality of service depends on the impact of an inspection system. Tax credits have little impact on affordability because they tend to drive prices up.

Recommendation

- Address affordability issues through direct State spend on childcare, not tax credits



Quality

Costs are not the only problem within the childcare system; quality is also an issue. Quality of childcare can vary with parents having no assurance about the standard of service.

Up-skilling and Improving Training

The European Commission published a report in March 2015 highlighting concerns around Ireland's childcare system. Its list of policy recommendations included a general upgrading in the quality of childcare, an improvement in the overall monitoring system, national compliance with minimum standards and regulations, and the up-skilling in qualification levels of staff.

POBAL (2015) reports that only 15% of educators working in the sector in Ireland currently hold a degree at Level 7/8 in early childhood education and care. This is much lower than the EU (2011) recommendation of 60%. It's also true that training modules for Level 5 and 6 need to incorporate practical experience into their education training.

All further professional development courses should be centred on the frameworks of Síolta and Aistear. Síolta (the national quality framework for early care and education) and Aistear (the national curriculum framework) were published in 2006 and 2009 respectively. They acknowledge the fact that care and education are inseparable and that the first years in a child's life form the basis for all later learning. They have not been fully rolled out across the state and remain mostly in the pilot only stage.

Public funding must be linked to quality. This would incentivise higher quality by making higher capitation supplements available to graduate-led services. The call for the further 'professionalisation' of the early-years workforce will only be met when a system of up-skilling is incorporated into a salary scale reflective of additional training.

Recommendations

- Aim for a 60% degree-led ECCE workforce by 2025 as recommended by the EU – i.e. that 60% of all supervisors, managers etc hold degrees. This early childcare training must be given at government expense and in paid time for all workers.
- Extend the Learner Fund. The minimum qualification that will be introduced in September 2016 is at a low level 5 on the National Framework for Quality (NFQ), which is the equivalent to Leaving Cert level. In order to support the improvement of quality in the sector with an incremental move towards it being graduate degree-led, Government should expand the Learner Fund to support progression to Level 7 and 8 qualifications. Total Cost €16 million per annum
- Implement the immediate roll out of Síolta and Aistear through County Childcare Committees (CCCs). This would ensure swift national coverage with minimum cost, since the CCCs have access to all childcare providers nationally, are linked to local training agencies and are supporting the administration of the Learner Fund - Issue a directive to all relevant departments to this effect in order to ensure that all education and training boards and private training companies fully engage. Total cost €5 million
- Appoint Department of Education inspectors using the frameworks of Síolta and Aistear while avoiding a duplication of inspection roles
- Publish an Early Years Strategy immediately
- Ensure coordination of the National Better Start Initiative

Capitation Rates

Capitation rates are paid by the State to crèches for each child in their care. An increase in capitation payments can both improve quality and ensure a reduction in parental costs. A higher capitation grant is paid where the crèche is led by a level 7 graduate, a reflection of the quality provided in the crèche.

Recommendations

- Increase capitation grants for the Free Pre-School Year by €5 per week to €67.50, and by €9.50 for the higher capitation rate to €82.50. The government restored capitation rates by €2 in Budget 2016. Total Cost €20 million
- Initiate a review of capitation payments for the ECCE year with a view to introducing a reformed funding model in 2017. This should include paid non-contact time for staff, as well as increased capitation for services in disadvantaged communities and for services supporting children with additional needs
- Introduce mechanisms to withdraw funding if standards are not met. Services in receipt of public funding should adhere to certain required standards. Funding should be withdrawn from low-quality services if standards are not raised in a given time frame. Inspections must be standardised so that no service provider is unfairly penalised
- As educational attainment is achieved, extend higher capitation payments to all services to improve quality. Total cost €12 million
- In the longer-term, increase capitation rates as State spending on childcare to GDP increases, to allow for a reduction in the parental portion of childcare and to further lower price caps for parents.

Private Childcare Services

Early Childhood Ireland has called on the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to stall expansion of new operators delivering the ECCE programme until a clear plan has been developed which takes account of a current level of oversupply of childcare places. There are an estimated 31,500 vacant places nationwide. A detailed county analysis is required in light of the ECCE expansion announced in Budget 2016 to ensure adequate provision.

Concern has been expressed by service providers about the entry of primary schools into the ECCE programme. As set out in a recent Department of Education and Science discussion document, primary schools are opening ECCE rooms, many without regard to the existence of other settings in the local area. Inevitably, the issue of unfair competition is raised from a service provider's perspective. However, we make a point in this document that in areas of disadvantage and need, where private sector services are meeting a childcare demand need, they should be eligible for public subsidies. A balance must be found between allowing existing service providers to viably operate while allowing schools in areas which are in need of additional supports to also take part in the ECCE scheme.

There has been a concern raised that primary schools are offering places to children who have not availed of their free pre-school year - allowing parents to send those children to school at an earlier age in order to increase school numbers. However, at the same time from a parent's practical perspective, in the absence of affordable childcare, allowing children to enter the school system at earlier age allows a parent to fulfil working hour obligations.



Recommendation

- The DCYA depends on existing operators to work in partnership with them in order to deliver the ECCE programme. Better co-ordination and planning is needed to prevent displacement, while providing a universal provision of the free service for all.

Community Childcare Services and Community Employment

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on supports for governance and sustainability. Community services are reliant on Community Employment schemes for staff within a number of counties. This hinders quality and stretches efficiency in relation to HR, administration, governance, and finance. The governance structure of community services needs to be reviewed with the view to building an alternative structure at local level.

The capacity of some community service management committees is not adequate in relation to the skills-set needed to run a business dealing with annual government funding to the value of €100-200k+. Under-qualified managers often progress through the system, from small play-schools up to managerial level of large full day care services, without the necessary up-skilling. When skilled managers leave a post or are on long term leave, the voluntary management committees are not in a position to run the services, and a service can quickly find itself in difficulty.

Recommendations

- Create a balance between community/local government models and interagency committees. Relevant agencies within a county (county council, development companies, County Childcare Committees, family resource centres) would ensure a community model with professional input at the highest level, while supporting good governance.
- Provide additional supports to services of higher disadvantage. Childcare services in areas of extreme disadvantage are not in a position to gather additional funds through parental fees or fundraising schemes. They are reliant on capitation from government programmes.
- Charge a support agency, such as Pobal, with the responsibility for carrying out sustainability reviews of community childcare services. Some County Childcare Committees are currently doing this work in the absence of any alternative. Sustainability reviews are a vital local need and a recurring issue.
- Conduct a review of community childcare services' committees to ascertain if they have functioning management committees to ensure good governance.

Grants

Pobal announced the Early Years Capital 2015 programme in April 2015. DCYA secured €7 million for this programme. EYC2015 was open to early-years settings and currently it provides services under Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), Training Education Childcare (TEC), or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

EYC2015 only provided grants with a maximum of €500 for ICT equipment to private providers. The purpose of the Early Years Capital 2015 grants was to support community facilities to remain fit-for-purpose, improve quality, and make community services more efficient and sustainable through improving the energy rating of these facilities.



Recommendations

- Allow private childcare providers to also apply for funds from the government grant aid in areas where the option of a community provider is not available
- Ensure local input regarding funding by support agencies under the Better Start Initiative is part of the appraisal process



Regulation

Childminders and Childminding Regulation

The regulation of childminders needs to be brought within a framework. All paid, non-relative childminders must be brought within the pre-school regulation system - regardless of the number of children they have in their care. For their benefits, they can have access to government programmes and from a parents' perspective, equity of choice and quality is assured. It was disappointing that childminders are not included in mandatory reporting in the Children First Act (2015) as other sole trader operators (i.e one person preschool) are under their duty within the Preschool Regulations.

Recommendations

- Recognise professional childminders as providing a home-based equivalent to centre-based provision and regulate and support accordingly.
- For families who prefer home settings, open up funding schemes to registered childminders who meet quality standards
- Include childminders under the Preschool Regulations

Domestic Work Sector and au pairs

In Ireland there are approximately 50,000 children in the care of child minders and 19,000 of those childminders are unregulated. This is a grey area that needs to be examined urgently.

Trends indicate a growing number of migrant women working in childcare unregulated, i.e. an informal workforce providing care in private homes. The Migrant Rights Centre of Ireland has also identified an increase in the pattern of exploitation experienced by au pairs. Domestic workers must have proper employment rights and they must be protected.

Employers should be obliged to register as a single employer if an individual is working for them in their private home. Also, there is an onus on the au pair industry recruitment agencies to be aware of and comply with the Employment Agencies Act 1971.

Recommendations

- Oblige employers to register if an individual is working in their home
- Support the call by the Migrant Rights Centre for an immediate and co-ordinated response by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation and the National Employment Rights Authority to ensure that the employment rights of au pair workers are upheld and enforced, with a particular emphasis on recruitment agencies and direct employers.
- A public awareness campaign should be developed by DJEI and implemented by NERA to inform recruitment agencies and employers of the responsibilities involved in the employment of au pair workers under Irish employment law.
- NERA should continue labour inspections in the private home sector to ensure labour law compliance and support au pairs in claiming their employment rights and compensation where employment rights are breached.



Registration of Childcare Service Providers

A key weakness in the regulatory system identified by all stakeholders is the fact that under the Child Care Act 1991 anyone may open a childcare service subject to notifying Tusla. The only recourse Tusla has had to deal with unsuitable services has been prosecution. A robust system of registration should be in place to ensure that services cannot open until they meet at least minimum standards.

Childcare service providers need to be given all information pertinent to registration with TUSLA, and to costs involved, in a timely fashion. This will allow providers to plan ahead and factor in any additional costs.

Recommendation

- Ensure services do not open until Tusla is satisfied that the service can meet standard requirements.

Garda Vetting of Workers and Services

At present, the vetting system for those who want to work with children provides a “point-in-time” background check and individuals must undergo screening each time they enter into a new position of employment or voluntary work. The process can take anything from 4 weeks to months to complete, leaving employees unable to take up positions or employers facing non-compliance within preschool regulations.

Garda vetting should be person-centred and not service-centred. A simple procedure could be introduced where a document similar to a driver’s licence or passport would be issued, with a renewable date within a five to eight year period. This process of vetting will provide for ongoing monitoring of an individual’s suitability for child-related work/volunteering. Any relevant convictions within the renewal period would have to be recorded on the vetting licence/passport with the administering authority informing the employer of the offence and/or withdrawing the vetting. Individuals can also carry their vetting between positions and do not have to undergo repeated screening while their vetting licence is valid. This model is already used internationally.

Childcare Regulations could be amended to accept a copy of the garda vetting from a relevant college until a person centred approach is adopted.

In relation to home-based childminders all persons within the home over 18 years should be garda vetted to ensure good child protection practice.

Recommendations

- Move to a person-centred, not service-centred approach to vetting, providing a time-limited passport type document to ensure continued monitoring of individuals’ suitability for working with children, but also ease the burden of re-vetting for each new position.
- Review Childcare Regulations to enable the acceptance of a copy of garda vetting certification from a relevant college until a person centred approach is adopted.

Inspections

One of the main regulation concerns is the number of childminders and school age childcare services are currently operating outside the inspection process. We acknowledge the plan announced in Budget 2016 to introduce standards and bring the school age childcare services under regulations but a large amount of childminders still remain outside of the regulations.



There has been a long history of no national approach to regulation which has caused serious consequences and difficulties for services and for inspectors. Many areas across the state have had no inspector or an inadequate number of inspectors in recent years. Tusla is moving to a National approach however additional inspectors are still needed. While inspection reports were made available to early years services and parents, they were not intended for publication. According to DCYA, a revision to the existing reporting templates have included attention being given to problematic elements such as:

- A focus on deficits, no matter how small scale, that were then interpreted as non-compliance with no provision for a more coherent view of the overall quality of the service
- a layout and content that were not consumer friendly particularly for parents
- a lack of consistency in language and approach

Following the shocking Prime Time programme in May 2013 a decision was taken to publish inspection reports on line for public viewing. However, it has been emphasised that there are inconsistencies in the process of making these reports public, with a lack of clarity for service providers around the timeline and accessing of reports being uploaded online. The right to reply for childcare services and the publishing of these is necessary to ensure that the public has all relevant information. Consistency is needed should the publication of reports achieve the aim for improving quality of services, transparency for parents and safety of children.

Recommendation

- Ensure consistency in reporting standards and cooperation between investigating services and care providers to ensure quality and standards can be achieved in provision.

Accessibility & Inclusivity

Children with additional needs

The free pre-school provision has, to date, been universal in name only. Many children with special needs are prevented from availing of the government-subsidised scheme due to the absence of necessary supports. In addition, a child with additional or special needs' attendance at a pre-school centre often depends on where that child lives. His or her attendance can range from not-at-all, to only a portion of any given day. This provides no continuity for a child even when he or she is able to attend. All children, especially those who are in need of additional care, should be provided with childcare in their own communities.

The Government has promised to phase in a number of supports to enable children with disabilities to fully participate in pre-school care and education. These supports are due to include enhanced continuing professional development for childcare staff to better understand and respond to children's different needs; grants for equipment, appliances and minor alterations; as well as access to therapeutic intervention.

Present situation for children with Additional Needs:

- 11% of early-years services were forced to refuse a child with additional needs in 2014 because they were unable to meet his/her needs. (Early Childhood Ireland)
- Uptake of the free pre-school year is 95%. The remaining 5% is made up of marginalised children in disadvantaged areas, minority children and children with additional needs.

Recommendations

- Provide an additional 1,000 SNAs to the ECCE Programme – Total Cost €21m
- Direct investment to facilitate lower staff-child ratios where services are supporting the inclusion of children with additional needs – both diagnosed and undiagnosed.
- Provide Additional Needs training for all childcare workers involved with working with children with special needs. This training should not be at the expense of the childcare worker or in his/her own time but made a core module rather than an elective module for FETAC/HETAC training

The Traveller Community

Current policy states that Traveller children should receive their education, including their pre-school education, "within an integrated provision that welcomes them as equal participants and also respects their culture" (DES, 2006, p.96). Securing equal educational outcomes for the Travelling community remains a challenge. OECD thematic review of early education and care in Ireland (2004) states that "the level of educational achievement of Traveller children is a matter of deep concern. The low enrolment rates of Traveller children in pre-schools and the infant school suggest that most Traveller children are entering primary school already at a great disadvantage..." (OECD, 2004, p. 8), there does not seem to have been much progress since this report to date. There are no national figures of the overall uptake among Traveller children of early years services, nor of their uptake of the universally available free preschool year, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is well below that of the wider population. Pobal Survey (2014) of childcare services highlights a total of 385 (or 15.4% of all services) reported having at least one child from



the Travelling Community attending. However, the breakdown of this figure between community-based at 30.5% and private providers 9.1% is highly uneven. Urban facilities are more likely to have a Traveller child accessing their service (20.3%) than are rural services (12.2%). The survey also showed that only 1,467 traveller children were attending childcare services in the country.

Migrant children and children of minority backgrounds

Specific needs of immigrant children should not be overlooked in the implementation of the free pre-school year. Norway, like Ireland, puts a strong focus on the importance of language stimulation at an early stage of life. This is expected to be especially beneficial for immigrant children. With respect to the development of the host language, it would be important to take multi-cultural and anti-bias approaches to curriculum development and implementation (OECD REVIEWS OF MIGRANT EDUCATION: IRELAND – OECD 2009)

The OECD also states that it is helpful for immigrant children to be exposed to teachers with immigrant backgrounds, who can learn to teach both language and culture into the overall activities. Based on their own experiences of being an immigrant, such teachers may be more culturally sensitive to the child's 'language, social and emotional development, all of which are the prerequisite for successful integration and social cohesion.'

Recommendations

- Urgently examine and address the issue of non-inclusivity in education and childcare for children from Traveller backgrounds, working with the Traveller community and local based crèches to provide information and training where needed.
- Establish a National ECCE inclusion policy.



Childcare Employees

The childcare sector employs approximately 25,000 women. The average pay ranges between €10 and €11 per hour. Workers must often carry out a significant number of hours in preparation and administration that are unpaid. The service provider also works many hours that are not considered. This expectation of free labour is not acceptable and causes burn-out.

In spite of the high cost of childcare to parents in Ireland, educators on whom the quality of care depends are under-valued and under-paid. There is no job security or paid leave. Many are laid-off in the summer months. Most services are unable to pay staff for anything other than 'core hours'. With such low wages, it is difficult for services to recruit and retain well-qualified staff there is increasing evidence that highly skilled graduates are being lost from the sector.

In order for a quality childcare system to work, the pay and conditions of childcare workers must also be a consideration. Rights and standards for childcare workers should be explored with workers needing professional salaries that provide for CPD, planning and preparation time, and educational attainment.

There is little difference in the salaries payable to educators with a QQI Level 5 qualification and those with a Level 8 honours degree. The rate of pay for an educator is generally €9 per hour (€351/week) to €10 per hour (€380/week) Managers who hold a Level 8 honours degree state that they earn between €12 per hour (€468/week) and €14 per hour (€546/week) In comparison, the CSO figures for the first quarter Q1 of 2015 show the average weekly wage at €699.45 and an average hourly rate at €22.25.

Crucially, there is no reward for obtaining a degree in early childhood education and care. With the exception of the ECCE scheme, which as of next year will require a minimum of a Level 6 qualification, there is no incentive for existing educators in the field to up-skill to higher level qualifications.

Recommendations

- Implement rights and standards for childcare workers.
- Carry out a review in the first year of government, with a view to introducing salary scales and raising capitation payments accordingly. Negotiate sectorally agreed pay scales that are linked to capitation payments.
- Increase investment to facilitate contracts that cover all aspects of the job:
 - Include one additional hour for every three hours of contact with children, to facilitate documentation, planning, parent meetings, and staff meetings "Time for staff to plan, document, analyse and reflect – individually and collectively – on their work with children is seen to improve quality." (OECD)
 - Allow for a minimum of five paid Continuing Professional Development (CPD) days per annum.



Departmental responsibility

Too many children have been let down in Ireland by the absence of clear and consistent governance, poor communication and lack of accountability. The fact that we now have a cabinet-level Department of Children and Youth Affairs is an opportunity to drive significantly higher standards for all our children. A decision has to be made to view childcare as a public service rather than expecting the whole sector to work within a business model.

Recommendations

- Invest responsibility for Early-Years Education and Care in one government department only.
- Review the structure, capitation rates, and eligibility of the current childcare programmes (ECCE, TEC & CCS) to ensure that they are sufficiently funded and delivered in a manner that is less bureaucratic and administration heavy for all. Look at an appropriate contract with childcare services from DCYA, to allow for professional development and administration
- Review supporting agencies to ensure that they are sufficiently funded and to eliminate any duplication of work. These supports would include the services of Pobal, the Better Start Initiative to include the Quality Development Service, County Childcare Committees, Childminding Ireland, Early Childhood Ireland, and the National Childcare Network.







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