

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 6.00pm, Tuesday, 15 October 2013**

**Start Strong welcomes focus on quality in early years' provision but cautions that additional funding will not achieve high quality that young children deserve**

**Free GP care is a positive move for young children, but should not be at the expense of others.**

Start Strong – a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance children's early care and education in Ireland – has this evening said that while the additional funding for early years is welcome, it falls short of the level of investment needed if we are to bring about a significant improvement in quality standards.

Start Strong's Director, Ciairín de Buis, reacting to Budget 2014 stated, "While we welcome a focus on improving quality in early services, our current level of investment is so low that much more is needed. If we are to ensure that no child is in a poor quality service, much more than €4.5m is needed."

The Expert Advisory Group on the National Early Years Strategy, of which Start Strong was a member, last week stated in its report to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs that the variable quality in services is *'the foremost policy challenge'* in early care and education today and called for a large increase in investment.

"While the fact that Child Benefit was not reduced will be a relief to many families, the reduction in the weekly rate of Maternity Benefit for many mothers, following last year's taxation of this payment, will again impact negatively on families with very young children at a time when they need additional support," Ciairín de Buis said.

Start Strong welcomes the introduction of free GP care for those aged 5 years and under, a recommendation of the Expert Advisory Group. However, Ms. de Buis cautioned that the introduction of GP medical cards for young children must not be at the cost of other children. "This is about the rights of children to a medical service, not about pitting one group of children against another."

Ciairín de Buis continued, "In times of austerity it can be difficult to think in terms of investing more. However now, more than ever, the Government need to be investing in young children. We invest very little in our young children; our investment in early care and education services is less than half the internationally recognised standard. Investing in young children is an investment in the future of our society and our economy".

**Notes to Editor:**

*Right from the Start*, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy was published on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2013.

Ireland currently invests 0.4% GDP in early care and education services. The OECD average is 0.7% GDP. International studies have used the figure of 1% GDP as a benchmark for the level of annual investment required to achieve a high-quality system of early care and education services.

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