

# Planning Now, for the Future

Children's Early Care  
and Education in Ireland



**start  
strong**  
Advancing Children's  
Early Care & Education

# Children 2020

November 2010







**Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance early care and education. Originally formed as the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN) in 2004, we became Start Strong in November 2009. We support our advocacy with research and the analysis of good practice. In particular, we advocate the development of a 10-year national plan to bring early care and education in Ireland up to the highest international standards by 2020.**

**High quality early care and education matters because it works:**

**For children**

First and foremost, quality care and education in the early years helps children to flourish and make the most of their lives. There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the long-term beneficial effect of quality care and education for young children's development.

**For the economy**

A strong economy depends on people's skills, creativity, motivation and knowledge. Investment in young children has high economic and social returns, because its impact on people's skills and dispositions lasts a lifetime.

**For society**

Quality care and education for young children helps make society fairer through reducing social and economic disadvantage and strengthening equality.

**Early care and education**

By early care and education we mean care and education in children's early years, for children aged 0–6. Early care and education is not limited to any one place or time of the day. Young children develop, learn and are nurtured in many places: in their own homes – with their parents and families – in the homes of their grandparents, other relatives and childminders, and in centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí.

For young children, care and education should be inseparable. From the very start, children's care should be attentive to their capacity for learning and development, while their early education should be based on play and should include a strong focus on social skills and emotional development. Children's need for nurture, caring relationships and learning-through-play extends well beyond their early years.

If you would like more information, or are interested in joining Start Strong, please contact:

Start Strong  
Third Floor  
6/7 Exchange Place  
IFSC  
Dublin 1

Tel: 01 7910100  
Email: [info@startstrong.ie](mailto:info@startstrong.ie)

**[www.startstrong.ie](http://www.startstrong.ie)**

You can sign up for our e-newsletter at [www.startstrong.ie/e-newsletter](http://www.startstrong.ie/e-newsletter).



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Welcome to *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future*, Start Strong's outline of our vision of what children's early care and education in Ireland could be.

Start Strong is committed to advancing high quality care and education for all young children in Ireland. Our advocacy is built on clear evidence of the benefits this brings for children, for the economy and for society.

This report presents a set of recommendations for how Ireland could bring about a step-change in the provision of high quality care and education for young children in the next decade.

In *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future* we have set out 5 key principles:

- Children come first.
- High quality.
- All young children.
- All families.
- Linked services.

All of these need to underpin children's early care and education in Ireland. If we can ensure these are the basis of any Government actions around early care and education, our hope that children born in 2020 will have the quality supports and services they need to give them strong foundations as they start out in life can become the reality.

The next phase of the *Children 2020* project will be putting costs on our recommendations and carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of the package of reforms we are proposing. Goodbody Economic Consultants have already begun this work on our behalf. We have taken the decision to publish our recommendations in advance

of completing a detailed cost-benefit analysis as we believe it is necessary to stimulate a national debate on the future of early childhood care and education.

We could not have completed this work without the generous support of our funders, The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Katharine Howard Foundation and the Irish Youth Foundation. We also could not have reached this stage of our work without the contributions of all those who engaged in our consultation process. We are particularly grateful to Candy Murphy of CMAAdvice Ltd. who facilitated our consultation process and brought together the thoughts and ideas of a wide-ranging group of individuals and organisations. I would also like to thank my fellow board members and those on our Research Advisory Group, who guided the work and supported us in this ambitious project. Finally, thanks to the staff: Ciairín de Buis, Toby Wolfe and Lorraine Whitty, without whom we would not have been able to publish this report.

As a society, we are at a crossroads. Decisions that we take now will make a huge difference to our ability to meet the needs of young children in the future and to lay the foundations for long-term growth and well-being. We call for leadership at national level to recognise the importance of the vision we are presenting and to act on the recommendations.

**Dr Tony Crooks**  
Chairperson  
Start Strong



Over 40 years ago, Robert F. Kennedy stated that ‘...the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play... It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile!’ (University of Kansas, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1968).

In 2010 this quotation is a salient reminder of what is important in life, something which we are in danger of forgetting as we sink further into economic crisis. Yet, while GNP does not allow for the measurement of quality care and education for young children, quality early care and education can contribute to our economic recovery and growth. They are mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive. Throughout our work, Start Strong has highlighted that high quality early care and education matters because it works for children, for the economy and for society.

This report outlines what the future of young children's care and education in Ireland could be. It sets out recommendations for Government, which would move us towards ensuring quality early care and education opportunities are available to all young children and families. We have broken down our recommendations into two categories: immediate actions that require little or no short-term expenditure, and recommendations for plans and commitments that the Government should make for the future.

I would like to echo our Chairperson's comments about those who contributed to the development of our report. We have been heartened by the level of support for the development of a long-term plan for children's early care and education in Ireland. Many people have contributed to our thinking, including national policy-makers, international experts, those working with children,

parents, service-providers, family support-workers and, of course, young children themselves.

We now need to work to ensure that those thoughts and ideas are translated into action. The next stage of our *Children 2020* project is to complete financial costings of our proposals and engage in a cost-benefit analysis. International research shows that there are sound economic arguments for public investment in high quality care and education for young children, to lay the foundations for future economic growth. The next stage of our work will examine how these arguments apply to our proposals.

However, we must not forget that this is about young children, who live in the here and now, and are not young children forever. Early childhood is a very short, very important time, a time of learning, of exploration, of new experiences. We need to ensure that we work for a future where young children will have the very best early childhood possible and the opportunity to grow and achieve the best possible future for themselves.

What we have set out here is ambitious yet achievable, and young children deserve nothing less.

**Ciairín de Buis**

*Director*

**Start Strong**



**Ireland is at a time of change. People are questioning our values as a society, and are asking what our priorities should be in the decade ahead. Start Strong believes that young children must be a priority. They are the future of our society, and their well-being matters right now. Early childhood is a critical period in life, and high quality care and education in early childhood is essential if we are to give young children strong foundations.**

This publication offers both a vision for the future of young children's care and education in Ireland and proposals for immediate actions. We have called it *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future* as our proposals aim to build the quality supports and services that children born in Ireland in 2020 will need to give them a positive start in life. In responding to the current crisis in our economy, we must adopt measures that we know will contribute to the long-term well-being of our society. We believe high quality early care and education should be a priority as there is clear evidence that it brings substantial, long-term benefits for children, for the economy and for society as a whole.

**Investing in young children will lay the foundations for growth in the future, both for the economy – with high economic returns to such investment – and for our children, whose well-being and development must be a central priority in policy-making.**

There has been much progress in the last decade in developing early care and education in Ireland, and families can see the benefits of this. The Free Pre-School Year, which was introduced in January 2010, already has a participation rate of 94%.<sup>1</sup> Parents are voting with their feet, showing they recognise the value of affordable and accessible care and education services for their children.

However, we are still far behind international standards, particularly in ensuring high quality in all services and supports. High quality is essential. To ensure that high quality care and education is available and affordable for all young children and their families is a major challenge. We can't achieve all that we are looking for instantly, but we can start right now by planning for the future.

Our immediate priority, given today's economic climate, must be to preserve the current level of expenditure on services and supports for young children and their families. The progress that has been made in the last decade must not be lost. Looking to the future, plans must be developed now to ensure that policies continue to move in the right direction over the years to come.

### **The care and education of young children in Ireland today**

The last decade has seen the creation of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the introduction of a free pre-school year, the extension of maternity leave entitlements, an increase in the number of places in services for young children, and the introduction of the Síolta quality framework, the Aistear curriculum framework and revised pre-school regulations. These have been important steps forward which we need to build on. Nevertheless, Ireland is still far behind international standards for the care and education of young children:

- In a 2008 'league table' of 25 OECD countries' performance in meeting 10 'minimum standards' for early childhood education and care, UNICEF placed Ireland at the bottom of the league, stating that Ireland then met only 1 of the 10 standards.<sup>2</sup>
- Many of those working with young children remain without formal qualifications, and most childminders are unregulated.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the FETAC level 5 qualification that is becoming standard is well below the graduate-level training that is advocated internationally.
- The cost to families of care and education services



for children up to 3 years old is among the highest in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Some financial support is available to families with low incomes who are able to access a place in a community-based service. Others receive no support.

- In spite of recommendations from the OECD, the Oireachtas, the NESF and the Social Partners, Ireland has no national plan for the development of early childhood services.<sup>5</sup>

## Aims and methodology

This publication marks the end of the first phase of Start Strong's Children 2020 project on a vision for the future of children's early care and education in Ireland. This first phase of the project aimed to develop policy recommendations, on the basis of national and international research evidence and in consultation with stakeholders here in Ireland. In the second phase of the project, we will examine in more detail the costs and benefits of implementing the policies we propose.

Our Children 2020 vision relates to:

- **Young children** from their earliest months to the compulsory school starting-age of 6 years old.
- **All settings** where the care and education of young children takes place, including: their own homes, the homes of relatives and childminders, centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí, and the infant classes of primary schools.
- **A wide range of services and supports**, including services for young children, parenting supports, home visiting, after-school services, and specialist services such as speech and language therapists.

The development of this vision involved:

- **A review of research evidence.** We looked at international research on child development, on early childhood education and care, and on policy effectiveness in services and supports for young children and their families.
- **Analysis of national and international benchmarks and standards.** Our vision draws extensively on reports from the NESF (*Early Childhood Care and Education, 2005*), the OECD (*Starting Strong, 2006*), the European Commission Childcare Network (*Quality Targets in Services for Young Children, 1996*), UNICEF (Report Card 8, 2008) and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (*General Comment No.7, 2005*).
- **A consultation process.** Our consultation involved a wide range of stakeholders. In all, more than 200 people took part in the process, including parents of young children, service providers, academic researchers, Government officials, County Childcare Committees, professional bodies, NGOs and others. We also consulted with children – a series of projects asked children their views on what makes a good service for young children.

We found a striking degree of agreement on a vision for the future and on the key actions to achieve this vision. Our proposals are not only in line with research on what is best for children and with international standards, but also have support from a wide range of stakeholders in Ireland.



## Key principles

The following five key principles are the building blocks that underpin our vision for the future of children's early care and education. They were repeatedly spoken about by participants in our consultation process, and they emerge clearly from the research evidence:

- 1. Children come first.** All children have rights. Children's well-being and development should be the driving force in policies on early care and education.
- 2. High quality.** The quality of young children's experiences in all settings – both in the home and in services outside the home – is critical to their well-being and development. The Government must prioritise quality in services and supports for young children and their families.
- 3. All young children.** All children matter. High quality services and supports should be universal – provided for all children, affordable and accessible – with additional supports for those who need them.
- 4. All families.** Families are central in young children's lives. A wide range of mainstream supports should be readily available to all families.
- 5. Linked services.** Promoting children's well-being and development requires well-coordinated services and supports for young children and their families.

### 1. Children come first

Where care and education in early childhood is of high quality, it can be enormously positive for children. As

the first principle of Síolta – Ireland's national quality framework for early childhood education – states:

'Early childhood, the period from birth to six years, is a significant and unique time in the life of every individual. Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood.'<sup>6</sup>

There is also a large and growing body of research that demonstrates the profound impact that children's experiences in their early years have on their future development, their later success in school and their life-chances. Through its long-term effects, high quality early care and education lays the foundations for a stronger economy and a fairer society (see page 11).

To drive the development of young children's care and education, there needs to be strong leadership at national level. The establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, began the process of integrating 'care' and 'education' at a structural level nationally. Building on the progress made since the creation of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, in our vision there would be a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.

Our vision of a single Government department is in line with a recent report from UNESCO which highlights the importance of integrating caring and learning in the governance of early childhood services.<sup>7</sup> In the interim, the role of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs should be further deepened and developed.



A Government department for children should be responsible for providing leadership in the development of early care and education, for the coordination, regulation and inspection of early care and education services, and also for ensuring sufficient provision in all local areas, achieving quality standards and providing public funds to services and supports, to ensure accessibility, affordability and quality for all young children and their families.

## 2. High Quality

Quality is critical, both in services for young children and in supports for families. Where services and supports are of high quality, the benefits to children are significant. Where services are of poor quality, children can suffer.

In the Síolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework, we have two documents that set out a great deal of our vision. The challenge is to fully

### High quality early care and education also benefits the economy and society

**For a stronger economy.** In 2009, the National Competitiveness Council observed that '[i]nternational evidence suggests that Ireland is under-investing in services for younger children'.<sup>8</sup> Also in 2009, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) argued that quality care and education in early childhood should be a policy priority in the recession as it is 'a good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy'.<sup>9</sup>

In the short-term, public investment in services and supports for young children creates jobs and supports parents' participation in the labour market, boosting incomes and economic growth. In the longer term, it enhances economic productivity, increases financial returns to the Exchequer, and delivers wide social benefits including a better educated society and a lower level of crime.<sup>10</sup> Cost-benefit analyses have consistently shown positive returns on investment, with benefits ranging from 2.5 to 16 times the costs.<sup>11</sup>

**For a fairer society.** Public investment in the care and education of young children can help make society fairer and more equal. Crucially, through the reduction of childcare costs it can increase disposable income within families and is a significant contributor to the reduction of child poverty.

In the longer term, quality early care and education facilitates social mobility and helps to break the intergenerational cycle of social exclusion. By putting in place the right supports at the earliest age, we can transform the life-chances of young children born into situations of disadvantage.

The lack of public investment in children's early care and education in Ireland is also a central cause of inequality between men and women. Only where parental leave is paid and quality care and education services are affordable and accessible do both men and women have a real choice about their participation in employment, education and training and their work-life balance.

Start Strong (2009) *Why Early Care and Education?* Dublin: Start Strong.



implement them in services and to ensure that they are fully embedded in the training of the workforce and in inspections. In our vision, public funds would only go to services that meet quality standards.

The quality of services for young children lies partly in physical characteristics (such as plenty of space, including space for outdoor play, and an environment that is full of opportunities and interest), but above all it lies in the interactions between staff and children. Factors that affect the ability of practitioners to engage responsively and appropriately with young children include their professional training, the ratio of adults to children, the curriculum, and continuity of staff.<sup>12</sup>

### **The professionalisation of the workforce is central to the achievement of high quality.**

Young children need services that are staffed by skilled, motivated and well-qualified practitioners. In our consultation process, many people spoke of the problem that 'caring' is not a valued role in society, that childcare is seen as unskilled work which is usually low-paid. Our vision is that early years practitioners should be recognised as professionals, should have the training, status and development opportunities of professionals, and should be part of a profession with a much greater balance of men and women at all levels.

Anyone working in a professional capacity with young children should have appropriate qualifications that are relevant to early childhood and should be engaged in ongoing professional development. Service leaders should be graduates with a third-level, early years qualification. All those in roles that support the delivery of quality services, including staff in training institutions, inspectors and those in advisory roles, should have relevant early years training.

## **3. All young children**

High quality care and education services should be available and affordable for all young children as all children can benefit. In addition, some children and families need extra supports and services to overcome barriers that they face. Early identification of additional needs and early response to those needs are essential to minimise the long-term negative effects of disadvantage in early childhood. We use the phrase 'universal plus' to call for a combination of:

**'Universal'** – universal services and supports, which are not only accessible to all young children but, through public funding, affordable to all families; and

**'Plus'** – additional supports for those children and families who experience disadvantage or who have additional needs. Additional supports should involve a combination of: lower fee levels for services where fees are charged; additional, targeted supports within universal services; outreach to enable disadvantaged families to access services; and specialist supports such as speech and language therapists on a referral basis.

**Affordability for all.** For all young children to benefit, quality services and supports for young children and their families need to be genuinely affordable. Our vision is that high quality care and education services should be available free for all children, on at least a part-time basis, from the age of 2, because of the compelling evidence of the benefits of such services. This would involve extending the principle of free education – already established in primary schools and now in the Free Pre-School Year – to all 2 year-olds.



In addition, given the reality that many parents work full-time, high quality services outside the free provision should be subsidised, including high quality after-school services. Subsidies should be structured to ensure that all families with young children can afford high quality care and education services.

**Accessibility for all.** Every family with young children should have access to local, quality services and supports that cater for the needs of all children in the community. In achieving provision in every community, we can build on the expansion of childcare places over the last decade, although a move to genuinely affordable services for all young children would lead to a further increase in the demand for places.

High quality services should operate throughout the year, for 48 or more weeks of the year, because continuity of care is an important aspect of quality care and education for young children. Similarly, to fit with the needs of children and families, high quality regulated after-school services should be available for children who are in the infant classes of primary schools.

There should also be diversity of types of provision, to reflect the diverse needs of children and families, and parents should as far as possible have a choice between different types of service.

**Respect for all** In catering for the needs of all children in their local community, mainstream services need to be inclusive, catering for the needs of children from all backgrounds and of all abilities. To be inclusive, services need to reflect many types of diversity – social, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, family-structure and abilities – and they need to be in a position to provide additional supports when required.

Of course there are limits to the ambition of fully inclusive services. There are, for example, some children with disabilities who need specialist supports that cannot always be provided within mainstream services in the local community in a way that meets the best interests of the child. In such cases, linking services together through 'early childhood hubs' (see below) should facilitate the early identification of needs to enable the child and the child's family to access the specialist supports they require.

#### 4. All families

Families are central in young children's lives. A wide range of supports should be readily available to all families with young children, including paid parental leave, family-friendly work arrangements, and information and advice for parents and guardians on how they can best support their children.

**Paid parental leave.** Our vision is that public support should make it possible for children to be primarily cared for at home by a parent or guardian for the first year or more of their lives. Research evidence suggests that children benefit where a parent is enabled to remain at home with a child for the first year through paid parental leave.<sup>13</sup>

The current 6 months' maternity leave should be followed by at least 6 further months of paid parental leave, to ensure a minimum entitlement to 12 months at home. This parental leave needs to be paid if it is to be economically feasible for a parent to remain at home for this critical period. Furthermore, families should not experience a gap between the ending of their entitlement to paid parental leave and the availability of high quality, genuinely affordable services for their children.



**Work-life balance.** Where parents work outside the home, they should have family-friendly work environments which support them to meet the needs of their young children. In addition to entitlements to parental leave and force majeure leave, workers' ability to combine employment with family life is supported by flexible work arrangements such as job-sharing, flexitime, term-time working, and working from home.<sup>14</sup>

**Supports for parents.** Parents increasingly value clear and reliable information and advice on how best to support their young child's development. Information, advice and support on parenting should be universally available and free, to help parents in the first years of their child's life.

Supports should include positive information and advice to help parents' understanding of how children learn and develop, as well as advice on how to promote positive behaviour in children and information on children's health, well-being and safety. Supports should take a variety of forms, including public information, group-based supports in the community (including parenting courses), supported parent-and-toddler groups, public health nurses, and home visiting supports.

## 5. Linked services

Throughout early childhood, young children's care and education are inextricably linked and encompass many aspects of their well-being and development, including their physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, and their early learning and cognitive development. Just as young children's care, learning, health and development are linked, so services and supports for young children and their families need to be linked too.<sup>15</sup>

**Linking care and education.** In Ireland, as in many other countries, there has in the past been a distinction in both practice and policy between 'childcare' on the one hand (aimed at helping working mothers, particularly those with children up to 2 or 3 years old) and early education (aimed at developing school-readiness for children between 3 and 5 years old). We argue instead that all services for young children should be centrally concerned with *both* the care of young children *and* early education.<sup>16</sup>

Our vision is that there should be no divide between services for children under 3 with a care focus and services for children over 3 that focus on early education. From the very start, children's care should be attentive to their capacity for learning and development, while their early education should be based on play and should include a strong focus on social skills and emotional development.

**Early childhood hubs.** The linking together of services and supports for young children and their families needs to extend to a wide range of supports, to ensure that services and supports work together effectively and efficiently. We propose the development of 'early childhood hubs', which would involve using existing resources differently, rather than creating new organisations.

'Early childhood hubs' would link together services for young children with supports for children's families. They would link supports for young children's care, learning, health and development, and they would link services outside the home with supports for families in the home. Early childhood hubs would involve both close working relationships between providers of services and supports, and accessible points of contact, information

and referral for families. They could link together a wide range of services and supports, including:

- Care and education services for young children.
- Advice and information for parents.
- Parent-and-toddler groups.
- Parenting programmes.
- Resources such as toy libraries.
- In-service training for early years practitioners.
- Support and training networks for childminders.
- Specialist supports on a referral basis.
- Outreach to facilitate access to services.
- Wider supports for adults including employment supports and adult education.

We envisage that early childhood hubs would build on the work already done at local level by organisations such as Family Resource Centres and at county level by Children's Services Committees and County and City Childcare Committees.

**Linking pre-school services and schools.** Making a successful transition to school is crucial for every child's future education. Achieving successful transitions is only partly about helping children to be 'ready for school' – above all, it is about changing schools so that they are 'ready for young children'. In many European countries young children do not begin formal school until the age of 6 or 7, and attend early care and education services before this. In Ireland, where most children begin school at 4 or 5 years old, the leap for young children into primary school can be enormous.

In our vision, the infant classes of primary schools would be supported to become more like early years settings, with a real sense of continuity for young children as they make transitions from pre-school services into schools.

There are already moves in this direction, with the Aistear curriculum framework (which applies to the full age-range from 0 to 6) increasingly informing curriculum and practice within the infant classes of primary schools.<sup>17</sup>

### **A manifesto for growth**

We here present a manifesto for investing in the growing child and for investing in the future growth of the economy. We recognise that our vision is ambitious, but it is achievable. Actions are needed now to ensure that we hold on to what we have achieved so far and continue moving in the right direction.

The actions we summarise here make good sense in a recession and are essential if we are to lay the foundations now for the smart economy of the future. Start Strong urges the Government to commit to developing high quality, affordable and accessible services and supports for all young children in Ireland by 2020.

**1. Children come first.** Young children are valued members of society and bearers of rights – and they are the future of our society and our economy.

### **Immediate actions for the Government:**

- Make no further budget cuts to services and supports for young children and their families, to ensure the progress of recent years is not lost.
- Make a commitment in the forthcoming National Children's Strategy to develop a national plan for young children's care and education.
- Hold a children's rights referendum to provide a firm constitutional basis for the recognition of children's rights.



### **In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:**

- Develop and implement an ambitious 10-year national plan for young children's care and education.
- Steadily increase public investment in early childhood services and supports, moving Ireland progressively towards European and UNICEF targets of 1% of GDP.
- Create a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.

**2. High quality.** Services and supports for young children and their families must be of high quality if children's early care and education is to have the positive impact – for children, the economy and society – that research on child development has demonstrated.

### **Immediate actions for the Government:**

- Ensure public funding for early care and education services is linked to a sufficient level of compliance with all statutory requirements, including (where relevant) the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No.2) Regulations, 2006*.
- Fulfil the commitment already made to make all inspection reports publicly available, by publishing them on the internet.
- Introduce compulsory notification to the HSE for all paid childminders, bringing them within the scope of the statutory inspection process.
- Introduce regulations for after-school services.

### **In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:**

- Build on the excellent frameworks provided by Sólta and Aistear by developing a detailed plan for their full implementation.

- Achieve substantial progress towards a fully professional workforce in services for young children, with ambitious targets for the proportion of staff qualified to tertiary level, with plans to ensure that all paid childminders have appropriate qualifications, and with plans to provide relevant early years training to inspectors, to those in advisory roles and to staff in training institutions.
- Amend the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations* to require all early care and education services to have – or have access to – outdoor play areas.

**3. All young children.** Quality services and supports for young children and their families should be universally available, part of the framework of public services available to all members of society, with additional supports for those who need them.

### **Immediate actions for the Government:**

- Align the school starting-age with the age for starting the Free Pre-School Year, so that all children can access the scheme, regardless of their date of birth.
- Make no budget cuts in relation to special needs assistants, to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream services.

### **In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:**

- Extend the entitlement to free provision that began with the Free Pre-School Year to a second, earlier year, to at least 48 weeks of the year, and to at least 3.5 hours per day, in line with the recommendations made by the NESF.
- Introduce a subsidy for hours outside the free provision, with a tiered fee-structure that reflects parents' ability-to-pay.





- Provide for young children with additional support needs in inclusive mainstream services, when this is in the child's best interests. Additional needs should be identified early, and supports provided in response.
- Ensure adequate provision of high quality, subsidised and regulated after-school services.

**4. All families.** Supports for parents and families need to be universally available.

#### **Immediate actions for the Government:**

- Carry out an awareness-raising campaign to inform parents of the benefits of quality early care and education for all children, including the value of parenting supports.
- Implement the requirements of the new EU directive on parental leave.

#### **In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:**

- Provide parenting supports locally and free of charge for all parents and guardians of young children, as well as for others who provide informal care for young children, such as grandparents and other relatives.
- Expand the provision of the public health nurse service and home visiting programmes. It should be made possible for any family to receive quality support in the home in a child's first years in relation to children's health and development, relationships, early learning, safety, parenting styles, and the early identification of additional needs.
- Incrementally introduce payment for parental leave so that paid leave is available for the critical first 12 months for every child.
- Introduce legislation to provide for at least 2 weeks' paid paternity leave for fathers.
- Strengthen work-life balance, for example through

a right to flexible working arrangements for parents with young children.

**5. Linked services.** Young children's care, learning, health and development are inextricably linked, so services and supports for young children and their families need to be linked too.

#### **Immediate actions for the Government:**

- Commission research on early childhood hubs. This could be done through existing research funds, and possibly accessing philanthropic funding.
- Establish an innovation fund to support the design and implementation of a small number of early childhood hubs as demonstration programmes, to explore how best to implement hubs at local level, making maximum use of existing resources.
- Assist primary schools and local pre-school services to cooperate in programmes to facilitate the transition of pre-school children into schools.

#### **In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:**

- Roll-out a national programme for the development of early childhood hubs, following evaluation of initial models.
- Support primary schools to more fully meet the needs of children in infant classes, e.g. by amending adult-child ratios to match those for 4-5 year olds in other early years settings, revising the infant level of the primary school curriculum to bring it fully into line with Aistear, and facilitating lead teachers in the infant classes of primary schools to gain relevant training in early childhood education.









**‘If we set out a vision for early childhood care and education committed to meeting the developmental needs of each child in the State, then we have to move from that to setting a policy objective. I think the policy objective increasingly has to be that we aim towards building a national early childhood provision, recognising it as the last frontier in the lifelong learning continuum in the State. It is really the only place that we haven’t in any cohesive way addressed the essential learning needs of the population. And this is of course amazing because the rationale for it is so overpowering!’**

*Prof. Tom Collins, Professor of Education, Acting President, NUI Maynooth, speaking on 24th June 2010 at Start Strong’s ‘Children 2020’ national consultation meeting.*

The central message of our *Children 2020* report is that policy-makers must take a long-term view. In responding to the current crisis in our economy, it is vital that policy-makers adopt measures that we know will contribute to the long-term well-being and prosperity of our society. The provision of high quality care and education for all young children must be central to reform plans as there is clear evidence of substantial, long-term benefits of quality early care and education for children, for the economy and for society as a whole.

This publication offers a vision for the future of young children’s care and education in Ireland, and we propose steps to help build the ‘national early childhood provision’ described by Prof. Tom Collins in the consultation process that led to the writing of this report – including actions that we can take right now. We have called it ‘Children 2020’ in the hope that all children born in Ireland in 2020 will have the quality supports and services they need to give them strong foundations as they start out in life.

**Investing in young children will lay the foundations for growth in the future, both for the economy – with high economic returns to such investment – and for our children, whose well-being and development must be a central priority in policy-making.**

There has been much progress in the last decade in developing early care and education in Ireland, and families can see the benefits of this. The Free Pre-School Year, which was introduced in January 2010, already has a participation rate of 94%.<sup>18</sup> Parents are voting with their feet, showing they recognise the value of affordable and

accessible care and education services for their children.

However, we are still far behind international standards, particularly in ensuring high quality in all services and supports. High quality is essential. To ensure that high quality care and education is available and affordable for all young children and their families is a major challenge. We can’t achieve all that we are looking for instantly, but we can start right now by planning for the future.

In our Manifesto for Growth, we propose a series of actions that will help us move towards our ‘Children 2020’ vision, including actions that can be taken right now at no or little cost. Our immediate priority, given today’s economic climate, must be to preserve the current level of expenditure on services and supports for young children and their families. The progress that has been made in the last decade must not be lost. Looking to the future, plans must be developed now to ensure that policies continue to move in the right direction over the years to come.

### **Aims of the project**

This publication marks the end of the first phase of *Start Strong’s Children 2020* project on a vision for the future of children’s early care and education in Ireland. This first phase of the project aimed to develop policy recommendations, on the basis of national and international research evidence and in consultation with stakeholders here in Ireland. In the second phase of the project, we will examine in more detail the costs and benefits of implementing the policies we propose.



Specifically, the aims of this first phase of the project were:

- *To develop policy recommendations, both short and long-term, for costing and cost-benefit analysis in the second phase of the project.* At any time, but especially when public finances are in such difficulty, it is essential that policy decisions are taken in the light of economic analysis, so a driving force behind this project was the desire to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of policy proposals for the future of early care and education in Ireland.

Recent years have seen significant policy developments in relation to early childhood care and education in Ireland. In particular, the *Síolta* quality framework and the *Aistear* curriculum framework offer great potential for the raising of quality standards in services for young children provided their roll-out is sufficiently resourced. Most recently, the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year has established pre-school education as a public service and changed public expectations in regard to this, as well as partially accomplishing one of the core recommendations of the 2005 NESF report. There is a need now to reflect on early childhood care and education in Ireland today (see page 24) and to identify the next steps forward.

- *To examine international evidence on high quality care and education.* We wanted to draw together the research evidence on early childhood development to examine its implications for Government policies. We found growing agreement among researchers on the importance of early childhood and on the policies needed for a high quality national system of early childhood provision.
- *To hear the views of stakeholders in Ireland and*

*stimulate debate about the direction of Government policies for young children.* While 'childcare' was high on the political agenda in Ireland a few years ago, it has since largely dropped off the agenda, largely of course because of the primary political focus on responding to the banking crisis, unemployment and the state of the public finances. However, young children's rights and needs have not changed, nor has the economic case for investing in young children. Indeed, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) argued in 2009 that quality care and education in early childhood should be a policy priority in the recession.<sup>19</sup> We found a great deal of consensus among stakeholders on the future direction of early care and education policy in Ireland, and strong convergence between this consensus and the research evidence. It is of vital importance for our future – including our economic future – that children's early care and education moves higher up the political agenda.

## Scope of the project

**The young child.** Our focus is on young children from their earliest months to the compulsory school starting-age of 6 years old. Any age cut-off is more or less arbitrary – there are continuities at all ages. But our focus on the age from 0 to 6 has the benefits of fitting not only with the *Síolta* national quality framework and *Aistear* curriculum framework for early childhood in Ireland, as well as with international conventions, but also with what – our consultation process indicates – is many people's intuitive understanding of 'young children' and 'early childhood'.

Our vision involves an integrated understanding of children's early care and education. A large and growing body of research evidence shows that young children's care and their early education are inextricably linked



and encompass many aspects of their well-being and development, including their physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, and their early learning and cognitive development. In children's early years especially, all these facets of young children's lives are interconnected.

Our vision also reflects the diversity of children and families. Research evidence suggests, for example, that most children do best when they are at home with a parent or guardian in their first year, and that most children who are 2 or older benefit from quality care and education services outside the home, but these findings do not apply to every child, and the points of transition are not fixed. The right time for a parent to return to work or for a child to start in a service outside the home varies from child to child, and there is no fixed point at which all children become 'ready for school'. What matters is that a framework of supportive policies is in place that meets children's rights and needs.

**In all settings** Our vision relates to *all* the settings where the care and education of young children takes place: their own homes – with their parents and families – the homes of their grandparents, other relatives and childminders, centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí, and the infant classes of primary schools. Our vision relates to a wide range of services and supports, including: both centre-based and home-based care and education services for young children, child development and health supports, financial and parenting supports for families, as well as facilities such as playgrounds and outdoor spaces within the community. Our vision for children's early years is at its heart an integrated vision of how all these services and supports can work together to enhance young children's lives.

The fundamental policy question relating to children's early care and education is *not* the question of whether young children should be looked after *either* by their parents in their own homes *or* in services outside the home. Both matter, and both can make a hugely positive difference to young children's lives. Rather, the fundamental question is how we as a society can best help young children and their families through the services and supports we make available. Services and supports can help parents in the home, and they can also help young children directly through high quality care and education outside the home.

The home environment is crucial for all children, whether those children also attend crèches, playschools, childminders, or whether they are exclusively cared for at home during the day by their family. The family is the child's first educator, and the home environment is crucially important for children's well-being and life-chances. This report therefore talks a lot about the supports that could help give parents and families the resources and information they need to provide a caring, stimulating, safe and supportive home environment in which young children can start their lives.

Much of this report also deals with services and supports outside the home. This is a reflection of what we now know from the research evidence: high quality care and education services in early childhood can have a profound and long-lasting positive impact on children's well-being and life-chances. It is also a reflection of the reality that many children in Ireland do spend much of their early childhood in a range of services outside the home while their parents are in employment.

As was concluded in the comprehensive overview of child development research, published by the US National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*:

'Policies and programs aimed at improving the life chances of young children come in many varieties. Some are home based and others are delivered in centers. Some focus on children alone or in groups, and others work primarily with parents ... They all share a belief that early childhood development is susceptible to environmental influences and that wise public investments in young children can increase the odds of favorable developmental outcomes. The scientific evidence resoundingly supports these premises'.<sup>20</sup>

## How we developed the vision

The development of this vision involved a review of research evidence, analysis of national and international benchmarks and standards, and a consultation process:

- **A review of research evidence.** We looked at international research on child development, on early childhood education and care, and on policy effectiveness in services and supports for young children and their families. The box on pages 34 summarises research on the benefits of quality early care and education for the economy and for society. Other research findings appear throughout the report, and are cited in the references at the end.
- **Analysis of national and international benchmarks and standards.** Our vision draws extensively on a series of recent national and international reports that set out standards and benchmarks for children's early care and education. Our vision reflects the recommendations of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) as well as of UNICEF, the OECD and the European Commission Childcare Network. In Appendix 1 we have included summaries of key national and international reports, among which there is a great deal of consensus on policy priorities for early childhood.
- **A consultation process.** Our consultation involved a wide range of stakeholders. In all, more than 200 people took part in the process, including parents of young children, service providers, academic researchers, Government officials, County Childcare Committees, professional bodies, NGOs and others. The process also included consultation with children. A series of projects was designed to elicit children's views on what makes a good service for young children. Appendix 3 provides more detail on the consultation process.

We found a striking degree of agreement on a vision for the future and on the key actions to achieve this vision. The vision we set out is not just Start Strong's vision – it is also in line with research on what is best for children and with international standards, and has support from a wide range of stakeholders in Ireland.

## Key principles

The following five key principles are the building blocks that underpin our vision for the future of children's



early care and education. They were repeatedly spoken about by participants in our consultation process, and they emerge clearly from the research evidence. In the following five sections of the report, we take each of these five principles in turn and describe how our vision builds on the principles:

- 1. Children come first.** All children have rights. Children's well-being and development should be the driving force in policies on early care and education.
- 2. High quality.** The quality of young children's experiences in all settings – both in the home and in services outside the home – is critical to their well-being and development. The Government must prioritise quality in services and supports for young children and their families.
- 3. All young children.** All children matter. High quality services and supports should be universal – provided for all children, affordable and accessible – with additional supports for those who need them.
- 4. All families.** Families are central in young children's lives. A wide range of mainstream supports should be readily available to all families.
- 5. Linked services.** Promoting children's well-being and development requires well-coordinated services and supports for young children and their families.

## Children's early care and education in Ireland today

### *Children aged 0 – 6*

Out of a total population of 4.5 million, there are approximately 410,000 children in Ireland aged between 0 and 6. The number of children in the age group has been rising steadily in recent years. There were 74,000 births in 2009, compared with 54,000 in 2000.<sup>21</sup>

### *Governance*

There has been rapid development of policy and provision in Ireland over the last 15 years, but there is no national plan for early childhood care and education, in spite of recommendations from the OECD, the Oireachtas, the NESF and the Social Partners.<sup>22</sup> A national quality framework (Síolta, 2006), a curriculum framework (Aistear, 2009) and Equality and Diversity Guidelines (2006) were all introduced in recent years, and their implementation is now beginning. The publication of a Workforce Development Plan for services for young children is expected soon.

At a policy level, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), which was established in 2005, is responsible for early care and education services. The OMCYA is part of the Department of Health and Children, but relevant units from other departments are 'co-located' within the OMCYA, including the Early Years Education Policy Unit, which is part of the Department of Education and Skills.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) is responsible for the inspection of early care and education services in relation to pre-school regulations, which were broadened in 2006 to include a focus on children's learning and development.<sup>23</sup> The Family Support Agency, which provides supports to families, operates under



the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, which also has responsibility for parental leave legislation. The training of early years practitioners is the responsibility of a diverse range of institutions, including FÁS (the national training and employment authority), local Vocational Education Committees, as well as Institutes of Technology.

At local level, City and County Childcare Committees were established in 2001 to support the development of early care and education services. They offer supports to service providers, as well as information to parents. Their role in supporting services is complemented by the activities of a number of Voluntary Childcare Organisations. In a number of counties, Children's Services Committees were recently established to promote the integration of services for children.

There is a general lack of data on the care and education of young children in Ireland. Until very recently there was no national system, with data only gathered on specific funding programmes. With the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, returns are now made to the OMCYA by all participating services, which accounts for nearly all services. However, only limited data has been made publicly available to date.

#### *Public investment*

The recent OECD report, *Doing Better for Children*, notes that expenditure in Ireland on young children (aged 0-6) amounts to 20% of public expenditure on children, compared to 37% on the 'middle years' of childhood (6-12) and 44% on the later years (12-18).<sup>24</sup> However, most of the early years expenditure is on the infant classes of primary schools and Child Benefit. Public expenditure on early care and education services outside the infant classes is only a small fraction of this.

Public spending on the early years peaked between 2006 and 2008 as a result of the Early Childcare Supplement, which was a cash payment to all parents with children under the age of 6. The Government phased out the supplement during 2009 and replaced it in 2010 by a Free Pre-School Year, at around one-third of the cost. The other two main public spending programmes of the last decade – the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) – primarily funded (a) capital investment to increase the number of childcare places, and (b) current spending to subsidise places for disadvantaged children in community-managed services.

#### *Quality*

There is a lack of published data on the quality of provision. Inspection reports are not published, in spite of a commitment made by the Government in the *Towards 2016* social partnership agreement.<sup>25</sup> There is also no definitive, published data on the workforce.

A survey of centre-based services carried out during preparation of the *Workforce Development Plan* indicated a total workforce of around 20,000. Of those in the survey, 61% had achieved qualifications at Level 5 or above on the National Framework of Qualifications, and 9% had third-level qualifications (Level 7), though a proportion of third-level qualifications were unrelated to early childhood care and education.<sup>26</sup>

Until the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in January 2010, there were no requirements on the level of qualifications of staff in services. The Free Pre-School Year is now phasing in a requirement, but at a low level, and only in relation to leaders in the pre-school year. From 2012 there will be a requirement that those staff have a qualification at level 5 on the National Framework





## of Qualifications.

Adult/child ratios specified in regulations range from 1:3 for children under 1 year old to 1:8 for children over 3 in full-time day-care and 1:10 in sessional services. Childminders may not look after more than 5 pre-school children including their own, nor more than 2 children who are less than 15 months old. Department of Education figures indicate the average adult/child ratio in primary schools (including infant classes) is 1:16, with an average class size of 25, though in some schools the ratio can be 1:30 or higher.<sup>27</sup>

A large proportion of childminders are unqualified and unregulated, as there is no requirement for childminders to notify the HSE if they are caring for 3 or fewer children. There is also no regulation of after-school / school-age childcare services.

### *Provision of services for young children*

The majority of pre-school children are cared for during the working day by family members. Official survey data from 2007 indicates that 64% are cared for by a parent or guardian and 13% by another relative. 19% attend a centre-based service (though this figure may have risen since the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in 2010) and 12% have a childminder.<sup>28</sup> Although the compulsory school starting-age is 6, nearly half of 4 year olds and almost all 5 year olds attend primary school.<sup>29</sup>

There is a severe shortage of after-school provision, and out of school hours the large majority of primary school children are cared for by a parent or guardian. Only 3% of primary school children attend an after-school facility, and 7% a childminder.<sup>30</sup>

There is a mixed economy of provision in services for young children, with most services privately run, some community-based (particularly in disadvantaged areas), and a large but unknown number of self-employed childminders. There are approximately 4,500 centre-based services, of which around 900 are community-managed, with nearly all others private. The Early Start scheme offers a year's pre-school in 40 primary schools.

The use of centre-based services rose significantly between 2002 and 2007 (from 14% to 24% of households with pre-school children<sup>31</sup>), which may be a result of the rapid rise in the number of childcare places during that period – made possible by Government capital investment – as well as the rising participation of women in the labour market. Since then, the Free Pre-School Year has increased attendance in services among 3 and 4 year olds, but vacancy rates in services have also risen, because of the recession.<sup>32</sup>

There is no data on the proportion of children with special needs in early care and education services, nor of the proportion of children from migrant backgrounds.

### *Affordability*

Costs of early care and education services for families in Ireland are among the highest in EU and OECD countries, because of the low level of public subsidy. According to the CSO, 60% of households in Ireland say they do not have access to high quality, affordable childcare in their community.<sup>33</sup> Recent figures from the National Children's Nurseries Association indicate the average cost of a full-time day-care place is €168 per week, while the average cost of a sessional place (3 to 3.5 hours per day) is €75 per week.<sup>34</sup>

Figures from the OECD show that for a typical dual-earner family seeking full-day care for two children, aged 2 and 3, the cost amounts to 29% of the family's net income in Ireland, compared to an OECD average of 13%. For a one-parent family earning two-thirds of the average wage, with two pre-school children, early care and education costs 52% of the family's net income in Ireland, compared to an OECD average of 12%.<sup>35</sup>

The Free Pre-School Year reduces costs to parents for a single year immediately before school entry, but it only provides up to 15 free hours per week, and it provides no financial assistance for the care and education of younger children (up to 3 or 4 years old). The Community Childcare Subvention Scheme provides financial assistance to some parents on social welfare or low incomes, but only if they can access a place at a community-based service that operates the scheme. Direct income supports also help parents with the cost of early care and education services, though their purposes are much broader. The main income support is Child Benefit, which in late 2010 provided €150 per month per child (€187 for the third and subsequent children). From 2006 until it was phased out in 2009, the Early Childcare Supplement also assisted parents of young children with the cost of childcare, at its peak providing €92 per month.

### *Supports for families and children*

The entitlement to maternity leave has been extended in the last decade, and there is now 26 weeks of paid leave available, followed by 16 weeks of unpaid leave. The statutory rate of payment has a limit of €270 per week, though some employers top this up.

Each parent is entitled to 14 weeks of unpaid parental leave, to be taken before a child is 8 years old. Surveys suggest that the take-up of parental leave in Ireland is low (approximately 20%) with a particularly low rate among men, the primary barrier to take-up being financial.<sup>36</sup> Many employers have introduced work-life balance policies, especially in the public sector, but there is no legal right to flexible work or to request flexible work. There is also no statutory provision for paternity leave.

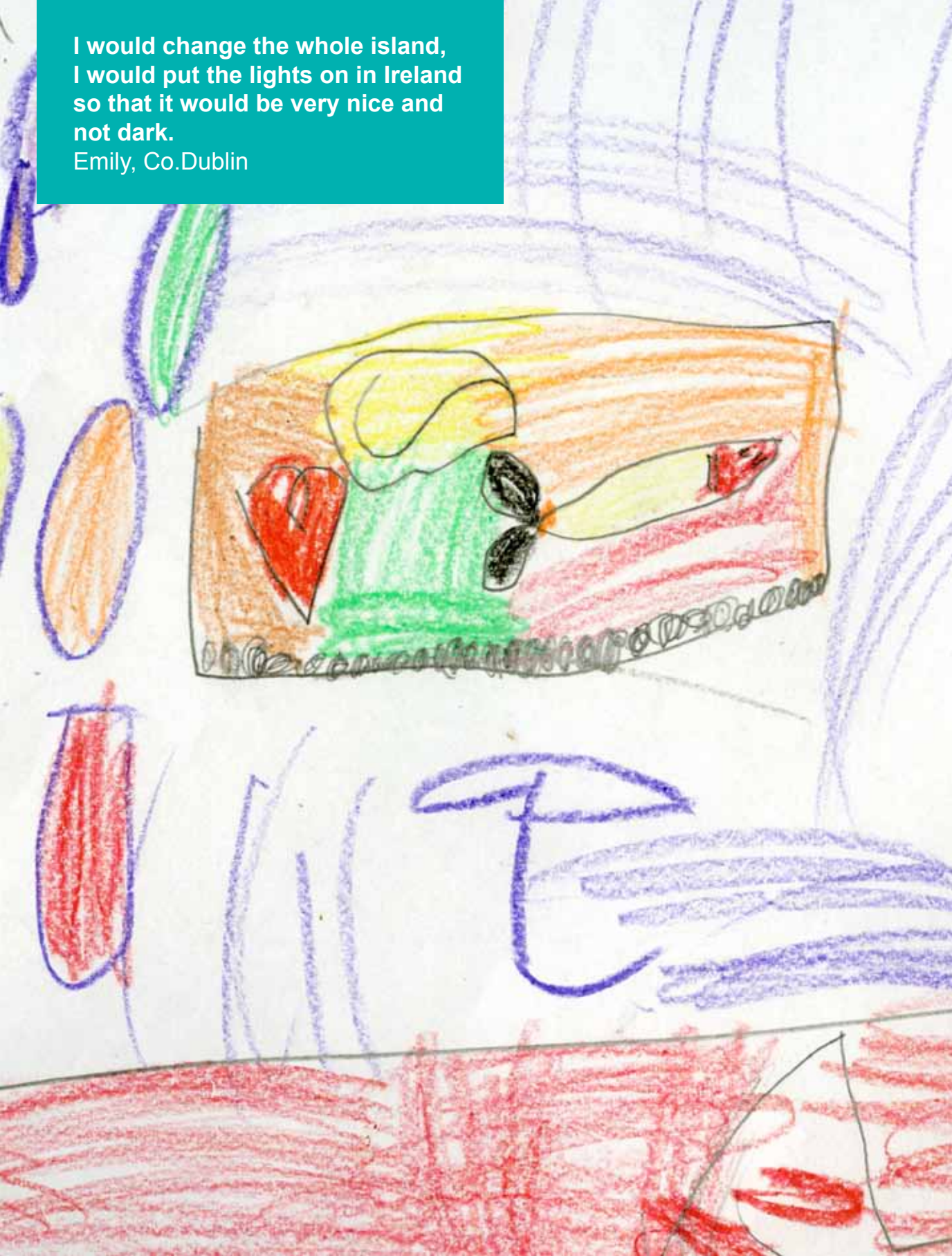
A range of organisations provide parenting supports at local level, including many community and voluntary organisations, as well as the HSE in some areas (e.g. though the Community Mothers Programme).

A number of initiatives at local level have attempted to foster the integration of services. In particular, the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme, with funding from the OMCYA and The Atlantic Philanthropies, supports pilot programmes in three disadvantaged areas of Dublin: Ballymun (youngballymun), Tallaght West (Childhood Development Initiative) and the Dublin 17 area of north Dublin (Preparing for Life). (See Appendix 2).



I would change the whole island,  
I would put the lights on in Ireland  
so that it would be very nice and  
not dark.

Emily, Co.Dublin







## 1. Children come first

**Young children's rights and needs are at the centre of our vision – and children's rights require the provision of high quality services and supports for young children and their families. High quality care and education in children's early years can have a huge impact on their later education and life chances, and it can thereby lay the foundations for a stronger economy and a fairer society in the future (see page 34). But children's early years matter not only because young children will grow into adults in the future. All children have rights and should be valued members of society today. Care, learning, supports and opportunities matter for each child's well-being here and now.**

Our vision is that children's well-being and development should be the driving force in policies on children's early care and education. Recent years have seen progress in raising awareness of both children's rights and the importance of early childhood, motivated in part by a growing body of research among developmental psychologists, economists, sociologists and others. There is also growing recognition among policy-makers of the value of prevention and early intervention. In Ireland, the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in 2010 involved explicit recognition by policy-makers that advancing young children's care and education is an important policy aim in its own right, not just as a means to increase the labour market participation of women.<sup>37</sup>

If we are to put children first, we also have to support families and communities, so that they in turn can support children's well-being and development. Children must be seen in context. Families and neighbourhoods are hugely important for children, and children's development is also strongly affected by wider contexts such as the culture and values of society as a whole.<sup>38</sup>

At a political level, we need strong national leadership on children's issues, to ensure that children's interests are at the centre of policy-making. Our vision is that there should be a full Government Minister for Children to give this leadership and to drive the development of young children's care and education in Ireland.

### Children's rights

All children – including the very youngest children – have rights. The vision we set out in this report is rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which, in Article 18.2, states that:

'States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.'

In this report, we outline some of the policies that are needed if Ireland is to secure the rights of young children, as described by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: 'For the exercise of their rights, young children have particular requirements for physical nurturance, emotional care and sensitive guidance, as well as for time and space for social play, exploration and learning. These requirements can best be planned for within a framework of laws, policies and programmes for early childhood, including a plan for implementation and independent monitoring.'<sup>39</sup>

Of course it is not only the child whose interests must be considered. Families, communities and the practitioners who work with children are all of central importance in the vision we set out in this report. Indeed, we believe that the interests of children, their families

and practitioners are closely intertwined. Policies that relate to young children must fit with the realities of family life and parents' working lives if those policies are to succeed. And it is only if those who work with young children have the status and working conditions of professionals that children will be treated with the skill and attention they need. In Appendix 1, we summarise the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to implementing the rights of young children. Fundamentally, the driving force behind policies on children's early care and education should be the interests – and rights – of the child.

### Children's well-being

Early childhood is a critically important period in our lives. Children's early years are important not just because of their impact on how children develop into adults, but also as a valuable time in itself. It is both children's 'well-becoming' and their 'well-being' that matter. Young children need to be valued as members of society right here and now. This is not just an abstract concept – it has real implications for early years practice. It means for example that even the very youngest children should be respected as individuals who can and should be allowed to have some control over the daily lives and to be active participants in their own learning and development.<sup>40</sup>

As the first principle of the Síolta quality framework states:

'Early childhood, the period from birth to six years, is a significant and unique time in the life of every individual. Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood. As with every other phase in life, positive supports and adequate resources are necessary to make the most of this period. Provision of such supports and resources should not be conditional on the expectations of the economy, society or other interests.'

*Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, Principle 1.*

Children's well-being encompasses both 'positive' and 'negative' dimensions.<sup>41</sup> Positive dimensions include children's happiness, fun, sense of identity, and the relationships children have with family members, friends and others. Negative dimensions include the avoidance of illness, injury and malnutrition, non-discrimination, and child protection issues.

Children's well-being is hard to measure, particularly positive dimensions, and it is hard to make reliable assessments of young children's own subjective sense of well-being, particularly for those who are too young to talk. But that does not make their well-being any less important, nor any less relevant to early years practitioners or to Government policy decisions.





## Children's development

The earliest life experiences are critical in the development of the human brain and in forming the skills and dispositions that are essential if children are to have firm foundations on which they can build their lives and make the most of their subsequent education.<sup>42</sup> International research has demonstrated that quality early care and education brings a wide range of benefits for children's well-being and for their social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and language development.<sup>43</sup>

Large-scale surveys of young children in England and Northern Ireland<sup>44</sup> have found that attendance in quality early care and education settings is beneficial for both:

- Social/behavioural outcomes, with less anti-social behaviour and better self-regulation; and
- Academic outcomes, with greater literacy and numeracy skills.

Research has shown that the developmental benefits gained by children are long-lasting and have a far-reaching social impact. Studies in the US have tracked children's development into adulthood. They have found that the immediate benefits of early care and education result in further benefits later in life, including:

- Higher levels of educational attainment.
- Higher earnings levels.
- Health improvements.

The benefits to children of quality care and education in their early years are both widespread and long-lasting. Recent research in the UK has shown that, while the benefits are greatest for disadvantaged children, all children benefit.<sup>45</sup> Research in the US has shown that adults aged 40 who received quality care and education in their early years had significantly higher educational attainment, a much higher earnings level, and were much less likely to have been arrested for crimes, than those who did not receive quality early care and education.<sup>46</sup>

## The seeds of growth

Summarising recent research on child development, Professor James Heckman – the Nobel prize-winning economist – concludes that:

'A large body of research in social science, psychology and neuroscience shows that skill begets skill; that learning begets learning. The earlier the seed is planted and watered, the faster and larger it grows.'

*James Heckman (2006) Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children is an Economically Efficient Policy, Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development.*



## Leadership on children's issues

To drive the development of young children's care and education, there needs to be strong leadership at national level. The establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs began the process of integrating 'care' and 'education' at a structural level nationally. Building on the progress made since the creation of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, in our vision there would be a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.

A Government department for children should be responsible for providing leadership in the development of early care and education, for the coordination, regulation and inspection of early care and education services, and also for ensuring sufficient provision in all local areas, achieving quality standards and providing public funds to services and supports. We need strong national leadership on children's issues to ensure that the principles that are central to the vision we set out here – children's rights, high quality, accessibility and affordability – are at the centre of policy-making on children's early care and education.

While national leadership and structures are critical, leadership on children's issues must also extend to other levels of administration. Overall responsibility for policy is of course at national level, but implementation should be managed at local level. What matters here is less the precise body chosen for this role, than the principle of decentralisation and the inclusion in local structures of specialist staff with expertise in early childhood services. Our vision is that staff involved in local management, as well as the staff involved in the inspection of services, should form part of a career development ladder within a professionalised early years workforce, to help ensure that there is expertise on and commitment to young children's issues at all levels.

**I would like there to be rocket ships  
and do lots of painting.**  
Tomas, Co. Waterford



## High quality care and education also benefits the economy and society

### For a stronger economy

Public investment in services for young children and supports for their families is a sound investment with high economic and social returns.

- In the short-term, it creates jobs and supports parents' participation in the labour market, boosting incomes and economy growth.
- In the longer term, research evidence shows that it enhances economic productivity, increases financial returns to the Exchequer, and delivers wide social benefits including a better educated society and a lower level of crime.<sup>47</sup>

Public investment in young children is particularly important in a recession, as it lays the foundations for a strong economy in the future. A 2009 report from the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) argued that quality care and education in early childhood should be a policy priority in the recession as it is 'a good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy'.<sup>48</sup> Also in 2009, the National Competitiveness Council observed that '[i]nternational evidence suggests that Ireland is under-investing in services for younger children'. Referring to the effects of quality care and education on educational attainment and productivity in the economy, the National Competitiveness Council argued that: 'While this is a time of considerable difficulty in the public finances, the case for targeting expenditure where returns are greatest remains strong'.<sup>49</sup>

The impact on children's development is long-lasting. Research projects that have been tracking the impact of quality care and education programmes for young children since the 1960s and 1970s now demonstrate that the positive impact lasts for decades.<sup>50</sup> This means that, while many of the economic returns to investments in young children only come in the long term, they are increasingly large the longer is our time-horizon.

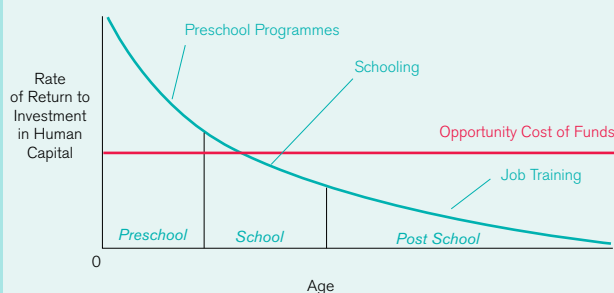
In addition, the effects on children have wider social and economic benefits. Studies have demonstrated benefits for parents, for society as a whole and for subsequent generations. An immediate effect of supporting care and education for young children is increased participation of women in the labour market, which reduces child poverty and thereby has a positive effect on children's development, and which also serves to increase economic growth and tax revenues. Longer-term benefits of quality care and education have been shown to include:

- A more productive workforce, resulting in faster economic growth, higher tax revenues and reduced welfare payments for the Government.
- Reduced levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, with lower criminal justice costs and lower costs of crime for victims.
- Reduced costs further up the education system, through reducing the need for additional supports for children and adults who fall behind, and reduced health-care costs.
- Inter-generational benefits, as those who benefit from quality early care and education may in turn provide a more supportive environment for their own children.

Many of these benefits involve financial returns to the Government – such as higher tax revenues, lower welfare payments and lower expenditure on criminal justice – which directly offset the cost of Government investment in early care and education. Even when the public finances are as stretched as they are in the current economic climate, children's early care and education is readily justified as a form of public investment that will repay itself in future.

Economists view education as an investment in human capital. Research on child development has shown that investment in pre-school care and education produces a higher rate of return than investment later on in the education system (see chart). This is because the early development of skills makes later skill acquisition easier, and because prevention and intervention in the early years are more effective and more cost-effective than remedial approaches to addressing behavioural and learning difficulties.<sup>51</sup> A recent OECD review of policies for positive child outcomes argued that 'Investment needs to rise during the "Dora the Explorer" years of early childhood relative to the "Facebook" years of later childhood'.<sup>52</sup>

Rates of Return to Human Capital Investment  
Initially Setting Investment to be Equal Across all Ages



Economic cost-benefit analysis provides a strong rationale for quality early care and education. Economic analyses have consistently shown positive returns on investment, with benefits ranging from 2.5 to 16 times the costs.<sup>53</sup>

The returns to investment are not just benefits for the individual child; they are benefits for society as a whole. Given the large social returns or 'externalities', the market on its own does not result in a sufficient level of investment. In addition, the returns to investment depend on the care and education being of high quality. Where the Government is not involved, there are real challenges in ensuring high quality care and education for all: parents may not be aware of the benefits of quality, nor of how to judge quality services, and many parents cannot afford to pay for them.



These 'market failures' create a need for the regulation of standards, supports for quality and for upskilling the early care and education workforce, and public funding to make quality care and education services affordable. Following a survey of international research, the OECD concluded that there is 'an overwhelming case for strong government investment in early childhood services'.<sup>54</sup>

While there are many good rationales for high quality early childhood education and care, it is particularly important to examine the economic rationale in the current economic climate. Start Strong has therefore commissioned economic consultants to carry out cost-benefit analysis of children's early care and education in an Irish context, in an attempt to put a value on the costs and benefits of implementing the policy proposals set out in this report.

## **For a fairer society**

Public investment in the care and education of young children can also help make society fairer and more equal through reducing child poverty, enhancing social mobility, and strengthening equality between men and women.

***Reducing child poverty.*** Crucially, public investment in care and education can reduce child poverty rapidly through reducing the cost to families of childcare. Child poverty has a damaging impact on children's development and opportunities.<sup>55</sup> The Government has set as a long-term goal that 'every child should grow up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, to nurture and care for the child, and foster the child's development and full and equal participation in society'.<sup>56</sup> Where subsidised through public funds, early care and education services help reduce child poverty through improving children's long-term life-chances and, in the short term, through lowering the barrier to employment for parents looking for work.<sup>57</sup>

The cost of childcare is higher in Ireland than almost every other country in Europe and is a large barrier to employment for many parents, particularly lone parents. Typical costs in Ireland amount to 35% of the net income of a dual-earner family with two young children where each parent earns two-thirds of the average wage, and more than 50% of the net income of a lone parent who earns two-thirds of the average wage.<sup>58</sup> The high cost of early care and education services is one of the central reasons for the high child poverty rate in Ireland – 6.3% of children lived in 'consistent poverty' in 2008, compared to 3.9% of adults of working age.<sup>59</sup>

**Enhancing social mobility.** In the longer term, quality early care and education facilitates social mobility and helps to break the intergenerational cycle of social exclusion. By putting in place the right supports at the earliest age, we can transform the life-chances of young children born into situations of disadvantage.

Recent research in Ireland has shown that 'social class background and parental education are significantly associated with a range of educational outcomes among young people in Ireland, including reading and mathematics performance, grades achieved in State examinations, and how long young people remain in the educational system'.<sup>60</sup> This has major consequences for young people's life chances, which are particularly negative for those who leave school early.

Actions aimed at breaking the cycle of social exclusion are most effective if they start before children reach school-age.<sup>61</sup> Prevention and early intervention strategies include early care and education services as well as supports for children and families in the home. A recent Oireachtas report identified early childhood care and education as one of the main educational supports to combat early school leaving.<sup>62</sup>

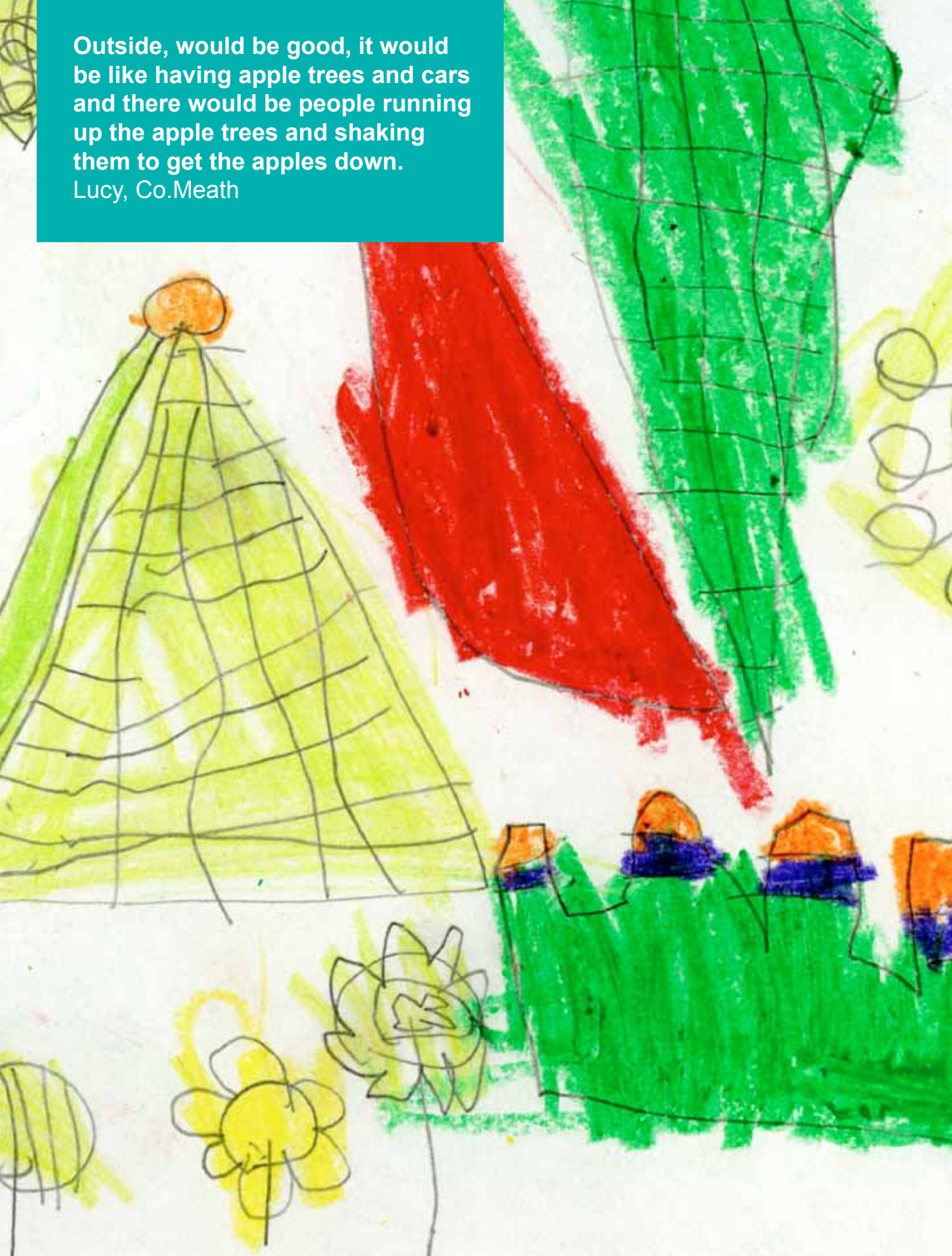
**Strengthening equality between men and women.** The lack of public investment in children's early care and education in Ireland is also a central cause of inequality between men and women. Only where parental leave is paid and quality care and education services are affordable and accessible do both men and women have a real choice about their participation in employment, education and training and their work-life balance.<sup>63</sup>

Where these are not in place, many women's choices are constrained, and the birth of children results in many women taking extended career breaks who – if the right policies and quality services were in place – could choose to return more quickly to employment, education or training.<sup>64</sup> This lack of meaningful choice limits many women's career prospects and participation in public life and is also a key factor in explaining the large gender wage gap in Ireland.<sup>65</sup>





Outside, would be good, it would  
be like having apple trees and cars  
and there would be people running  
up the apple trees and shaking  
them to get the apples down.  
Lucy, Co.Meath







## 2. High quality

**Our vision is that services and supports for young children and their families should be of high quality, affordable, universally available and integrated. Above all, we regard quality as of paramount importance.**

The quality of young children's experiences in all settings – both in the home and in services outside the home – is critical to their well-being and development. Services and supports for young children and their families must be of high quality if children's early care and education is to have the positive impact – for children, the economy and society – that research on child development has demonstrated. Where services are of sufficiently high quality, they can have a transformative effect on children's well-being, development and life-chances, and through that impact they can bring wider benefits for the economy and for society. Where they are of poor quality, children can suffer.

Young children need experiences that are positive, stimulating, rich in language, full of opportunities, and safe. At the core, the quality of children's experiences lies in the interactions between children and the adults around them, whether those adults are their parents or guardians, their grandparents or other relatives, their childminders, early years practitioners in crèches and pre-schools, or school-teachers.

Care and education services outside the home need to be of high quality, with professional, responsive and caring staff, stimulating environments and an educational curriculum. But parents too need supports – including parenting supports and home visiting – and those supports must be of high quality. Our vision also questions some of the boundaries between supports for families in the home and services for young children outside the home. Not only have some of the most successful programmes for young children combined high quality services outside the home with home visiting supports,<sup>66</sup>

but a feature of some of the best services is a high level of parental involvement. For parental involvement to be more than tokenistic requires a significant re-thinking of what services for young children are like.

### Aspects of quality

The essential feature that all services for young children should share is high quality. The research evidence overwhelmingly identifies quality as central in achieving positive outcomes for young children.<sup>67</sup> Quality matters both in services for young children and in supports for families such as parenting supports. In services for young children, the evidence suggests that there is a 'quality threshold'.<sup>68</sup> Where quality is above the threshold, the benefits to children are significant. Where quality is poor, not only are the benefits minimal but children can suffer.<sup>69</sup>

Quality in services for young children has many different dimensions. These are often characterised as either 'structural' or 'process' features of quality. Structural features include high adult-child ratios, plenty of space for each child including outdoor space, and a high proportion of qualified practitioners – features which can clearly be adjusted through policy decisions. Process features relate to the daily experience of children within the services, and the interactions between staff and children – features which are harder to control but which can be positively influenced through the professional development of staff and the introduction of curricula into services.



## Features of quality in early care and education services

The evidence shows that early care and education only has strong developmental benefits where it is of sufficient quality. According to a recent review of international research, the following aspects of quality within services 'are most important for enhancing children's development:

- Adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available
- Well-trained staff who are committed to their work with children
- Facilities that are safe and sanitary and accessible to parents
- Ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact appropriately with children
- Supervision that maintains consistency
- Staff development that ensures continuity, stability and improving quality
- A developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, those we spoke to in our consultation process pointed to many features of early care and education services that meet the needs of the whole child, including:

- Young children having opportunities to make choices about their own activities and immediate environment and to make discoveries for themselves. In our vision, young children would be active participants in their own care and education.

- A central role for play, with a combination of child-led and adult-led play, and with lots of opportunities for outdoor activity, including exploration of nature and the local environment.<sup>71</sup>
- Settings that are attractive, comfortable, homely and fun – not just safe – and in which young children are able to take risks: running, jumping, climbing, splashing, exploring. In our consultation process, we heard many people saying that insurance fears have driven services in Ireland to be overly risk-averse, and that this trend needs to be changed.
- Continuity for children in the adults around them, which is essential for young children to develop positive and trusting relationships. Continuity is helped by practices such as key-workers, high adult-child ratios, and low staff turnover.
- Support for parents to engage with and participate in services regularly, breaking down some of the boundaries between home and services outside the home.
- A strong emphasis on respect for diversity, including diversity in children's social and ethnic backgrounds and in their physical abilities, and also diversity in the workforce, including a much larger proportion of men in the workforce.



Research evidence shows that the most important aspect of quality lies in the interactions between staff and children. The quality of a child's early experiences depends above all on responsive interaction and communication with adults who are attentive to the child. As the Síolta quality framework states, 'Positive relationships, which are secure, responsive and respectful and which provide consistency and continuity over time, are the cornerstone of the child's well-being'.<sup>72</sup>

High adult-child ratios help – being in small groups helps all young children as high ratios allow adults to be more responsive to each individual child. But it is more than numbers that matter. It is the nature of the interactions between adult and child that is key, for 5 year olds as much as for newborn infants. Factors that affect the ability of practitioners to engage responsively and appropriately with young children include their professional training, the curriculum, and continuity of staff.<sup>73</sup>

In our vision, parents would also be actively involved in the early care and education services that their children participate in. Services' doors would be open to parents, parents would be encouraged to take part in activities, and there would be regular and open communication

between parents and practitioners within the services. A partnership approach between parents and practitioners is not only good practice,<sup>74</sup> but it was expressed by children who took part in our consultation with children as one of the things they would most like to see change within their services. In a variety of ways, many children told us that they wanted to break down the boundaries between home and playschool. Achieving this requires not only changes to practices within services, but also stronger work-life balance policies in the workplace to make it easier for parents to participate in their children's services regularly, even when working full-time.

It was emphasised by many participants in our consultation process that, in the Síolta quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework (see box), we now have two documents that set out a great deal of what we would want to see in quality services. The challenge lies in their full implementation and in adequately resourcing their roll-out and monitoring.



## Síolta and Aistear

**Síolta** is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, covering the age-range 0 to 6. Published in 2006, the framework was developed by a multi-stakeholder group under the leadership of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. Drawing on international experience, the framework is specifically geared for use in an Irish context.

It includes a series of 'principles' and 'standards' for all aspects of quality in services for young children. A series of user manuals assist services to know how to implement the principles and standards and specifically aim at different types of service: full and part-time daycare, sessional services, childminding, and infant classes of primary schools.

The implementation of Síolta began recently, though resources are limited. Services that receive public funding are required to adhere to the principles of Síolta, and to this end are invited to participate in awareness-raising activities. A small number of services are receiving more intensive support. A self-assessment system is being developed, but this is separate from the HSE inspection process.

**Aistear** is Ireland's curriculum framework for children from 0 to 6. It was published in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Like Síolta, its development involved multiple stakeholders, drew on international research, and was specifically developed for an Irish context. Aistear is intended both for parents and practitioners, and can be used in a wide range of settings, including children's own homes, childminders, centre-based care and education services, and the infant classes of primary schools.

Aistear is specifically concerned with children's early learning and development. It includes a series of 'themes' and 'principles', as well as a wide range of practice examples that give suggestions on how the themes and principles might be applied in different settings. Aistear is a framework, rather than a curriculum, and is compatible with a range of different curriculums. The NCCA is currently planning a process of revising the infant level of the primary school curriculum, to bring it into line with Aistear.

As with Síolta, the impact of Aistear will depend on the degree to which individual services receive intensive support in implementing the framework.



## A professional workforce

'Quality early childhood practice is built upon the unique role of the adult. The competencies, qualifications, dispositions and experience of adults, in addition to their capacity to reflect upon their role, are essential in supporting and ensuring quality experiences for each child. This demanding and central role in the life of the young child needs to be appropriately resourced, supported and valued.'

*Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, Principle 9.*

The professionalisation of the workforce is central to the achievement of high quality. Given the evidence on the impact of early years services, young children need services that are staffed by skilled, motivated and well-qualified practitioners.

There has been progress in recent years, but much of the workforce remains unqualified or with a low level of qualifications.<sup>75</sup> In our consultation process, many people spoke of the problem that 'caring' is not a valued role in society, that childcare is seen as unskilled work which is usually low-paid. 'Childcare' has in the past been seen –

and often still is seen – as unskilled work that could be done by anybody (or at least by any woman), as simply a matter of 'minding' young children. We now understand that children's early years are critically important, that quality is essential, and that providing a quality service for young children is skilled work.

Our vision is that early years practitioners should be recognised as professionals, should have the training, status and development opportunities of professionals, and should be part of a profession with a much greater balance of men and women at all levels. The importance of this issue is seen in the research evidence that high quality adult-child interactions are most consistently found where practitioners are highly qualified, and where wages are sufficiently high to reduce staff turnover to a low level.<sup>76</sup> Those working in the care and education of young children should:

- Have appropriate training and qualifications, relevant to early childhood, the attainment of which should require both a theoretical understanding of early childhood care and education and an extended period of monitored practical experience.
- Be required, in order to retain their professional status, to take part in on-going professional development.
- Have the status, wages and working conditions that go along with being a professional, both to retain qualified and experienced practitioners within the

profession, and to ensure that practitioners have the time for preparation and for in-service training.

- Have career development opportunities. Those in supervisory and advisory positions at local and national levels should have experience as practitioners and relevant professional expertise.

Our vision is that anyone working in a professional capacity with young children should have relevant qualifications, and that service leaders should be graduates with a third-level, early years qualification. All those in roles that support the delivery of quality services, including staff in training institutions, inspectors and those in advisory roles, should have relevant early years training and qualifications. Regulated childminders should participate in supported childminder networks that provide peer support and on-going professional development.

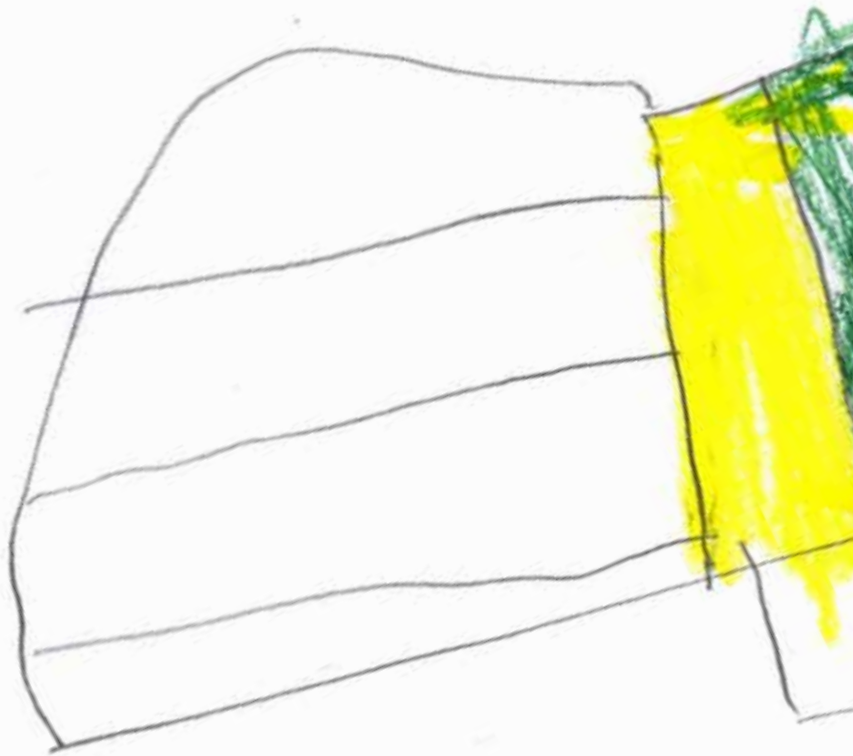
A vital feature of a fully professional workforce will be respect and recognition for diversity within training and practice, to support children from all backgrounds – social, ethnic, cultural, family structure, etc. – to feel a sense of belonging.

A significant proportion of practitioners should be men – and here we are talking of those practitioners who work directly with children, not just managerial grades. This is important for children, but it is also important for society, as part of a process of revaluing the 'caring' professions, and strengthening the professional development of the sector.

To achieve professionalisation requires a radical change in the way that 'childcare workers' are perceived within society. Such a change is possible. In New Zealand, for example, the decision was taken to call such workers 'teachers' and to seek parity with primary school teachers in qualifications, pay and social esteem. While the process is not yet complete, New Zealand has succeeded in going a long way down this road (see page 89 below). There are also significant parallels with the nursing profession, which in recent decades has gone through a process of professionalisation comparable to that which we envisage for early years practitioners. Some of those we spoke to in our consultation process felt that we need an even wider social change, one in which there is a radical revaluation of caring roles within society – with a higher social value placed on caring and on the caring professions. What we can say for certain is that change is essential if early years practitioners are to be valued as a profession, and that change is possible.



**My pre-school is in a rocket with  
lights and buttons. There is loads  
of food you can eat with aliens.**  
Joan, Co.Kilkenny







### 3. All young children

**‘Equality ... is a fundamental characteristic of quality early childhood care and education provision. It is a critical prerequisite for supporting the optimal development of all children in Ireland. It requires that the individual needs and abilities of each child are recognised and supported from birth towards the realisation of her/his unique potential. This means that all children should be able to gain access to, participate in, and benefit from early years services on an equal basis.’** *Síolta National Quality Framework, Principle 5.*

All children matter. High quality care and education services should be available and affordable for all young children as all children can benefit. Our vision is that high quality care and education in early childhood should support all children to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background.

Services and supports for young children and their families should be part of the framework of universal supports available to all members of society, alongside primary and secondary education, and health-care. Public investment in early childhood services should not be exclusively, or even primarily, for working mothers or disadvantaged families – it should be for all young children. This universality applies both to supports for parents – such as paid parental leave, work-life balance policies and parenting supports – as well as to services for young children.

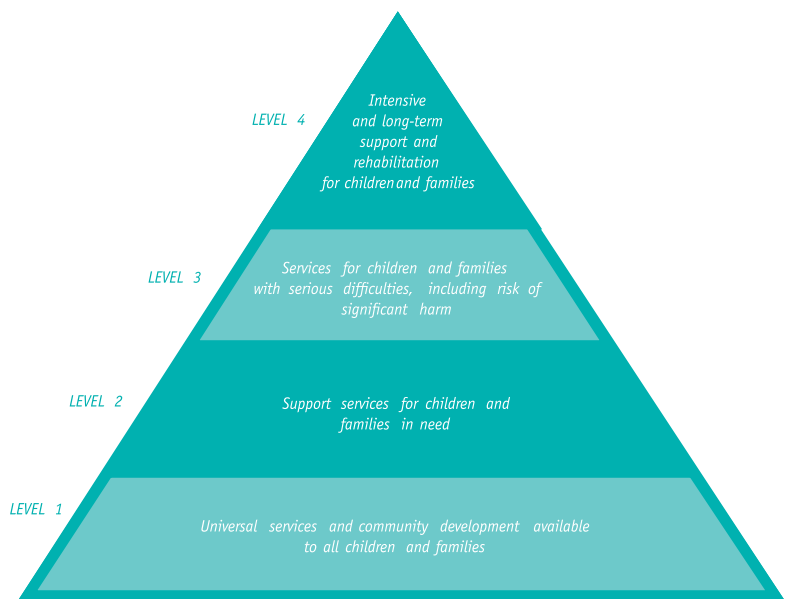
Of course, some children and families need extra supports and services to overcome barriers that they face. Early identification of additional needs and early response to those needs are essential to minimise the long-term negative effects of disadvantage in early childhood. But our vision is that additional supports – targeted at those with additional needs – should be provided on top of a strong base of universal supports.

#### **Services that are ‘universal plus’**

The research evidence shows that, while the benefits are greatest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, all children benefit from high quality care and education in early childhood.<sup>77</sup> From a children's rights perspective, therefore, our vision is therefore that high quality services and supports should be affordable and accessible to *all* children. Additional benefits of universal provision are that it is an effective means of reaching those who experience disadvantage, given the difficulty of identifying and reaching all disadvantaged children through targeted approaches, and that it helps to ensure quality for all, avoiding the risk of a two-tier system.<sup>78</sup> There is also evidence that young children do best when they are in services with a mix of children from different social backgrounds, which universal provision helps to achieve.<sup>79</sup>

In line with the Síolta equality principle quoted above, our vision is that the availability and funding of services should be structured to ensure that all children have access to, participate in and benefit from quality early care and education on an equal basis. There was widespread agreement in our consultation process that we will only achieve equality when early childhood services are what we here term ‘universal plus’.<sup>80</sup> We use this phrase to call for a combination of:





**‘Universal’** – universal services and supports, which are not only accessible to all young children but, through public funding, affordable to all families; and

**‘Plus’** – additional supports for those children and families who experience disadvantage or who have additional needs, to help them to overcome their disadvantage and to benefit equally from the universal services that are available to them.

Additional supports should involve a combination of:

- Lower fee levels for services (where fees are charged) for those with lower incomes.
- Additional, targeted supports within universal services. For example, some children with disabilities require special needs assistants within mainstream services.
- Outreach to enable disadvantaged families to access services.
- Specialist supports such as speech and language therapists on a referral basis.

This vision of early childhood services fits the model of services in the *Agenda for Children’s Services*, as illustrated in the following diagram which draws on the Hardiker model.<sup>81</sup> In our vision, both early care and education services for young children and parenting supports for parents of young children would form part of Level 1 in the diagram. More intensive parenting supports – such as long-term home visiting – as well as outreach and referral to specialist services would form part of Level 2.

Some of the key ‘universal’ features of our vision – available to all – support parenting in the home, including: paid parental leave to enable all children to remain at home for at least 12 months; work-life balance policies to allow parents to play a stronger role in the care and education of their young children; and parenting supports for all families. Calling for early childhood services and supports to be ‘universal’ does not mean that all children should be in a crèche from an early age – indeed, some parents will continue to choose to care for their children at home until the compulsory school starting-age.

At the same time, if all services for young children were of high quality and affordable, and parents were aware of the clear benefits for their children, we believe that most parents would want their children to take part in them, at least part-time, regardless of whether the parents themselves were at work or at home. The high take-up (94%) of the Free Pre-School Year in its first full year of operation is evidence of this – parents are voting with their feet, showing they recognise the value of affordable and accessible care and education services for their children.<sup>82</sup>

## The role of Government

We will only achieve the universal provision of high quality services and supports for *all* young children and their families if the Government plays a strong role. The Government must ensure that services and supports are of high quality, affordable and accessible to all. Calling for ‘public’ investment and for a strong Government role does not mean that services for young children need be owned



or managed by the State. There is some international evidence to suggest that the highest standards in early care and education systems are achieved through direct public provision,<sup>83</sup> and many of those we spoke to in our consultation process believe we should move in this direction. However, public investment in early childhood care and education is compatible with a mixed economy of provision.

The achievement of high quality in services and supports nevertheless requires that there should be strong public involvement:

- The Government should directly fund services, to place it in a strong position to ensure the quality of provision.
- The Government should ensure affordability for all, preventing the development of a two-tier system of services.
- As is already the case, public authorities should be responsible for coordination, regulation and inspection of services and supports, and for ensuring that parents are well-informed about the services and supports that are available to them.
- There should be active engagement by parents and the community in the management and daily life of services for young children.

In the justification for extensive public investment, there is a strong analogy between early childhood care and education and the primary and secondary levels of education. Indeed, we believe that the policies embodied in our vision of the future of early care and education could have as transformative effect on Irish society and the Irish economy as did the introduction of free

secondary education in 1967 when Donogh O'Malley was Minister for Education. Building on the expansion in Ireland in recent decades in primary, secondary and tertiary education, early childhood services and supports are the next frontier in the expansion of education and lifelong learning in Ireland, as Professor Tom Collins stated at our national consultation meeting (quoted on p.20 above).<sup>84</sup>

### **Affordability for all**

For all young children to benefit, quality services and supports for young children and their families need to be genuinely affordable. Our vision is that high quality care and education services should be available free for all children, on at least a part-time basis, from the age of 2, because of the compelling evidence of the benefits of such services. This would involve extending the principle of free education – already established in primary schools and now in the Free Pre-School Year – to an earlier year. The primary purpose of this change would be to enable children to gain the large benefits of high quality care and education services, rather than to facilitate parents' employment. Indeed, if services were of sufficient quality, affordability and accessibility, we would expect most parents to avail of them even where a parent remains at home.

Research evidence suggests that from the age of about 2 onwards children do better in high quality care and education services than they do if they remain at home full-time. The large-scale EPPE study in the UK concluded that:

'The duration of attendance is important with every month of pre-school experience after age 2 years linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability.'<sup>85</sup>

In addition, given the reality that many parents work full-time or wish to do so, high quality care and education services outside the free provision should be subsidised, including high quality after-school services. Subsidies should be structured to ensure that all families can afford high quality early care and education for their children. Subsidies should also be structured to ensure that parents are not deterred from seeking employment by the cost of services – such support is essential if we are to combat child poverty, which is so harmful to children's well-being and life-chances.

Whereas the cost to families of childcare in Ireland is currently among the highest in the EU, in our vision the parental contribution should be brought down to at most the EU average<sup>86</sup> and should vary according to the family's financial situation, so that those on low incomes or social welfare payments pay less than those on higher incomes.

Financial supports for young children and their families also include Child Benefit and other direct income supports. A wide range of policy measures are important in combating child poverty,<sup>87</sup> but income supports for families with young children, particularly families with low incomes, play an essential role.

## **Accessibility for all**

Every family with young children should have access to local, quality services and supports that cater for the needs of all children in the community. There should be quality, affordable services in every community in the country, and those services should provide for all children, regardless of their background, their abilities or their needs.

The importance of accessibility for all and of respect for the diversity of children and their families derives from the children's rights perspective that underpins our vision. If the starting-point in the design and delivery of early childhood services is the rights of the child, then no child should be excluded from the services that are available, and each child's background must be respected, with services that support each child's confidence and sense of belonging and that meet each child's needs.

In achieving provision in every local community, we can build on the expansion of childcare places over the last decade, although a move to genuinely affordable services for all young children would lead to a further increase in the demand for places.

While there is no doubt that such demand can be met given sufficient time and resources, particular challenges will remain in rural areas, especially more remote or sparsely populated areas, as the provision of high quality centre-based services requires a minimum number of children in order to be sustainable. In addition, it is not desirable that families should have to drive young children long distances in order to access services,



**What about the playgroup is made out of ice-cream with sprinkles and strawberry sauce and if we eat it, it just grows more back forever?**  
Cathal, Co.Sligo

and distant services are an impossibility for families without private transport. Regardless, no child should be denied access to quality services. The solution to this challenge involves a combination of outreach services and high quality childminding with qualified, regulated childminders. Outreach services might include the provision of home visits and parenting supports from an 'early childhood hub' (see page 64 below) in the nearest town.<sup>88</sup>

In our vision, high quality services would operate throughout the year, for 48 or more weeks of the year,<sup>89</sup> because continuity of care is an important aspect of quality care and education for young children. Similarly, to fit with the needs of children and families, high quality regulated after-school services should be available for children who are in the infant classes of primary schools. If services are not available year-round and full-time, many parents have no choice but to juggle multiple childcare arrangements – which is not always in a child's best interests and can be costly to families – or to withdraw from the labour market and remove their children from early care and education services.

Up to this point, we have emphasised the shared features that should be common to all services. However, there should also be diversity of types of provision, to reflect the diverse needs of children and families. Parents should as far as possible have a choice between different types of services, so that they can best meet their own child's needs.

## **Respect for all**

In catering for the needs of all young children within their local community, mainstream services need to be inclusive, welcoming and supportive for children of all abilities and all backgrounds – ethnic, cultural, social, family, etc. The full integration of all children in the local community into mainstream services has profound implications for the character of services and for the training of practitioners. In particular, it would require that all practitioners have respect for diversity and know how to provide for the meaningful integration of all children and how to promote equality within services.<sup>90</sup> Inclusive services would also involve diversity in the type of people who are in the workforce, who should include a significant proportion of men and of workers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, so that children of all backgrounds feel welcome within services and see role-models around them.

When we say that early childhood services should be inclusive services, we are talking about diversity in all its forms. Examples of diversity and of how we might respond to it include:

- **Social diversity.** The universal provision of services for all young children in the community should aim to foster a mix of children from different social backgrounds, given the evidence on the benefits for young children of a social mix within early childhood services.<sup>91</sup> While it is hard to achieve social diversity in practice, given social segregation in housing, it is important to design policies that help contribute to it.





- **Ethnic diversity.** In our vision, Traveller children, children from other ethnic minorities and children from migrant backgrounds should be integrated in local mainstream services for young children. Integration implies much more than mere accommodation of children from ethnic minorities. Integration implies that services themselves should model respect for diversity and non-discrimination in their practice, ensuring for example that children's diverse backgrounds are fully reflected in their surroundings (such as the pictures on the walls), in the materials (such as books) which they use, and in their daily activities.<sup>92</sup>
- **Linguistic diversity.** Early childhood services should give additional language support to young children who speak a different language at home, and services should be available for families who speak Irish at home or want their children to attend Irish-language services.
- **Diversity of family structures.** In our vision, diversity of family structure would be acknowledged and respected in settings through policies, practice, imagery and materials. The fact that children come from a variety of family structures, including same-sex parents and parents parenting alone, would be clearly visible in settings.
- **Diversity of abilities.** Young children with disabilities should as far as possible participate in local, mainstream services. The challenge here lies not in helping children with disabilities to fit in, but in changing services for young children so that they can meet the needs of every child. In some cases, the changes to services require physical access or additional equipment or extra staff, but often the central change required is in the professional training of early years practitioners, to ensure that all practitioners have the know-how and confidence to work with children with disabilities and the knowledge of where to turn for specialist support when it is needed.

Of course there are limits to the ambition of fully inclusive services. There are, for example, some children with disabilities who need specialist supports that cannot always be provided within mainstream services in the local community in a way that meets the best interests of the child.<sup>93</sup> In such cases, linking services together through 'early childhood hubs' (see page 64 below) should facilitate the early identification of needs to enable the child and the child's family to access the specialist supports they require.



I like hugging my brother cos he is  
my brother. I give mum and dad a  
hug as well.

Jack, South Co.Dublin





## 4. All families

**Families are central in young children's lives. The value of the home and family life for children is recognised by all, and recent research has confirmed the central importance of the home environment for young children's well-being and development.<sup>94</sup>**

Our vision is that a wide range of supports should be readily available to all families with young children, given the evidence that well-designed supports can bring a wide range of positive benefits for young children. Of relevance are not only parental leave, family-friendly work arrangements and child income supports, but also information and advice for parents and guardians on how they can best support their children.

Our vision of supports for families includes a particular focus on fathers. While there is a gradual cultural shift to a greater caring role for fathers, it is a slow process. Public supports – such as payment for parental leave or a legal right to flexible working arrangements<sup>95</sup> – can rapidly change workplace expectations and make it easier for the many fathers who wish to play a greater role in the care of young children but are constrained from doing so.

### **Paid parental leave**

Our vision is that public support should make it possible for children to be primarily cared for at home by a parent or guardian for the first year or more of their lives. Research evidence suggests that children benefit where a parent is enabled to remain at home with a child for the first year through paid parental leave.<sup>96</sup> It is essential that this parental leave is paid if it is to be economically feasible for a parent to remain at home for this critical period.

To achieve this, the current provision of 6 months' maternity leave should be followed by at least 6 further months of paid parental leave, to ensure a minimum entitlement to 12 months at home for each child. In our consultation process, we heard differing views as to how much leave should be available: some felt the total

should be 18 months, some 24, others that 12 might be sufficient.

Whatever approach is taken, families should not experience a gap between the ending of their entitlement to paid parental leave and the availability of high quality, genuinely affordable services for their children. This is necessary to minimise the likelihood of parents using unregulated services in a child's second year, to ensure that children do not have to move from one service to another within a year, and to make the return to employment affordable for parents. Above all, parents should not have to resort to services of lower or unknown quality.

Both parents should be supported to play an active role in parenting.<sup>97</sup> In our consultation process, there were also differing views as to what proportion of parental leave should be reserved for fathers, and what proportion might be transferable between parents. Many people spoke of the importance of positive measures to enable fathers to take a more active parenting role and to change the workplace culture in which it is still seen as unacceptable for men to take up parental leave and work-life balance measures.

### **Work-life balance**

Where parents work outside the home, they should have family-friendly work environments which support them to meet the needs of their young children. Strong work-life balance policies are a help to parents, but above all they are good for children.

Throughout their early years and beyond, whether their parents are working or not, positive outcomes for children



continue to depend crucially on their relationships and experiences in their home. In addition to entitlements to parental leave and force majeure leave, workers' ability to combine employment with family life is supported by flexible work arrangements such as job-sharing, flexitime, term-time working, and working from home.<sup>98</sup> Such arrangements are particularly important for very young children (such as those under two years old), as there is evidence to suggest that long hours in centre-based services can have a negative impact on some very young children.<sup>99</sup>

Our vision is that work-life balance policies should be equally available and equally used by both parents. The principle of equality that is central to our vision would extend not just to young children, but to all those who care for them, both in the home and in services outside the home. This is important not just as an equality issue in its own right,<sup>100</sup> but also because young children learn so much from the environments they are in and the role-models around them.

There have been shifts in recent decades in the roles of mothers and fathers in Ireland, but large inequalities still exist. A recent ESRI study of time-use data concludes that there remains 'a relatively traditional (and unequal) gender division of labour in Ireland compared to other European countries, in spite of some significant changes'. While continuing inequality partly reflects the slow pace at which cultural change often occurs, it also reflects barriers to change that can be removed by policy decisions. As the ESRI study notes, 'cross-national research suggests that employment policies, such as the regulation of working hours and the length and eligibility conditions for parental leave, can influence the extent and division of unpaid work'.<sup>101</sup>

One of the most significant barriers that prevents change in caring roles within the home is the vicious circle in which it doesn't pay mothers of young children to return to employment because of the high cost of childcare, as a result of which mothers are set back in their careers or abandon their careers altogether, so that it makes even less economic sense to change the family division of roles as children get older.<sup>102</sup> A step-change in the affordability of care and education for young children combined with a longer period of protected parental leave could break this vicious circle by making the return to employment affordable for mothers. The result could be a significant shift in the balance of employment and caring responsibilities between mothers and fathers.

Such a shift would also depend on a change in the workplace culture for men, to avoid the risk of women working a 'double shift' – both working outside the home and doing most of the caring in the home. A change in men's workplace culture could also be accelerated through removing policy-related barriers to men's caring roles. For example, many fathers who would like to take up more active parenting roles are constrained by expectations within the workplace that men should not take up work-life balance opportunities. Such expectations can be changed by altering incentives, for instance by providing payment for fathers' parental leave.<sup>103</sup>

The following elements of our vision, outlined elsewhere in this report, would all help contribute to a re-balancing of caring roles:

- A period of paid paternity leave at the time of birth.
- Genuinely affordable services for young children.
- Paid parental leave for both parents.
- Stronger work-life balance policies that are available





equally to both mothers and fathers, including a right to flexible work for parents with young children.

### **Supports for parents**

Parents increasingly value clear and reliable information and advice on how best to support their young child's development. Research evidence shows that children's home environment is crucially important for children's development, and that what matters is not who parents are, but what they do.<sup>104</sup> Parenting supports can therefore be of value to all parents and young children. Our vision is that information, advice and support on parenting should be universally available and free, to help parents in the first years of their child's life.

From a child's first days, he or she is learning. Indeed, right from their earliest weeks and months children start to develop the crucial dispositions that shape their ability to learn at an older age – dispositions such as curiosity about the world around them, confidence in themselves, and persistence. Right from the start, children benefit where those who care for them – typically their parents in the first months – understand not just how to 'care', but also how young children learn and develop, and understand how adults can help them in this, particularly through talking to them and engaging with them responsively.<sup>105</sup>

Supports include information and advice to help parents' understanding of how children learn and develop, as well as advice on how to promote positive behaviour in children and information on children's health, well-being and safety. They include, for example, suggestions on

how to play with young children interactively, and advice on the value of talking with and reading to even the very youngest children (see box). Supports can take a variety of forms, including:

- Public health nurses who can not only support a child's health and development, but also offer parents information and advice on parenting skills and early learning, and share information on other services and resources for parents and young children.
- Public information and awareness-raising campaigns.
- Group-based supports in the community, including parenting courses, with information and advice on how parents can best support their child's development and learning.
- Parent-and-toddler groups, particularly where they have professional support from early years practitioners and are welcoming to both mothers and fathers.
- Home visiting supports, where parents and young children need additional support in the home.
- Access to assessment and referral services, with early identification of any health or developmental issues that need additional support.

Of course, parenting supports should not be compulsory, but they should be resources that are readily available to all parents to help in the complex and demanding activities that being a parent involves. They should be relevant to all parents in all their diversity – social, ethnic, cultural, family structure, etc. Parenting supports have spread rapidly in recent years, but are still often seen as valuable only for 'problem families' or where children have behavioural or learning difficulties. As a

recent Council of Europe report on parenting argued, '[P]arenting is an activity that needs support. All parents experience known times and situations of high need ... [T]he authorities must recognise parenting as a legitimate domain of public policy'.<sup>106</sup>

Given the benefits of parenting supports, there should be no stigma attached to receiving a parenting support or home visit. Universal provision is an effective means of reducing stigma.<sup>107</sup> Parenting supports should build on the work of public health nurses, who are already recognised as a valuable public service and are already welcomed into so many homes immediately after the birth of a child. The work of public health nurses and related professionals should expand to provide a combination of health supports and parenting supports to all parents.

The Longford-Westmeath Parenting Partnership, launched in September 2010, offers an important new example of an initiative to provide parenting supports on a universal basis through a combination of public health nurses and community and voluntary organisations, with all relevant staff trained in the Triple P approach to the provision of parenting supports.<sup>108</sup>

### **A growing evidence base for parenting supports**

The design and content of parenting supports can now draw on a growing international evidence base on what works in such initiatives. A recent literature review carried out by researchers from the Institute of Education in London concludes that young children's attainment can be successfully supported within the family through a mix of 'direct' and 'indirect' supports:

- Direct supports include initiatives to help parents understand the importance of learning in the home, such as encouraging parents to read to children or go to the library.
- Indirect supports include pre-natal and post-natal care, guidance on breastfeeding and nutrition, and supporting the family's role in children's self-esteem and resilience, such as through supporting parent-child relationships.

The report stresses the importance of services for parents being accessible, non-stigmatising, trusted, and flexible enough to fit with parents' lifestyles. It recommends both using special initiatives (such as Incredible Years and Enhanced Triple-P) and building on existing resources such as health visitors (public health nurses). The report notes the benefits for child outcomes of home visiting, especially for younger children or where parents do not seek supports from centre-based provision.

Iram Siraj-Blatchford and John Siraj-Blatchford (2010) *Improving Children's Attainment through a Better Quality of Family-based Support for Early Learning*, London: C4EO (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services).



I would like to stay outside all day  
riding bikes and tricycles.  
Nia, Co. Waterford







## 5. Linked services

**Throughout early childhood, young children's care and education are inextricably linked and encompass many aspects of their well-being and development, including their physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, and their early learning and cognitive development. Just as young children's care, learning, health and development are linked, so services and supports for young children and their families need to be linked too.<sup>109</sup>**

Our vision is that there should be no distinction between 'childcare' and 'early education' – services and supports for young children and their families should support the whole child. Young children are learning right from their earliest weeks and months, both in their own homes and in all the other settings they spend time in, including childminders' homes, crèches and the natural environment around them.

Government policies for children's early care and education should address all settings: children's homes, parent-and-toddler groups, the homes of childminders, centre-based services for young children, the infant classes of primary schools, as well as outdoor spaces within the neighbourhood. Where services are provided by professional practitioners – whether professionals engaged in early care and education, health-care or child development – such services should be closely linked and easily accessible to all who need them. We here introduce the idea of the 'early childhood hub' as a way to link services together.

Integrated delivery also requires close linkages over time. There should be strong connections between the different settings that young children move through as they grow older, to facilitate smooth and successful transitions. There should be a focus on practices that help young children to move happily from the home into settings outside the home and that later support their transition into primary schools.

### Linking care and education

Given the many ways in which care and education are interconnected in young children's lives, our vision is that all services for young children should be centrally concerned with *both* the care of young children *and* early education. There should be no divide between services for children with a 'care' focus and services for children that focus on 'early education'. High quality services for young children of all ages support the *whole* child – their physical, social, behavioural, emotional and cognitive development, as well as their well-being and happiness.

The establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) began the process of integrating 'care' and 'education' at a structural level nationally in Ireland. Building on the progress made since the creation of the OMCYA, in our vision there would be a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children. Our vision of a single, integrated Government department is in line with a recent report from UNESCO, which highlights the importance of integrating caring and learning in the governance of early childhood services.<sup>110</sup> The report focuses on the current trend to integrate responsibility for both sectors within education ministries, but stresses above all the importance of an integrated understanding of 'care' and 'education'.





According to UNESCO, countries where the care and education of young children have been fully integrated not only in the structure of a Government department but also in an integrated understanding of 'care and education' have seen significant progress on many indicators of success. New Zealand, for example, which began a major integration process in the late 1980s, saw

significant improvements in participation rates (including for disadvantaged groups), in qualification levels in the workforce, in curriculum development and in resources for the sector.<sup>111</sup>

The integration of care and education in governance structures should extend not only to the management of

### **A 'split system' persists in Ireland**

A significant shift in thinking is needed if we are to fully take on board the significance of the links between young children's care and education. A split between 'childcare' for the youngest children (up to about 3 years old, viewed as a welfare support for working mothers) and 'early education' (focusing on school-readiness for children aged from about 3 to 5) has historically underpinned policy and practice not only in Ireland, but in many other countries.<sup>112</sup>

The 1999 White Paper on early childhood education, *Ready to Learn*, stated that 'one of [the White Paper's] key underlying principles is that, for young children, education and care should not be separated, but should be provided in a complementary, seamless fashion', but immediately went on to argue that '[c]are is the dominant requirement of children aged less than 3 years and, because education is a more significant need of older children, the principal, though not exclusive, policy focus of this White Paper is on children aged between 3 and 6 years'.<sup>113</sup>

Policy documents in Ireland have increasingly referred to the links between young children's care and education, and the creation of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs – linking related units from three different Government Departments – was a significant move in the right direction.

But the split system – and the associated view of young children's needs at different ages – has remained hard to shake off, and is currently embodied at a policy level in the different rationales underpinning the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme and the Free Pre-School Year. The Community Childcare Subvention Scheme aims to provide financial assistance with childcare costs for families with low incomes, and recent reforms have focused the scheme more closely on supporting parents' entry into the labour market.<sup>114</sup> In contrast, the Free Pre-School Year aims to provide early education and promote school-readiness for children aged between 3 and 5.<sup>115</sup> If policies are to fully reflect the links between care and education, we need a new approach.



services, but also to their regulation and inspection. For example, the inspection process carried out by the HSE should be integrated with an inspection process focusing on implementation of the Síolta quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework. Integrating these different aspects of inspection would allow early years inspectors to look at all aspects of a service for young children, and the early years inspectorate itself should be staffed by practitioners with expertise and experience in the provision of services for young children.

## Early childhood hubs

The linking together of services and supports for young children and their families needs to extend to a wide range of supports, to ensure that services and supports work together effectively and efficiently. We propose the development of 'early childhood hubs', which would involve using existing resources differently, rather than creating new organisations.

A wide range of services and supports are relevant to children's early care and education as young children learn and develop – socially, emotionally, cognitively and in their language development – throughout their daily lives, not just in pre-schools or infant classes. Public health nurses, for example, are in a good position to support not just children's health but also their early learning, through the supports they give to parents in parenting skills.

In our vision, services and supports for young children and their families would be linked through 'early childhood hubs' in all areas of the country. In our consultation process, people used a variety of terms to describe the idea of the hub – some called for one-stop shops, others for child and family centres, others for community centres focused on children. We also heard different ideas as to how the hubs might operate and at what level. But we found a large degree of consensus on the need for a way to link together services for young children and supports for children's families.

An early childhood hub would provide integrated, two-generational supports for the young child and the child's family at one and the same time – linking supports for the child's care, learning, health and development, and linking services outside the home with supports for families in the home. An integrated early childhood hub would involve both:

- Close working relationships between providers of services and supports, so that there are effective referral systems, so that different services complement each other, and so that services cooperate to help families with particular needs.
- Accessible points of contact, information and referral for families, so that families know where to turn for advice and support, and receive support in accessing services that are available to them.

In our consultation process, different models of early childhood hub were suggested. In one model, the hub



**I gonna make a swimming pool there,  
blue water. Here will be a trampoline.  
It's gonna have dark brown on the  
slides and green round a round.  
Look, I did swings there and a big  
swimming pool for my daddy.  
Piotr, Co.Dublin**

would be at a very local level – a type of community centre with early care and education services at its core and other services provided on-site or radiating out like the spokes of a wheel. In another model, the hub would be at a county or sub-county level, providing comprehensive information to parents and providing resources and training to local services. Both these and other models have value. Indeed, different models might be appropriate in different areas, depending for example on whether urban or rural, or it may be that different models are needed simultaneously. Given the importance of integrated services and the difficulty of achieving integration in practice, implementation should be preceded by a programme in which different models are tested and evaluated.

Whatever the model, early childhood hubs would link together a wide range of services, including:

- Care and education services for young children.
- Advice and information for parents.
- Parenting programmes.
- Group-based parenting supports in the community.
- Home visiting services.
- Supported parent-and-toddler groups.
- Resources such as toy libraries.
- Support-and-training networks for childminders.
- In-service training for early years practitioners.
- Specialist supports on a referral basis, such as speech and language therapists.
- Outreach to facilitate access to services.
- Wider supports for adults, including employment supports, adult education and personal development courses.

We envisage that early childhood hubs would build on the work already done at local level by organisations such as Family Resource Centres and at county level by Children's Services Committees and County and City Childcare Committees.

Previous reports have also pointed to the importance of an integrated model of service provision for young children and their families. The OECD's 2004 country report on early care and education in Ireland, for example, proposed the establishment of purpose-built Child and Family Centres. The 2005 NESF report explicitly endorsed the OECD's proposal and also advocated the developing model of 'Children's Centres' in the UK (see box and see also page 90 below).



## **Extract from the NESF report, Early Childhood Care and Education**

### **'Children's Centres in the UK and the Proposed Child and Family Centre Model**

The Children's Centre programme in the UK is based on the concept that providing integrated education, care, family support and health services are key factors in determining good outcomes for children and their parents. It is proposed that the Child and Family Centres would develop along a similar vein. The aim of the Child and Family Centres in this country would be to build on existing good practice at the community level and to bring together, in a more coherent and integrated way those who are currently providing services for children and families.

Some families with young children already benefit from integrated service provision. The work of the HSE, the Community Development Programme, the Family Resource Centres and others has greatly facilitated this approach. The Project Team proposes that this work should be built upon and enhanced.

The following services are provided by Children's Centres in the UK:

- Early education integrated with full day care, including early identification of and provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities.
- Parental outreach.
- Family support, including support for parents of children with special needs.
- Health services.
- A base for childminders, and a service hub within the community for parents and providers of childcare services.
- Effective links with local employment services, local training providers and further and higher education institutions.
- Effective links with Children's Information Services, Neighbourhood Nurseries, Out of School Clubs and Extended Schools.
- Management and workforce training.

Source : Surestart Unit, UK.

The [NESF] Team agreed that the Child and Family Centres proposed by the OECD (2004) and endorsed in this report should broadly reflect a similar service delivery model.'

Source: NESF (2005) Early Childhood Care and Education, Dublin: NESF, p.134.



## Linking pre-school services and schools

Making a successful transition to school is crucial for every child's future education. Where children do not make happy transitions to primary school, the odds of making successful transitions to post-primary school are stacked against them, and those children who have a negative experience of the transition to post-primary school are the children who are most likely to leave school early.<sup>116</sup>

Achieving successful transitions is only partly about helping children to be 'ready for school' – above all, it is about changing schools so that they are 'ready for young children'. Success in the initial transition to primary school does not mean ensuring that every child is able to sit still, keep quiet and hold a pen by a certain age. Indeed an over-emphasis on the formalities of schooling can be precisely what alienates many children from the school system from a young age. Instead, success in the transition to school would mean that all children enjoy the transition, feel welcomed into school, and feel positive about their early school experiences.

In many European countries young children do not begin formal school until the age of 6 or 7, and attend early care and education services before this. In Ireland, where most children begin school at 4 or 5 years old, the leap for young children into primary school can be enormous.

In our vision, the infant classes of primary schools would be supported to become more like early years settings, with a real sense of continuity for young children as they make transitions from pre-school services into schools.<sup>117</sup> There are moves already in this direction, with Aistear (which applies to the full age-range from 0 to 6) increasingly informing curriculum and practice within infant classes.<sup>118</sup>

There may also be value in providing more centre-based services for younger children on primary school sites as part of an extended school, in order to offer children a full and seamless transition through early childhood towards formal schooling.

Whatever approach is taken, there needs to be a 'strong and equal partnership between early childhood and the education system'.<sup>119</sup> At local level, there should be strong links between primary schools and early care and education services in the area, to facilitate smooth transitions from pre-schools into the infant classes. At present, the level of communication between pre-school settings and primary schools is low in Ireland.<sup>120</sup> Cooperation, the sharing of information, and transition programmes that link schools and services, are all needed to support smooth transitions for local children, while full implementation of the Aistear curriculum framework across both pre-school settings and all infant classes would significantly enhance continuity of approach.











**Investing in young children will lay the foundations for growth in the future, both for the economy – with high economic returns to such investment – and for our children, whose well-being and development must be a central priority in policy-making.**

We here present a manifesto for investing in the growing child and for investing in the future growth of the economy. We recognise that our vision is ambitious, but it is achievable. Actions are needed now to ensure that we hold on to what we have achieved so far and continue moving in the right direction. The recommendations in this chapter do not amount to our full vision, but if fully implemented they would move us a long way towards it.

The actions we propose here make good sense in a recession and are essential if we are to lay the foundations now for the smart economy of the future. We include actions that can be taken right now at no or little cost to the Exchequer. Our immediate priority, given today's economic climate, must be to preserve the current level of expenditure on services and supports for young children and their families. Significant progress has been in recent years in building an infrastructure of early childhood services, in developing a national quality framework and a curriculum framework and, through the Free Pre-School Year, in establishing universal pre-school education. While we are still a long way from achieving what we aspire to create, we cannot afford to lose what we already have.

Looking to the future, we outline an ambitious framework of policies, many of which are long-term. The fact that they are long-term makes them no less pressing, as we must start planning now, for the future. Start Strong urges the Government to commit to developing high quality, affordable and accessible services and supports for all young children in Ireland by 2020.

There are economic constraints, of course. However, the biggest economic constraint may be not the state of the public finances, but the fact that young children have not yet been given the priority they deserve within public spending. There is a strong economic rationale for investing significant public funds in quality care and education for young children, given the evidence from cost-benefit analyses of a high return to such investment. And the cost of doing nothing, in the missed opportunities for children and the negative social and economic effects, is far greater than the cost of quality early care and education.<sup>121</sup>



## 1. Children come first

Young children are valued members of society and bearers of rights – and they are the future of our society and our economy. If we are to put young children's rights and needs at the centre of policy-making, and if we are to invest sufficiently in young children to lay the foundations for future economic growth, we need to start planning now. Even if we cannot afford to increase public investment in young children this year, we must avoid cutting it, and we must start planning for growth.

### Immediate actions for the Government:

- Make no further budget cuts to services and supports for young children and their families, to ensure the progress of recent years is not lost. Between 2008 and 2010 the budget of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was cut by 50%, while Child Benefit was cut by 10%.<sup>122</sup> Any further cuts will do both short-term and long-term harm.
- Make a commitment in the forthcoming National Children's Strategy to develop a national plan for young children's care and education, to bring Ireland into line with international standards and to provide a clear road-map for moving in the direction of the vision outlined in this report over a 10-year period.
- Hold a children's rights referendum to provide a firm constitutional basis for the recognition of children's rights.

### In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Develop and implement an ambitious 10-year national plan for young children's care and education. A national plan should aim to achieve a step-change in the quality, affordability and accessibility of services for young children from 0 to 6 years old and in the supports for their parents and families.
- Steadily increase public investment in early childhood services and supports, moving Ireland progressively towards European and UNICEF targets of 1% of GDP.<sup>123</sup> Investment in young children has a sound economic rationale, as it lays the foundations for a strong economy in the future.
- Create a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.



## 2. High quality

Services and supports for young children and their families must be of high quality if children's early care and education is to have the positive impact – for children, the economy and society – that research on child development has demonstrated. All children can gain long-term benefits from early care and education services, but only where the services are of sufficient quality. Quality standards are not an optional extra – they should be an essential requirement for all regulated and funded services for young children.

### Immediate actions for the Government:

- Ensure public funding for early care and education services is linked to a sufficient level of compliance with all statutory requirements, including (where relevant) the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No.2) Regulations, 2006*.
- Fulfil the commitment already made to make all inspection reports publicly available, by publishing them on the internet.
- Introduce compulsory notification to the HSE for all paid childminders, bringing them within the scope of the statutory inspection process.
- Introduce regulations for after-school services.

### In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Build on the excellent frameworks provided by Síolta and Aistear by developing a detailed plan for their full implementation in every service for young children. They are a tremendously important resource, but their impact depends both on the extent to which staff are trained in them, and also on whether they are a requirement that is embedded in the inspection regime. Their implementation should be a requirement of public funding, monitored regularly by an augmented inspection service.
- Achieve substantial progress towards a fully professional workforce in services for young children, with ambitious targets for the proportion of staff qualified to tertiary level, with plans to ensure that all paid childminders have appropriate qualifications, and with plans to provide relevant early years training to inspectors, to those in advisory roles and to staff in training institutions.
- Amend the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations* to require all early care and education services to have – or have access to – outdoor play areas.



### 3. All young children

All children matter. Quality services and supports for young children and their families should be universally available and genuinely affordable, part of the framework of public services available to all members of society, alongside primary and secondary education, and health-care. Additional supports should be provided to those who need them.

#### Immediate actions for the Government:

- Align the school starting-age with the age for starting the Free Pre-School Year, so that all children can access the scheme, regardless of their date of birth.
- Make no budget cuts in relation to special needs assistants, to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream services.

#### In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Extend the entitlement to free provision that began with the Free Pre-School Year to a second, earlier year, to at least 48 weeks of the year, and to at least 3.5 hours per day, in line with the recommendations made by the NESF.<sup>124</sup>
- Introduce a subsidy for hours outside the free provision, with a tiered fee-structure that reflects parents' ability-to-pay. Such a scheme should be available in all services that meet quality standards, and would replace the current Community Childcare Subvention scheme. Such a scheme could also fund after-school services for children in the infant classes of primary schools. No subsidy would be needed for children less than 1 year old if public funds were instead to support paid parental leave for children of that age (see recommendation below).
- Provide for young children with additional support needs in inclusive mainstream services, when this is in the child's best interests. Additional needs should be identified early, and supports provided in response.
- Ensure adequate provision of high quality, subsidised and regulated after-school services, including after-school services for children in the infant classes of primary schools.



#### 4. All families

Given the central importance of the family in young children's well-being and development, and the impact that children's families and homes have on their life-chances and on the wider economy and society, supports for parents and families need to be universally available. Of relevance are not only parental leave, work-life balance policies and child income supports, but also home visiting and parenting supports. The growing evidence base shows that well-designed supports benefit children.

##### Immediate actions for the Government:

- Carry out an awareness-raising campaign to inform parents of the benefits of quality early care and education for all children – both in the home and in out-of-home services – including the value of parenting supports.
- Implement the requirements of the new EU directive on parental leave.<sup>125</sup> The EU directive requires *as a minimum* the extending of unpaid parental leave to 4 months per parent, of which 1 month should be strictly non-transferable, and introducing a right for employees returning from parental leave to request flexible working and/or reduced hours for a set period of time.

##### In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Provide parenting supports locally and free of charge for all parents and guardians of young children, as well as for others who provide informal care for young children, such as grandparents and other relatives.
- Expand the provision of the public health nurse service and home visiting programmes. It should be made possible for any family to receive quality support in the home in a child's first years in relation to children's health and development, relationships, early learning, safety, parenting styles, and the early identification of additional needs.
- Incrementally introduce payment for parental leave so that paid leave is available for the critical first 12 months for every child.
- Introduce legislation to provide for at least 2 weeks' paid paternity leave for fathers around the time of the birth of a child.
- Strengthen work-life balance, for example through a right to flexible working arrangements for parents with young children. While this would be important for children of all ages (and would help address some of the need for after-school services), a higher degree of flexibility could be legislated for parents of very young children, given their particular need for continuity of care.

## 5. Linked services

Young children's care, learning, health and development are inextricably linked, so services and supports for young children and their families need to be linked too. The integration of services is hard to achieve, but it is of crucial importance for children's well-being, for effective services, for early identification of additional needs and for early intervention to respond to those needs.

### Immediate actions for the Government:

- Commission research on early childhood hubs. This could be done through existing research funds, possibly accessing philanthropic funding.
- Establish an innovation fund to support the design and implementation of a small number of early childhood hubs as demonstration programmes, to explore how best to implement hubs at local level, making maximum use of existing resources.
- Assist primary schools and local pre-school services to cooperate in programmes to facilitate the transition of pre-school children into schools.

### In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Roll-out a national programme for the development of early childhood hubs, following evaluation of initial models.
- Support primary schools to more fully meet the needs of children in infant classes, e.g. by amending adult-child ratios to match those for 4-5 year olds in other early years settings, revising the infant level of the primary school curriculum to bring it fully into line with Aistear, and facilitating lead teachers in the infant classes of primary schools to gain relevant training in early childhood education.











### Cost-benefit analysis

At any time, but especially when the public finances are in such difficulty, policy decisions are informed by economic analysis, so a driving force behind our 'Children 2020' project was the need to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of policy proposals for the future of children's early care and education in Ireland.

While the immediate actions we called for in the previous chapter involve minimal cost, the long-term vision would be costly to implement. We are convinced, though, that the benefits would substantially outweigh the costs, and that there would be a high, long-term return to the forms of public investment we have identified. Research evidence from other countries provides strong evidence for this claim.

In order to assess the evidence in an Irish context, Start Strong has commissioned Goodbody Economic Consultants to carry out an economic analysis of the recommendations contained in this report, including:

- Estimating the costs of implementing recommendations, and
- Carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of the overall package of measures we propose.

We plan to publish the results of the economic analysis in the coming months.

### Questions for further analysis

In our consultation process we found consensus among stakeholders on much of the vision set out in this report. However, there were some issues on which there was less agreement, and there were some issues on which there was a shared vision but different ideas about how to get there. Above all, not surprisingly, there was great anxiety about how we can possibly move towards our vision in the current economic climate, given that policy and practice in Ireland today are so far behind international standards. We hope that this report will stimulate further research and debate. Questions that merit further analysis include:

1. How would effective inter-agency work be achieved within early childhood hubs?

Early childhood hubs are central to our vision, but we have left open the detail of exactly what they might look like and how inter-agency linkages within them would operate. It is easy to call for integrated services, but hard to achieve them in practice. Further research is needed in this area as well as the piloting and evaluation of alternative models of early childhood hub.

2. What steps are needed to ensure the full implementation of the SÍolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework?

Quality is critical if care and education services are to benefit children. In SÍolta and Aistear we have two valuable frameworks which, if fully implemented, would achieve much of what we want to see in services. We need a detailed plan to achieve their full implementation. Many services need intensive support and staff need upskilling. Some initial actions have already been taken but much more is needed.

Crucially, Síolta and Aistear will need to become central to the inspection framework, and public funding will need to be conditional on their implementation. Further consideration should be given to what a full implementation plan should look like.

### 3. What exactly constitutes a 'fully professional workforce'?

Some stakeholders in our consultation process called for a fully graduate workforce, while others called for a graduate-led workforce. Others questioned how we should balance the need for professional qualifications with the value of experience and on-the-job learning. Others again argued that the central issue is not so much the professional competence of the individual practitioner as the need for a 'competent system' in which all levels of the workforce are relevant – not just those working directly with young children, but also those in advisory roles, inspectors, staff in training institutions, and those in decision-making positions at regional and national levels. There is agreement that we need to professionalise the early years workforce, but the detail of what this should involve needs further examination.

### 4. How should we balance public funding for part-time and full-day services for young children?

While we know that high quality care and education services outside the home are beneficial for young children,<sup>126</sup> it is less clear how long young children should spend in such services each day. Evidence suggests that many of the direct benefits of quality early care and education services can be achieved with part-time provision,<sup>127</sup> and there is some evidence that the youngest children can be negatively affected

if they spend very long hours in centre-based services.<sup>128</sup> On the other hand, it is important for quality services to reflect the reality of children's lives and many children live in families with parents who work full-time. Part of the solution lies in greater work-life balance measures to allow parents with young children to reduce their working hours or to have more flexible work arrangements, but part of the solution also lies in making high quality, full-day services for young children genuinely affordable. How to balance different policy options needs further consideration.

### 5. How much paid parental leave should be available, and what work-life balance policies?

There is widespread agreement that a parent should be supported to remain at home with a child for at least the critical first 12 months. There is also a strong argument for ensuring that the end of paid parental leave should coincide with the beginning of an entitlement to a place in a high quality, affordable service for young children, so that parents do not have to resort to services of lower or unknown quality. However, the way in which public funds should connect the completion of parental leave to the availability of affordable services needs further examination, as do the conditions under which a portion of paid parental leave should be transferable (e.g. between parents or to a grandparent) and what element of parental leave should be non-transferable. There is also need for further discussion on how to legislate for more effective work-life balance (e.g. through workers' rights to flexible working arrangements or reduced hours), without significantly reducing family incomes or raising employers' costs.









### National and international benchmarks

There have been many excellent reports, both Irish and international, that have set out standards and benchmarks for children's early care and education and that have identified policy proposals to achieve those standards. Our vision draws on a number of key reports, among which there is a great deal of consensus on the policy priorities for children's early care and education.

In the first section of this appendix (A1.1), we summarise the recommendations of two major Irish reports that were both published in 2005: by the NESF and by the National Women's Council of Ireland. There are large similarities between the vision we set out in this report and the vision that underpinned the NESF report. Some of the NESF's specific recommendations have already been implemented, but much remains to be done. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that the recommendations we set out in the final chapter of this report amount to a call for the full implementation of the NESF report.

In the second section (A1.2), we summarise the conclusions of a series of international reports that have put forward recommendations and international standards for the provision of early childhood services, at the level of the UN, the OECD and the EU. These reports have served both to draw together international experience in the design and implementation of early childhood policies and to provide benchmarks for the assessment of progress at national level.

In the third section (A1.3), we point to models from three countries that were discussed by stakeholders in our consultation process. In each case we focus on a particular aspect of services for young children that was cited as offering important lessons for Ireland: the professionalisation of the workforce in New Zealand, the

Sure Start programme in the UK, and the establishment of a universal right to services for young children in Sweden. We do not suggest that these models can or should simply be copied in Ireland. But they do offer lessons that helped to shape our own vision and that merit further examination in an Irish context.

#### A1.1 Reports from Ireland

##### National Economic and Social Forum

In 2005, the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) published its report on *Early Childhood Care and Education*, which involved a wide range of stakeholders including the social partners, as well as a public consultation process.<sup>129</sup> The report presented a 'policy framework' for 10 years (2005-2015), and called for a '10-year funding envelope' to provide long-term financial commitment to this policy area. The report included as a vision statement that: 'All young children should have access to, and participate in, a range of quality education and care services and supports of an internationally accepted standard through a plan implemented over the next ten years (2005-2015)'.

The NESF report offered a holistic vision of the child and of the policy measures required, linking early care and education services to health-care and to work-life-balance measures. Its vision was also one of universal services and supports.

At national level, the NESF called for a single system of administration, integrating responsibility for care and education for 0-6 year olds, with a national Early Childhood Development Unit to be established to implement a 10-year national plan. To promote the integration of services at local level, the report proposed the introduction of 'Child and Family Centres', building



on the recommendations of the OECD (see below), the developing model of Sure Start Children's Centres in the UK, and models from Ireland such as the Family Resource Centres.

In terms of supports for parents, the NESF called for parental leave to cover the whole of each child's first year. The report also called for services that are compatible with parents' hours of work, and that are subsidised (through capitation grants to service providers) with payment for parents on a sliding scale based on income.

The NESF's proposals for the reform of early care and education services included:

- Putting in place by 2010 a free pre-school year for all children, to cover 3.5 hours per day, 5 days per week, for 48 weeks per year – extending by 2015 to a second, earlier year of free provision, and with durations funded for longer than 3.5 hours per day.
- Development of a single set of quality standards, integrating HSE regulations and the National Framework on Quality.
- Increasing the adult-child ratio in the infant classes in primary schools to 2:20. The report also called for the expansion, regulation and funding of after-school care, with training for staff.
- Greater supports to facilitate children with special needs and Traveller children to participate in mainstream services, supported by equality and diversity training programmes such as éist.

The report also placed a strong emphasis on raising skill and qualification levels in the early years workforce. It called for:

- A target of 60% of staff to have a degree-level qualification within 5 years, along with introduction of

a national pay-scale for practitioners.

- Every free pre-school class to be led by a graduate (B.Ed. or B.A. in early childhood care and education), with an assistant.
- Childminders to be an integral part of the early years workforce. To this end, the report proposed that all childminders should be required to register and be accredited, be supported through childminder networks, and be subject to inspection.

#### **National Women's Council of Ireland**

Also in 2005, the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) published an *Accessible Childcare Model*, intended to meet all children's needs for quality developmental support from an early age and at the same time to facilitate real parental choice around work/life balance.<sup>130</sup> The NWCI's recommendations included:

- The introduction of 26 weeks' paid parental leave which, when combined with maternity leave, would enable a child's full first year to be at home, as well as the introduction of 5 days' paid paternity leave to be taken within a month of a child's birth.
- Free early education for all 3 and 4 year olds for 3.5 hours per day for 48 weeks per year.
- Subsidised full-day care for 1 and 2 year olds, and subsidised extended care (outside the free provision) for 3 and 4 year olds and also for 5-14 year olds.
- The subsidies would be provided for places in quality services for all parents in employment, education or training, with the subsidy tiered to reflect parental income and ranging from 50% to 100% of the cost of provision, with providers' fees capped. The subsidies would be paid directly to providers, based on the primary school funding model, and only to providers that achieve a quality mark.



## A1.2 International standards

A central feature of our vision is that Ireland should meet international standards in services and supports for the care and education of young children. We are far from doing so at the moment. Indeed, from an Irish perspective, UNICEF's 2008 Report Card reads more like an aspirational vision-statement than the set of 'minimum standards' it was intended to be. Ireland has, however, made progress since publication of the Report Card.

International standards in the area of early childhood policy have been published by the UN, UNICEF, the OECD and the European Commission, and we give a brief outline of each below. Presenting these various standards in one place shows not only the growing international focus on this policy area, but also the high degree of consistency between the different standards. Though none of the standards is formally binding on Ireland, they provide important benchmarks against which early childhood policy and practice here should be assessed.<sup>131</sup>

### UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – General Comment No.7

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. All children – of all ages – hold rights under the Convention, including: the right to education, play, and recreation; the right to safeguards from abuse and neglect; and the right to have a say in matters that affect them. The Convention asserts that the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration in all actions concerning children. Article 18.2 of the Convention states that:

'States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal

guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.'

In 2005, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child examined the issue of early care and education. The Committee's commentary (*General Comment No. 7*) does not have the status of the UNCRC itself, but it is an authoritative, expert interpretation of how the general clauses of the UNCRC apply to young children. The Committee argues that:<sup>132</sup>

- For the exercise of their rights, young children have particular requirements for physical nurturance, emotional care and sensitive guidance, as well as time and space for social play, exploration and learning.
- Under normal circumstances, a young child's parents play a crucial role in the achievement of their rights, along with other members of family, extended family or community, including legal guardians as appropriate.
- Appropriate assistance to parents can best be achieved as part of comprehensive policies for early childhood, including provision for health, care and education during the early years.
- The Committee calls on States parties to ensure that all young children (and those with primary responsibility for their well-being) are guaranteed access to appropriate and effective services, including programmes of health, care and education specifically designed to promote their well-being.
- The Convention recognises the right of the child to education. The Committee interprets the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development.

- Work with young children should be socially valued and properly paid, in order to attract a highly qualified workforce, men as well as women.
- States parties are urged to adopt comprehensive, strategic and time-bound plans for early childhood within a right-based framework. This requires an increase in human and financial resource allocations for early childhood services and programmes.

#### UNICEF minimum standards

In 2008, UNICEF published a 'league table' of 25 OECD countries, comparing their performance in meeting 10 minimum standards for early childhood care and education.<sup>133</sup> UNICEF placed Ireland at the bottom of the international league, stating that Ireland met only 1 of the 10 minimum standards.

Since 2008, there has been progress in Ireland: the Free Pre-School Year was announced in April 2009, and during 2009 there was a consultation process in preparation for a Workforce Development Plan. Nevertheless, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) continued to write in October 2009 that 'Ireland performs very poorly across [UNICEF's] 10 benchmarks'.<sup>134</sup> UNICEF's 10 standards are:

- Parental leave for a child's full first year, paid at 50% of salary (which may be subject to upper and lower limits), with at least 2 weeks' parental leave reserved for fathers.
- A national plan for the organisation and financing of early childhood services, to ensure the benefits are available to all, especially to disadvantaged children.
- Subsidised and regulated childcare services for 25% of children under 3 years old.
- Subsidised and accredited early education services for 80% of 4-year olds.
- 80% of all staff having significant contact with young children – including childminders – should have relevant training. In addition, there should be movement towards pay and working conditions in line with wider teaching and social care professions.
- 50% of staff in accredited early education services should have three years' tertiary education with a recognised qualification in early childhood studies or a related field.
- For 4-5 year olds, the ratio of children to staff should be no greater than 15:1, and the group size should not exceed 24.
- Public spending on early childhood education and care should be at least 1% of GDP.
- Child poverty rate less than 10%, as poverty is strongly associated with negative outcomes for children.
- Near-universal outreach of essential child health services, as a proxy measure of the availability of early childhood services to the most disadvantaged children.

#### OECD 'Starting Strong' reports

The OECD's *Starting Strong* reports are a series of in-depth policy reviews of early childhood education and care in OECD countries, and recommendations for the further development of early childhood policies. An initial round of policy reviews of 12 OECD countries culminated in the first *Starting Strong* report in 2001.<sup>135</sup> A second round of reviews, which included Ireland, led to the publication of *Starting Strong II* in 2006.<sup>136</sup> Other OECD reports have also addressed some of the policy issues we examine in this report – notably *Babies and Bosses* and *Doing Better for Children* – but we summarise the *Starting Strong* reports here because of



their detailed examination of early care and education policies.<sup>137</sup>

The country report on Ireland, published in 2004, included analysis of Irish provision, as well as a series of recommendations.<sup>138</sup> The OECD review team argued that Irish policy at the time was 'still in its initial stages' (p.6) and expressed particular concern at the low level of coverage, the separate treatment of care and education, and the shortage of quality services.

The OECD's central recommendations for Ireland at that time included: a significant increase in funding for early childhood services, the 'urgent formulation of a *National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development*', and the integration of all early education and care policy and funding under one ministry or agency. The OECD's call for integration extended also to the local level, where it recommended the development of model child-and-family centres, as well as parent education and professionally managed drop-in services for at-home mothers and children.

The OECD called for quality standards in Ireland to be raised through: a quality framework for service providers, linked to the provision of operational grants; professionalisation of the workforce (with the development of training, career ladders and compensation); and accrediting and subsidising quality childminders and forming childminder networks. In relation to primary schools, the OECD called for a trained Child Assistant in infant classes, to improve child-staff ratios to a maximum of 15:1, along with extension of the infant school day to make full-day provision available, as well as greater autonomy for the infant classes within schools, and the possibility of integrated early care and education provision on school sites.

In its financial recommendations, the OECD called for: the provision of funded parental leave to a full year after the birth of a child; direct operational subsidies to accredited providers of care and education services (both centre-based services and childminders), with parental fees capped; and publicly funded early education services for all 3 and 4 year olds.

The report also had a strong focus on supporting access for children experiencing disadvantage or with special needs. In addition to calling for the introduction of publicly funded services on a universal basis – to benefit all children – the OECD also called for: structured and regular educational support from birth for children with disabilities; strengthening the Early Start programme for young children in disadvantaged areas; and support for the inclusion of young Traveller children through anti-bias teacher training, and the recruitment and training of Traveller teachers and assistants.

In 2006, two years after the publication of the country report on Ireland, the OECD presented in its *Starting Strong II* report its overall, summary analysis of early care and education in OECD countries. The report identified a number of key 'policy areas for consideration' for all OECD countries (pp.206-220):

- A 'vision of early childhood services as a life space where educators and families work together to promote the well-being, participation and learning of young children'.
- Remunerated parental leave for about a year after a child is born, with the end of parental leave then linked to an entitled place in a publicly supported early childhood service.
- Focusing early childhood services (1 to 6 year olds) on an integrated vision of learning, socio-emotional

development and well-being, with a focus on the agency of the child and listening to the child, to help children develop curiosity for learning and confidence in their own learning.

- Well-conceptualised governance of the sector, with devolution of management and funding to local level, while ensuring a unified approach to regulation, staffing criteria and quality assurance at central level, as well as an emphasis on monitoring, evaluation and research.
- The development of curricular standards, but with a focus on children's own learning strategies, and with goals not so much of school-readiness as of broader understandings of learning, including 'learning to live together'.
- Substantial government investment to support high quality, affordable services.
- Active Government involvement in service provision, given the international experience that a policy focus on parental choice and the paying of subsidies directly to parents tends to lead to a reduction in quality and inequalities in access and outcomes.
- Responding to inequalities and diversity through the development of universal programmes and a focus on the multiple identities of every child, with enhanced funding in disadvantaged areas.
- The promotion of parental engagement in services.
- Improvement of the working conditions and professional education of staff in services, to raise skill and qualification levels and to reduce staff turnover. The report suggests the introduction of equal working conditions (salaries, benefits and professional development opportunities, including in-service training) for equivalent qualification levels across early childhood services and primary schools.

### European principles and targets

At an EU level, formal targets for early care and education have been limited in scope, given the EU's limited mandate in this policy area. The Barcelona targets, adopted in 2002, focused exclusively on increasing rates of access to childcare services, to support the policy aim of increasing women's participation in the labour market, and did not address children's experiences within services.<sup>139</sup>

However, the European Commission did at an earlier stage establish a European committee of experts 'to establish criteria for the definition of quality in childcare services'. The committee – the 'European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women' (shortened to the European Commission Childcare Network) – interpreted its brief broadly and developed a set of 40 targets to achieve national systems of quality services for all young children, not just children of employed parents. It also adopted an integrated understanding of early childhood services, to prevent a distinction between 'childcare' and 'early education' and to focus on all children from 0 to 6 years old.

The 40 quality targets, which were published in 1996,<sup>140</sup> were intended to be a realistic set of targets that could be achieved throughout the EU within a 10-year timeframe. From an Irish perspective, given the ambitious level of the targets, and their coherence as comprehensive set of proposals, the resulting document can very much be seen as a vision statement for the future of early childhood services.





At an overarching level, the first target named by the European Commission Childcare Network was the development and publication of a coherent, national policy framework for care and education services for young children, the underlying aim of which should be 'to provide flexible, coherent and high quality services with equality of access for all children'. The remainder of the 40 targets can be seen as different aspects of this overall purpose. The 40 targets encompass a wide range of policy areas, including:

- A national policy framework, and legislative and administrative frameworks to ensure the effective planning and implementation of the national policy framework.
- Substantial public investment in early childhood services, amounting to at least 1% of GDP.
- Accessible, publicly funded services, with flexibility of hours to match parents' working hours over the course of the year, and with provision for children from diverse backgrounds, including children with disabilities.
- A broad, integrated educational philosophy that relates to all children from 0 to 6 years old and that focuses on benefits for children in the present, not just the future.
- Adult-child ratios and group sizes that create conditions that maximise the quality of relationships between adults and children, between children themselves, and between the adults working in or making use of the service.
- Professionalisation of the workforce, with sufficient pay, working conditions, training and staff support to achieve quality and to ensure the continuity and responsiveness of staff and their consistent relationship with the same group of children.
- Environmental and health targets that both meet health

and safety requirements and also meet the pedagogic aims of early childhood services, supporting young children's development and their freedom to explore, exercise and rest.

- Services that are well connected with their communities and that support engagement with parents.
- Regular measurement of the performance of services, including both quantitative and qualitative measures of progress.

More recently, proposals have been put forward to promote a European approach to services for young children. In 2007, a discussion paper on the issue was prepared by the Editorial Board of Children in Europe, a Europe-wide network of organisations concerned with early childhood services.<sup>141</sup> And in 2009, a discussion paper published by Eurochild, the international NGO, identified a series of key goals for consideration at European level in relation to early childhood policies.<sup>142</sup> The Children in Europe discussion paper proposed 10 principles as a basis for a European approach, arguing that they can and should be implemented across European countries by 2020. The 10 principles are:

- Access – all children should be entitled to a place in services for young children.
- Affordability – as services for young children are an entitlement and a public responsibility, they should be provided free of charge, with public funds going directly to services.
- Pedagogical approach – services for young children should be understood as public institutions, and should aim at 'education in its broadest sense', encompassing learning, social relationships, ethics, aesthetics, and emotional and physical well-being.
- Participation – services should actively include young children, parents, professionals and others in the

community, as part of a shared, democratic project.

- Coherence – all services should operate within a single, coherent policy framework for children from birth to compulsory school age, with one government department responsible for all such services.
- Diversity and choice – all services should positively value diversity – of people, practices and perspectives. Choice should also be valued, but this should be the democratic exercise of collective choice, rather than the individual choice of parents, which can lead to the ghettoization of services.
- Evaluation – should be participatory, democratic and transparent.
- Valuing the work – those working with children aged 0-6 and their families should be qualified professionals, equal to teachers in the compulsory school system.
- Services for young children and compulsory schools should have a strong and equal partnership.
- Cross-national partnership – cross-European reflection and dialogue on practice and policy.

### A1.3 Models from other countries

In developing a vision for the future of services for young children in Ireland, we regard it as essential that we learn from models in other countries, and participants in our consultation process cited a number of examples from other countries. A further purpose of looking at models in other countries is to show that ambitions that are visionary in Ireland today are achievable, and are being put into practice elsewhere right now.

While many different models could be cited from other countries, we have here focused on three particular examples which were cited a number of times by participants in our consultation process as offering valuable learning for Ireland and each of which points to a different possible area of practice as a model: the

professionalisation of the workforce in New Zealand; the development of the integrated Sure Start programme in the UK; and the establishment of a right to quality, universal services for young children in Sweden.

#### **New Zealand – professionalisation of the workforce**

New Zealand was mentioned by participants in our consultation process as an example of a country with many similarities to Ireland (in population and structure of the economy) but where the development of early childhood policy has undergone a transformation in the last decade, propelled in part by the New Zealand Government's publication in 2002 of a 10-year national plan, *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*. An aspect of the plan that was often cited was the commitment to fully professionalise the early years workforce within 10 years.

While the New Zealand Government adopted a number of strategies for improving quality (including legislating on a curriculum, and reducing group size and child-adult ratios), there was a particular focus on the workforce. A shift had already occurred in New Zealand to calling early years practitioners 'teachers', and the 10-year plan made a commitment that within 10 years 100% of regulated staff in centre-based services would be registered teachers with a graduate-level qualification in early childhood education. The Government incentivised services to meet this target through offering higher grants for services with higher qualification levels.

Financial cutbacks have recently resulted in some negative adjustments to the plan, so that the Government has now reduced its 2012 target to 80% of teachers registered and qualified at graduate level. Nevertheless, considerable progress has already been made, and the end-goal of full professionalisation remains a realistic



ambition, even if the time-frame has slipped.

### **UK – Sure Start**

While the UK is not rated among the highest-performing countries internationally in early childhood services, the OECD *Starting Strong* review praised the UK for the rapid development of provision over the last decade, starting from a low base.<sup>143</sup> In 1998, the UK Government set out its aim of ensuring high quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0 to 14 in every neighbourhood, which initiated a major process of change in early childhood care and education across the UK. The process was given a further push with the publication by the Government in 2004 of a 10-year strategy for childcare.

One particular UK development that was referred to a number of times in our consultation process as offering valuable learning for Ireland was the Sure Start programme and the development of integrated Sure Start Children's Centres at local level. Sure Start was first piloted in disadvantaged areas in the late 1990s. In the 2004 ten-year strategy, the Government committed itself to creating a Children's Centre 'in every community' in the country, and their roll-out expanded rapidly in recent years, with the Government achieving its commitment by 2010, following the establishment of 3,500 Children's Centres.

Sure Start was part of a policy move to develop more integrated services and supports, linking childcare, early education, schools, health-care, and supports for families and for parenting. At national level, a single unified Government department was created with responsibility for schools, early childhood services and family supports – the Department of Children, Schools and Families. Sure Start was intended to embody the

vision of integrated services at local level.

The activities of the Sure Start programme vary across the UK and respond to local needs, but in general they provide: early education opportunities; child and family health services; family support and outreach; support for childminders; help for children and parents with special needs; and links with job centres for parents seeking employment.

While initial assessments raised questions about the programme, and concerns have been raised about the rapid pace of the roll-out, recent evaluations have praised the impact of the programme, the effectiveness of the integrated model of early childhood services, and the effectiveness of the move to universal provision as a means of reaching the most disadvantaged.<sup>144</sup>

### **Sweden – a universal right for all young children**

Sweden is regularly cited as a world leader in the provision of early childhood education and care, and in the UNICEF 'league table' of OECD countries published in 2008 it was the only country that achieved all 10 of UNICEF's minimum standards.<sup>145</sup> Sweden was also referred to a number of times in our consultation process as offering a vision that Ireland should aspire to.

Notable features of the Swedish model include the universal nature of provision, extending right through childhood, and the strong focus on the rights of the child. Early childhood education and care has become a central element of Swedish public services:

'Today pre-schooling and school-age child care is taken for granted by parents in the same way as school, health services for children, and

parental insurance [parental leave]. In principle all those who want and need a place can get it'.<sup>146</sup>

The universal provision begins with a strong system of parental leave – 16 months of paid leave, of which 2 months are reserved for fathers (and 35% of fathers take the leave – the highest proportion in the OECD).<sup>147</sup> From the age of 1, every child then has a legal right to pre-school education, which is available for the full day, all year round.

Most young children – including children with disabilities – go to local, centre-based services run by local authorities and staffed by professional early years practitioners. Childminding (for around 12% of children) is concentrated particularly in rural areas. Parental contributions are capped at a maximum of 11% of costs. Early years services (*Förskola* or 'pre-schools') offer integrated care and education for children from the age of 1 through to 6 years old. Compulsory schooling begins at 7. Right through to the age of 6, group sizes remain low (typically a maximum of 17 children) and adult-child ratios remain high (an adult for every 5 or 6 children).

The scale, quality and public support for Sweden's system of early care and education may at times seem unattainable in Ireland. Certainly, the level of public investment in early childhood services at approximately 1.7% of GDP is a multiple of current public spending in Ireland.<sup>148</sup> However, the scale of public investment in services for young children in Sweden has not always been so large, nor has the child's right to quality care and education always been so widely recognised. Indeed, the growth of the Swedish pre-school system has largely taken place since the 1970s, and many aspects of the

system are more recent and were strongly contested at an earlier stage: much of the expansion in the scale of provision took place in the 1990s, the right to a pre-school place for all children was only fully achieved in 2002, and free pre-school for 4 and 5 year olds was only introduced in 2003.<sup>149</sup> The Swedish experience offers an important lesson to Ireland: policies that seem visionary can really be attained, with sufficient time and political will.



**All my family on the swing.**  
Máire, Co.Leitrim





### Learning from practice

In planning for the future of children's early care and education, it will be important for the Government to continue evaluating and learning from practice. While there is a wealth of experience in Ireland going back many years, a series of current projects that are funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies offer great potential for learning and for informing future policy development in this area:

#### Archways

*Incredible Years - classroom management training programme* for teachers of 4 - 5 year olds in Junior and Senior Infant Classes. The programme aims to help teachers better manage their classrooms and to support children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to learn.

*Incredible Years - parent training programme* for parents of 3-6 year olds. It consists of 12 - 14 weekly, 2 hour parent- group training sessions. The aim of the programme is to improve parental well being, skills and competencies.

#### Barnardos

*Tús Maith* for 3-5 year olds. The overall outcome of Tús Maith is that the child will be ready for primary school and will develop the specific cognitive skills necessary for this transition. The programme targets the following outcomes: (1) Social - the child will be prepared for primary school and will develop the specific cognitive skills necessary for this transition; (2) Emotional - children can manage their emotions and regulate their behaviour; (3) Social - children will experience positive relationships with their peers and early-years staff; (4) Language, literacy and communication - children will have the necessary emergent language and literacy skills; (5) Physical

- children will have healthy physical development.

*Wizard of Words* for 6-7 year olds. The programme focuses on phonemic awareness, reading comprehension, vocabulary building and reading fluency. It is designed to encourage and promote children's interest in and love of reading and improve their confidence in their ability to read.

*Friendship Group* for 6-9 year olds. The Friendship Group is about giving children a place to develop and practise the skills they need to form healthy friendships. This proven programme was designed in the United States and is rooted in a strong understanding of children's development. Each group is made up of six children and two staff who meet every week for two hours over a period of 22 weeks.

#### CDI Tallaght West

*Early Childhood Care and Education* for 3-4 year olds. Designed to develop and enhance all domains of children's physical, psychological and social well-being including their cognitive skills and language development and capacity for learning. It also seeks to support the child's family by focusing on parents' psychological health, building on their parenting strategies and encouraging a positive relationship. The programme will strive to ensure inter-disciplinary assessments and effective referral mechanisms and support and train pre-school staff in early identification of learning difficulties or health problems.

*Doodle Den* for 5-6 year olds. This programme aims to secure improvements in children's literacy, contribute to more frequent school attendance, encourage more learning outside of school, increase parental involve-

ment in out of school time, increase family's use of libraries and social support networks, increase parental support of children's learning, increase parent's sense of self confidence and self esteem, and enhance children's relationships with parents and peers.

**Healthy Schools Programme** for junior and senior primary school students. The programme is designed to improve children's (1) health through the health screening process, identification of health issues and speedy referral; (2) diet and nutritional needs through a whole school approach to nutrition and healthy eating programmes; and (3) physical activity out of school time. It is also designed to ensure (1) inter-disciplinary assessments and effective referral mechanisms; and (2) a healthier school environment through the development of school safety policy, physical health programmes and health promoting activities. Finally parents will be supported to play a more active and central role in their children's health.

## Early Years

**Respecting Differences** for 3-4 year olds. The programme targets the following outcomes for children; practitioners and parents. Child outcomes include (1) the reduction in prejudices held about others in relation to race and disability; (2) increased positive feelings toward others in relation to race and disability; (3) increased willingness to be inclusive of others; (4) increased ability to recognise how being excluded makes someone feel (5) increased awareness of and positive attitudes towards other cultures and traditions in relation to race and religions. Practitioner and parent outcomes include: (1) increased recognition of the importance of doing diversity work with young children and of the types of approaches required; (2) increased confidence in dealing with diversity issues with young children; and

(3) reduction in prejudices held about others.

## Lifestart

**Lifestart Parenting Programme** for parents of 0-5 year olds. The programme is designed to impact on parenting outcomes which in turn impact positively on child development outcomes. Outcomes for parents include increased knowledge, competence and parenting skill and enhanced wellbeing and self-esteem.

## Longford-Westmeath Parenting Programme

**Triple P** for parents of 0-5 year olds. The Triple P - Positive Parenting are a set of evidence-based programmes designed to give parents the skills they need to raise confident healthy children and to build stronger family relationships.

## Northside Partnership – Preparing for Life

**Preparing for Life** for pregnant women and their children, through to school-entry. Preparing for life is designed to prepare children for school. The service specifically targets the following six areas of development: (1) physical well being; (2) motor development; (3) social and emotional development; (4) approaches to learning; (5) language development and literacy; and (6) cognition and general knowledge. Preparing for Life also works to facilitate local communities and agencies to work together and measure progress rigorously through evaluation.

## Pobal

**National Early Years Access Initiative** for 0-6 year olds. Aims to demonstrate innovative, inter-agency, com-



munity based responses to the provision of early years education and care through funding a limited number of nationally spread, high quality local sites targeting key innovations. A main focus of the work will be around collectivising and disseminating the learning from the local sites and other Atlantic Grantees as a key input into national advocacy and policy change through the creation of an integrated learning and evaluation framework.

## **youngballymun**

*Ready Steady Grow* for pregnant women and their children, through to school-entry. The aim of the programme is to identify and respond to issues and difficulties that may arise within parent-child relationships. Local pre-birth support; baby and toddler development clinic; supports for parents, babies and toddlers delivered in partnership with the HSE.

*Incredible Years* - Teacher; Parent and Child training programme for 5-12 year olds. A teacher-parent-child training and support programme that nurtures social and emotional skills development, effective parenting skills and a positive learning culture in partnership with parents, with schools and with Archways.

*3, 4, 5 Learning Years* for 3-5 year olds. Comprehensive high quality preschool programme with family support. A partnership with Barnardos and early years centres in Ballymun provides a framework for quality practice and the implementation of HighScope ensuring that children are ready for their move into primary school.

*Write Minded* - In School Literacy Support for 4-18+ year olds. Age appropriate supports to literacy skills and language development are provided across schools, community settings and education centres in Ballymun and are integrated with the Department of Education and Science DEIS programme.

### The consultation process

In order to carry out the consultation process, Start Strong appointed Candy Murphy of CMAAdvice Ltd as a facilitator. Candy led the facilitation process very ably, challenging stakeholders to look at the long-term issues and drawing out the key themes that emerged from the wide-ranging discussions that she conducted.

In keeping with our principles and ethos, Start Strong is committed to consulting with children. To this end, we also engaged the help of Barnardos, BCCN (the Border Counties Childcare Network) and IPPA (the Irish Pre-School Play Association).<sup>150</sup> Their projects were designed to elicit children's views on what makes a good service for the care and education of young children and thereby to contribute to our vision.

The consultation process used a number of different techniques:

- 1. Meetings with the Start Strong Board and Research Advisory Group.** The initial phase of the consultation process, which ran from April to June 2010, began with workshops involving Start Strong's Board of Directors and the Research Advisory Group for the project. These workshops included analysis of the current situation in Ireland, discussion of the consultation methodology, consideration of the questions to be asked in the consultation process, as well as visioning exercises.
- 2. Consultation with children.** Children in the age group 2-6 in more than 30 early care and education settings were consulted regarding their views of and experience of early childhood care and education. A variety of approaches and methods were employed by practitioners to generate discussion. Some carried out one-on-one interviews with the children, some

generated discussion in focus groups, and some initiated projects so that children could design their 'ideal' service. Many worked on group collages using a wide variety of resources. Some practitioners used a camcorder to record the responses, while another used a camera so that the children themselves could photograph their favourite and least favourite aspects of their setting.

- 3. Stakeholder interviews.** In the initial round of consultations, seventeen individual interviews were held with a range of key stakeholders involved with children's early care and education in Ireland. A list of all those who participated in the consultation process appears at the end of this appendix.
- 4. Focus groups.** Eight focus groups were then held with a number of different stakeholder interests. These included County Childcare Committee Coordinators, regional consultation meetings in the South (Cork) and North-West (Cavan), a meeting with the Border Counties Childcare Network, a national meeting with representatives of organisations that provide parenting supports, a meeting with the Association of Childcare Professionals and a meeting with a parents' network in Co. Wexford.
- 5. Written submissions.** For those who could not attend any of the meetings or who wished to add additional information, written submissions were also requested via the Start Strong e-newsletter and website over a two-month period. Twenty one such submissions were received.
- 6. National consultation meeting.** A national consultation meeting was held in Dublin at the end of June, at which approximately 50 individuals with



an interest in young children's care and education participated. At this meeting Candy Murphy of CMA Advice Ltd presented an overview of the consultation process and of the themes that were emerging so far. Bernard Feeney of Goodbody Economic Consultants presented an overview of the economic analysis that Goodbody's will carry out for Start Strong on the costs and benefits of early childhood care and education in Ireland. Participants also took part in facilitated discussion groups on the following topics:

- Putting children at the centre of the vision
- Developing a model of services for young children
- Supporting parents and families in the early years
- Ensuring equality of outcomes for all

These topics were selected based on the interviews and focus group as ones where further elaboration of the vision would be helpful for Start Strong. Key points arising from the decision groups were presented to the full meeting at the end of the day.

Following all these stages, Candy Murphy then presented an overview of the findings so far to the project's Research Advisory Group in July 2010.

## **7. Second phase of consultation meetings.**

Following the development of a preliminary report over the course of the summer, a second phase of the consultation process then took place in September and October, when a further round of stakeholders was consulted on aspects of the draft report.

This second phase of the consultation process not only allowed more detailed discussion with

a number of stakeholders who had already been involved in the initial consultation, but also allowed Start Strong to address gaps that had been identified in the initial consultation process.

### **Comment**

In all, more than 200 people took part in the consultation process. We found a high level of consensus on a vision for the future of early childhood in Ireland and on the key policies to achieve this vision. It was also clear that there were a number of common areas of concern in relation to young children's care and education at the present time, particularly funding worries and the problems involved in achieving a national system of quality, co-ordinated services in the current economic climate.

There was a high level of interest expressed by those we spoke to in the development of quality care and education for all young children in Ireland, and clear recognition of the value of early years services and supports in achieving positive outcomes for children and their families as well as for the economy and for society as a whole.

Some issues have not yet been discussed in sufficient detail, and on others there are differing opinions. Start Strong hopes to do more consultation, more research and more analysis on many of these issues in the future, and we also hope to stimulate others to do the same. Nevertheless, our overriding impression from the consultation process was of a striking degree of consensus on the core elements of the vision. We are convinced that our vision is not only in line with international research on what is best for children, but also has support from a wide range of stakeholders in Ireland.



## List of those who took part in the consultation process

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the consultation process in any way. In addition to those listed below, others also contributed to the consultation, both formally and informally, but their names do not appear here. This report was shaped by the many ideas we heard in the consultation process, but does not necessarily reflect the views of any organisation or individual who contributed to the process.

### *Members of the Research Advisory Group*

Dr Tony Crooks, Chairperson  
Dr John Bennett (Visiting Fellow, Thomas Coram Research Unit, University of London)  
Dr Carmel Brennan (IPPA)  
Sarah Craig (Health Research Board)  
Sarah Cullinan (Pobal)  
Kate Goddard (Daycare Trust, UK)  
Irene Gunning (IPPA)  
Michelle Hart (BCCN)  
Prof Nóirín Hayes (CSER Dublin Institute of Technology)  
Dr Helen Johnston (NESC)  
Denise McCormilla (BCCN)  
Prof Brian Nolan (University College, Dublin)

### *Consultation with children*

Three organisations facilitated consultations with children, which took place in a range of early care and education settings:

Barnardos  
IPPA (Irish Pre-school Play Association)  
BCCN (Border Counties Childcare Network)

### *Networks*

Association of Childcare Professionals

Border Counties Childcare Network  
Loch Garman Parents' Network  
City and County Childcare Committees – Managers' Network: Border, Midlands and Western region  
City and County Childcare Committees – Managers' Network: Southern and Eastern region  
Cork Early Years Network

### *Organisations and individuals*

Archways (Jacqui Guiry)  
Archways (Aileen O'Donoghue)  
Association of Childcare Professionals, Wexford branch (Hilary Lantzós)  
Atlantic Philanthropies (Tom Costello)  
Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership (Nóirín Coghlan)  
Barnardos (Anne Conroy)  
Barnardos (Norah Gibbons)  
Barnardos (June Tinsley)  
Base Childcare Facility, Ballyfermot (Shayma Choudhury)  
Base Childcare Facility, Ballyfermot (Melissa Kearney)  
Brigit's Garden Children's Centre, Co. Clare (Veronica Crombie)  
Centre for Effective Services (Heino Schonfeld)  
Childcare Network Loch Garman (Carmel Loneragan)  
Childminding Ireland (Fionnuala Curry)  
Childminding Ireland (Bernie Griffiths)  
Childminding Ireland (Patricia Murray)  
Children's Rights Alliance (Niamh Gallagher)  
Children's Rights Alliance (Jillian van Turnhout)  
City of Dublin VEC crèche, Ballyfermot (Pauline Gregory)  
Cork County Childcare Committee (Karen McDonnell)  
CSER, Dublin Institute of Technology (Rachel Kiersey)  
CSER, Dublin Institute of Technology (Bernie O'Donoghue-Hynes)  
Early Years (Pauline Walmsley)  
ESRI (Joanne Banks)  
ESRI (Delma Byrne)  
ESRI (Bertrand Maître)  
ESRI (Frances McGinnity)



ESRI (Amanda Quail)  
 ESRI (Helen Russell)  
 ESRI (Emer Smyth)  
 Family Resource Centre National Forum (Packie Kelly)  
 Family Support Agency (Pat Bennett)  
 Froebel College of Education (Patsy Stafford)  
 Geraldine French  
 Home-Start (Paul Martin)  
 HSE Community Mothers Programme (Brenda Molloy)  
 HSE Mayo, Early Childcare Services (Jenny Bernard)  
 HSE North-West Dublin Childminders' Advisory Service (Liz Butler)  
 IBEC (Alan O'Kelly)  
 Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association (Audrey Flynn)  
 Katharine Howard Foundation (Noelle Spring)  
 Leitrim County Childcare Committee consultation with parents and service providers  
 Lifestart (Orla Tuohy)  
 Longford County Childcare Committee (Marie-Therèse Marry)  
 Longford Women's Link (Tara Farrell, Marissa Hebron)  
 Mayo Children's Initiative (Stephanie Troy)  
 Mead Community Preschool Day Care Centre, Donaghmede (Maria O'Keefe)  
 Men in Childcare Network (Tony Gillings)  
 Monaghan Communities Parenting Together (Colette Deeney)  
 Montessori Alliance (Lyn Bowers)  
 National Association of Private Childcare Providers (Pauline Fox)  
 National College of Ireland, Early Learning Initiative (Josephine Bleach)  
 National College of Ireland, Early Learning Initiative (Michelle Brazil)  
 National College of Ireland, Early Learning Initiative (Beth Fagan)  
 National Children's Nurseries Association (Teresa Heeney)  
 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Arlene Forster)

National Parents Council Primary (Áine Lynch)  
 National Women's Council of Ireland (Camille Loftus)  
 National Women's Council of Ireland (Orla O'Connor)  
 NESCC, National Economic and Social Council (Helen Johnston)  
 Northside Partnership (Sandra O'Neill)  
 Northside Partnership & Disability Equality Specialist Support Agency, DESSA (Emma Byrne-MacNamee)  
 Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Catherine Hynes)  
 Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Maira O'Mara)  
 One Family (Geraldine Brereton)  
 One Family (Karen Kiernan)  
 Pavee Point / Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network (Colette Murray)  
 Preparing for Life (Noel Kelly)  
 Society of St Vincent de Paul (Audry Deane)  
 South Dublin Children's Services Committee (Maria Donohoe)  
 South Dublin County Childcare Committee (Ruth Shortall)  
 St Patrick's College of Education (Elizabeth Dunphy)  
 St Patrick's College of Education (Anne McGough)  
 St Patrick's College of Education (Maura O'Connor)  
 St Ultan's Childcare Project, Cherry Orchard (Michelle Cavanagh)  
 St Ultan's Childcare Project, Cherry Orchard (Emma Meredith)  
 Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative (Marian Quinn)  
 Tír na nÓg Early Childhood Care and Education (Caroline Boyle)  
 Tolka Area Partnership (Breda Kenny)  
 World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) Ireland (Dr Rosaleen Murphy)  
 youngballymun (Gemma Cox)  
 youngballymun / Barnardos (Antoinette Gibbs)  
 youngballymun (Eleanor McClorey)



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- 33 Central Statistics Office (2009) *op. cit.*
- 34 National Children's Nurseries Association (2009) *op. cit.*
- 35 OECD (2007) *op. cit.*
- 36 Eileen Drew (2010) 'Ireland', in Peter Moss ed. (2010) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2010. Employment Relations Research Series No.115*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills, p.150
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- 'The Government has, by announcing this decision, demonstrated our commitment to our children's social and educational development. It is a key building block in the realisation of our plan for a smart economy. The provision of a year's free pre-school to all children will promote equality of opportunity at the most important developmental stage of children's lives.' Press release, 7 April 2009.
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- 44 The EPPE (Effective Pre-school and Primary Education) project has been tracking the development of 2,800 three year olds in England since 1997 (Kathy Sylva *et al.*, 2008, *EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase*, London: Institute of Education). The EPPNI project is a linked study of 800 children in Northern Ireland (Edward Melhuish *et al.*, 2006, EPPNI Summary Report, Bangor, Co. Down: Department of Education, Northern Ireland).
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- 46 Lawrence J. Schweinhart *et al.* (2005) *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40*, Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.
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- 54 OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD, p.251.
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- 57 European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues (2009) *The Provision of Childcare Services: a Comparative Review of 30 European Countries*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- 58 OECD (2007) *Benefits and Wages: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD.
- 59 Central Statistics Office (2009) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2008*, Dublin: Stationery Office.
- 60 Emer Smyth and Selina McCoy (2009) *Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*, Dublin: ESRI.
- 61 James Heckman (2006) *Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children is an Economically Efficient Policy*, Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development.
- 62 In addressing early school leaving, the report noted the importance of a combination of targeted and universal supports in the area of early childhood care and education, as well as the importance of supports for parental involvement in their children's education from an early age. Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills (2010) *Staying in Education: a New Way Forward*, Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, pp.85-88.
- 63 National Women's Council of Ireland (2005) *An Accessible Childcare Model*, Dublin: NWCi.
- 64 Helen Russell *et al.* (2009) *A Woman's Place: Female Participation in the Irish Labour Market*, Dublin: Equality Authority / ESRI.
- 65 Seamus McGuinness *et al.* (2009) *The Gender Wage-Gap in Ireland*, Dublin: Equality Authority / ESRI.
- 66 For example, the programme that has shown the highest rate of return in cost-benefit analysis has been the High/Scope Perry Pre-School Study in Michigan, USA, which involved both a high quality pre-school programme and weekly home visits to participating families. Lawrence J. Schweinhart *et al.* (2005) *op. cit.*
- 67 Deborah Lowe Vandell and Barbara Wolfe (2000) *Child Care Quality: Does it Matter and Does it Need to be Improved?* Institute for Research on Poverty, Special Report No.78. University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- 68 Margaret Burchinal *et al.* (2010) 'Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programmes', in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol.25, issue 2. Deborah Lowe Vandell *et al.* (2010) 'Do effects of early child care extend to 15 years? Results from the NICHD study of early child care and youth development', in *Child Development*, vol.81, issue 3.
- 69 Edward Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office, p.4.
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 Margaret Kernan (2007) *Play as a Context for Early Learning and Development*, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- 72 CECDE (2006) *Siolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, Principle 4.
- 73 Edward Melhuish (2004) *op. cit.*, p.55; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *op. cit.*, pp.314-8; and Sandra Mathers, Kathy Sylva and Heather Joshi (2007) *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study*, London: Department for Education and



- Skills, pp.7-10.
- 74 NCCA (2009) 'Building partnerships between parents and practitioners', in *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- 75 Department of Education and Science (2009) *op. cit.*
- 76 See note 73 above.
- 77 Pam Sammons (2010) 'Does pre-school make a difference?' in Kathy Sylva *et al.*, *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge.
- 78 Steven Barnett *et al.* (2004) *The Universal Vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Pre-School for All?* Pre-School Policy Matters, Issue 6. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- 79 Pam Sammons (2010) *op. cit.*, p.105.
- 80 This concept is closely related to the concept of 'tailored universalism' advocated by the NESF in National Economic and Social Council (2005) *The Developmental Welfare State*, Dublin: NESF, p.203.
- 81 Office of the Minister for Children (2007) *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- 82 Barry Andrews TD (2010) *op. cit.*
- 83 The large-scale EPPE study in the UK (where there is a mixed economy of provision that is comparable to Ireland's but includes a significant State-run – 'maintained' – nursery sector) found that 'Centres within the educational maintained/state sector (nursery schools, nursery classes and integrated centres) generally had higher scores than those in the voluntary or private sectors. State sector educational provision was in the "good"-to-"excellent" range followed by local authority social services day-care. Private day nurseries were consistently found to have scores in the 'minimal/adequate' range while playgroups had lower scores.' Kathy Sylva *et al.* (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*, London: Institute of Education, p.16.
- 84 Similarly, the National Competitiveness Council recently argued that 'Due to the cumulative nature of education, the NCC believes that serious consideration should be given towards the long term development of a formal pre-primary education system in Ireland, mirroring the bold steps Ireland has taken in recent decades in the development of primary, secondary, tertiary, and more recently fourth level education.' National Competitiveness Council (2009) *op. cit.*
- 85 Kathy Sylva *et al.* (2008), *EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase*, London: Institute of Education, p.2.
- 86 For a dual-earner couple, the average EU cost of childcare for two children is around 13% of average earnings, compared to around 30% in Ireland. OECD (2007) *op. cit.*, p.129.
- 87 The OECD writes of the need 'to reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes', OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Paris: OECD, p.213.
- 88 Research in Ireland has shown that parents in rural areas place a high value on home visits by public health nurses, especially those parents without a car, but feel the public health nurse system is overstretched. Laura Hanlon and Nóirín Hayes (2006) *Early Assessment and Intervention in Educational Disadvantage*, Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.
- 89 As recommended by the NESF (2006) *op. cit.*
- 90 An excellent example, which in our vision would be incorporated into mainstream practice in all providers, is the guidelines published by the OMCYA: OMCYA (2006) *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers*, Dublin: OMCYA.
- 91 Pam Sammons (2010) *op. cit.*, p.105.
- 92 A recent OECD review of migrant education in Ireland recommended both the recruitment of pre-school teachers from diverse backgrounds as well as training initiatives to support staff right across the sector in intercultural education and language development, and particularly in relation to the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines*. Miho Taguma *et al.* (2009) *OECD Reviews of Migrant Education: Ireland*, Paris: OECD.
- 93 In this regard, our vision reflects the inclusive principle that underpins the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004*, which states that: 'A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with – (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.'
- 94 Recent research from the UK based on longitudinal analysis of 12,000 children from the Millennium Cohort Study identified a substantial gap in early cognitive development between some children from low-income and middle-income families, and found that nearly 50% of the explained gap in cognitive development could be explained by the home learning environment (e.g. parents reading to children, regular trips to the library) and parenting style (e.g. regular daily routines). Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook (2010) *Low Income and Early Cognitive Development in the UK*, London: The Sutton Trust.
- 95 The recent OECD review of work-life balance policies, *Babies and Bosses*, argues that some form of legal entitlement is necessary if all families are going to have access to flexible work: 'when family-friendly workplace support is provided by employers on a voluntary basis and/or after agreement with unions, access to such support is unequal, with many workers in weak bargaining positions missing out.' OECD (2007) *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life, a Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries*. Paris: OECD, pp.191-2.
- 96 Paul Gregg and Jane Waldfogel (eds.) (2005) *The Economic Journal, special issue: Parental Leave, Early Maternal Employment and Child Outcomes*, Vol.115. A meta-analysis of 69 studies of early maternal employment concluded that: 'Employment in the first year of life, particularly full-time employment, was associated with more negative outcomes for children, whereas, somewhat later employment (Years 2 and 3) appeared to be advantageous for children's achievement', R. Lucas-Thompson *et al.* (2010) 'Maternal Work Early in the Lives of Children and its Distal Associations With Achievement and Behavior Problems: A Meta-Analysis', in *Psychological Bulletin*, p.24). Recent research suggests that children can suffer negative effects where parents return to employment within the first 12 months, but that these negative effects can be offset by the positive, indirect effects of raising family income through a mother's employment. However, paid parental leave allows parents to avoid the effects of low income, while at the same avoiding the





- negative effects on children of an early parental return to employment. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Wen-Jui Han and Jane Waldfogel (2010) 'First year maternal employment and child development in the first 7 years' in *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, vol.75, issue 2.
- 97 The evidence indicates that active and regular engagement by fathers in their children's care leads to a range of positive outcomes for children. Anna Sarkadi *et al.* (2008) 'Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies', in *Acta Paediatrica*, vol.97.
- 98 For examples of work-life balance policies and arrangements, see [www.worklifebalance.ie](http://www.worklifebalance.ie), the website of the National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance Policies.
- 99 National Institute of Child Health and Development (2006) *The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development*, US Department of Health and Human Services; Edward Melhuish (2010) 'Why children, parents and home learning are important', in Kathy Sylva *et al.* (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge, pp.54-55.
- 100 Kathleen Lynch, John Baker and Maureen Lyons eds. (2009) *Affective Equality: Love, Care and Injustice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 101 Frances McGinnity and Helen Russell (2008) *Gender Inequalities in Time Use: The Distribution of Caring, Housework and Employment among Women and Men in Ireland*, Dublin: Equality Authority and the ESRI, p.xi and xii.
- 102 See Seamus McGuinness *et al.* (2009) *The Gender Wage Gap in Ireland*. Dublin: ESRI and the Equality Authority.
- 103 An international review of research on leave policies concluded that 'Leave specifically for fathers (e.g. Paternity leave, fathers' quotas in Parental leave) is well used if paid at or near income replacement level'. Peter Moss ed. (2010) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2010. Employment Relations Research Series No.115*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills, p.33.
- 104 A major study of pre-school provision in Northern Ireland found that: 'The quality of the early learning environment at home (where parents are actively engaged in activities with children) promoted intellectual and social development in all children. Although parents' social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes, the quality of the home learning environment was more important and only moderately associated with social class or mothers' qualification levels. What parents do is more important than who they are. Hence pre-school settings that do not include parent support / education are missing an important element in enhancing social and behavioural development.' Edward Melhuish (2010) 'Effective pre-school provision in Northern Ireland', in Kathy Sylva *et al.* (2010), *op. cit.*, pp.203-4.
- 105 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) *The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the Gap between What we Know and What we Do*. Cambridge, MA: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.
- 106 Council of Europe – Committee of Experts on Children and Families (2007) *Parenting in Contemporary Europe: a Positive Approach*, Mary Daly ed., Strasbourg: Council of Europe, p.9.
- 107 A recently published randomised control trial in the US has shown the universal provision of parenting supports on a whole-population basis (with professional training of the existing workforce and universal media and communication strategies) to be very effective in reducing child maltreatment. Ronald Prinz *et al.* (2009) 'Population-based prevention of child maltreatment: the US Triple P System population trial', in *Prevention Science*, vol.10, no.1.  
<http://longford-westmeath.triplep-staypositive.net/>
- 108 See note 15.
- 109 Yoshie Kaga, John Bennett and Peter Moss (2010) *op. cit.*
- 110 *Ibid.*, pp.80-85.
- 111 *Ibid.*
- 112 Department of Education and Science (1999) *Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education*, Dublin, section 1.1.
- 113 Start Strong (2009) *Budget 2010 Analysis*. Dublin: Start Strong.
- 114 'The ECCE is a scheme designed to give children access to a free Pre-School Year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school. Participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment.' Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2010) *Guide for Parents to the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education*.
- 115 Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills (2010) *Staying in Education: a New Way Forward*, Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas; Mary O'Kane (2007) *Building Bridges: The Transition from Preschool to Primary School for Children in Ireland*, PhD thesis, Dublin Institute of Technology.
- 117 The OECD review team argued in its analysis of early years provision in Ireland: 'Of real concern to the OECD review team also was its observation of a predominantly didactic approach towards early learning in the primary school infant classes. The model of the teacher as the source of learning, from whom young children receive knowledge, is still strongly felt within the system, while the notions of the well-being and involvement of children or the construction of knowledge through play, participation and choice, need to be developed. In sum, a more active and experientially-based pedagogy would improve learning and quality in the junior infant classes, and could even be extended – as in other countries – through the senior infants into the first years of compulsory schooling.' OECD (2004) *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Country Note for Ireland*, OECD Directorate for Education, p.77.
- 118 [www.ncca.biz/Aistear/](http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/)
- 119 OECD (2006) *op. cit.*, p.58.
- 120 Mary O'Kane and Nóirín Hayes (2006) 'The transition to school in Ireland: views of preschool and primary school teachers', in *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood*, vol.2
- 121 New Economics Foundation and Action for Children (2009) *Backing the Future: Why Investing in Children is Good for us All*, London: New Economics Foundation.
- 122 In the Estimates that accompanied Budget 2008, the Government indicated an annual budget for the OMCYA of €675m, while in Budget 2010 this figure was reduced to €51m, primarily because of the abolition of the Early Childcare Supplement at the end of 2009. Start



- Strong (2009) *Budget 2010 Analysis*, Dublin: Start Strong.
- 123 The European target was proposed in 1996 by the European Commission  
Childcare Network (see p.XX above). The UNICEF target was set out in  
their 2008 *Report Card* (see p.XX above).
- 124 National Economic and Social Forum (2005) *Early Childhood Care and  
Education*. Dublin: NESF, pp.78-80.
- 125 *Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing  
the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by  
BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC and repealing  
Directive 96/34/EC*.
- 126 Edward Melhuish (2004) *op. cit.*
- 127 Pam Sammons (2010) *op. cit.*
- 128 See note 99 above.
- 129 National Economic and Social Forum (2005), *op. cit.*
- 130 National Women's Council of Ireland (2005) *An Accessible Childcare  
Model*, Dublin: NWCi.
- 131 It should be noted that there is a tendency in international reports on  
early childhood policy to include the full 0-6 age-range, which in Ireland  
encompasses the infant classes of primary schools. While this is entirely  
appropriate – and is a practice we follow in this report – it means that  
caution must be used when comparing Ireland's early care and education  
infrastructure with that in other countries or with international standards.  
For example, in international comparative data on services for 3-6  
year olds, the high level of third-level qualifications among infant class  
teachers in Ireland can direct attention away from the low level in pre-  
school settings, while conversely the relatively high adult-child ratios in  
pre-school settings can give a misleading impression of the ratios in the  
infant classes of primary schools.
- 132 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) *Implementing Child  
Rights in Early Childhood: General Comment No.7*.
- 133 UNICEF (2008) *op. cit.*
- 134 National Economic and Social Council (2009) *op. cit.*, vol.2, p.34.
- 135 OECD (2001) *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*,  
Paris: OECD.
- 136 OECD (2006) *op. cit.*
- 137 *Babies and Bosses* examines a range of work-life balance policies  
across OECD countries (OECD, 2007, *Babies and Bosses: Reconciling  
Work and Family Life, a Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries*.  
Paris: OECD). *Doing Better for Children* looks more broadly at children's  
well-being (OECD, 2009, *Doing Better for Children*, Paris: OECD.)
- 138 OECD (2004) *op. cit.*
- 139 At the Barcelona summit in 2002, the European Council set the targets  
of providing childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3  
years old and the mandatory school age, and to at least 33% of children  
under 3 years of age.
- 140 European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures  
to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men  
and Women (1996) *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children:  
Proposals for a Ten-Year Action Programme*
- 141 Children in Europe (2007) *Young Children and their Services:  
Developing a European Approach – a Children in Europe Discussion  
Paper*.
- 142 John Bennett (2009) *Improving the Well-being of Young Children in  
Europe: the Role of Early Years Services*, Brussels: Eurochild.
- 143 OECD (2006) *op. cit.*, p.417.
- 144 Three recent evaluations are: (1) National Evaluation of Sure Start  
(2008) *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Three Year Olds  
and their Families*, London: HMSO; (2) Ofsted – the Office for Standards  
in Education (2009) *The Impact of Integrated Services on Children and  
their Families in Sure Start Children's Centres*, London: Ofsted; and (3)  
House of Commons – Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010)  
*Sure Start Children's Centres*, HC 130-I, London: The Stationery Office.
- 145 UNICEF (2008) *op. cit.*
- 146 Barbara Martin Korpi (2007) *The Politics of Pre-School: Intentions and  
Decisions Underlying the Emergence and Growth of the Swedish Pre-  
School*, Stockholm: Ministry of Education and Research.
- 147 OECD (2006) *op. cit.*, p.408.
- 148 OECD (2006) *op. cit.*, pp.104-5.
- 149 Barbara Martin Korpi (2007) *op. cit.*
- 150 Findings from the consultation with children that was led by the IPPA  
appear in IPPA (2010) *Giving Children a Voice*, Dublin: IPPA.





Third Floor, Six/Seven Exchange Place  
IFSC, Dublin 1  
tel 01 791 0100  
email [info@startstrong.ie](mailto:info@startstrong.ie)  
[www.startstrong.ie](http://www.startstrong.ie)

**Images** All of the images used in this report were created by children during the consultation part of the project. All names have been changed.

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