



Planning for the early years



A policy priority NESC, October 2009

In October 2009, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) described early childhood education and care as one of Ireland's nine 'policy priorities' in the economic recession. According to the NESC:

'Ireland's early childhood care and development infrastructure is still comparatively underdeveloped and is one area of critical importance for the future of our children, our society and our economy.'

NESC (2009) *Well-Being Matters: A Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESC, vol.1, pp.xv and xxi

Why Ireland needs a national plan for children's early care and education

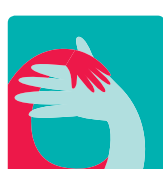
High quality, affordable care and education in children's early years matters for children's development, for future economic growth, and for a fairer and more equitable society.¹ There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the importance of public investment in young children and family supports as well as the significant benefits of prevention and early intervention.

Some children in Ireland have high quality care and education in their early years – but many do not. According to the Central Statistics Office, 60% of parents in Ireland do not believe they have access to high quality, affordable childcare in their community.²

If we are to give all young children the support they need, major changes are required in the funding and regulation of services for young children, in family supports, and in entitlements to parental leave and work-life balance.

These changes won't happen overnight. But what we can do now is to set out a clear vision of what we need, and to call upon the Government to develop a national plan that will move us steadily towards that vision over the years ahead.

That is why Start Strong is campaigning for a national, 10-year plan for early childhood. We are calling our campaign Children 2020, in the hope that all young children born in Ireland in 2020 will have the supports and services they need to give them strong foundations as they start out in life.³



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Advancing Children's
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Why a 10-year plan for early childhood?

A comprehensive and ambitious 10-year plan for early childhood could transform the life chances of the next generation. We need a plan that focuses specifically on young children, as that's the only way we will achieve the step-change that Ireland needs in services and supports for young children and their families. A new National Children's Strategy will provide a valuable overarching framework for policy, but we also need a dedicated, detailed plan for the early years:

- **To drive positive change for young children.**

In recent years there have been major developments in the sector, but it has not always been clear what vision or long-term plan lay behind them. According to the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), 'It is urgent to renew and restate Ireland's vision for early education and childcare services as a whole so as to ensure the coherence of the new and old measures being taken and how they interact with one another'.⁴ Future policy development for young children needs to be planned, coherent and ambitious.

- **To build the foundations of a strong economy.**

There is a strong economic case for investing in young children.⁵ NESC recently argued that early care and education is 'a good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy'.⁶ A focused national plan would help to maximise the impact of public investment in young children.

- **To reach international standards.** UNICEF recently placed Ireland at the bottom of an international league table of standards for early childhood care and education (see next page). As long as the care and education of young children in Ireland remains weak by international standards, we are failing our children. A comprehensive and ambitious national plan would help Ireland meet UNICEF's minimum standards, and would help us to meet the needs and rights of all our children.



Photograph © Derek Speirs





Photograph © Derek Speirs

Growing calls for change

In 1995, Professor Nóirín Hayes wrote that 'there is no national policy or philosophy generally about early childhood services'.⁷ Over the 15 years since then, there has been rapid development of policy and provision, and coordination between Government departments has strengthened. But it remains the case that there is no comprehensive national strategy for early care and education in Ireland, in spite of growing calls for change:

- The **OECD** in 2004 called for: 'The urgent formulation of a National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development [in Ireland]'.⁸
- The **National Economic and Social Forum (NESF)** in 2005 proposed a 'policy framework and implementation plan for ECCE [Early Childhood Care and Education] to cover a ten-year period... The aim would be that by the target year of 2015, a comprehensive system of ECCE would be in place'.⁹
- The **Oireachtas Joint Committee** in 2005 endorsed the framework proposed by the NESF, arguing that: 'There is now consensus ... that the issue of childcare can only be addressed by a long-term and holistic child-centred strategy'.¹⁰
- An **IBEC-ICTU Partnership Sub-Committee**, established under Sustaining Progress, argued in 2005 that: 'Ireland needs a more comprehensive and strategic approach ... with the aim of delivering a Comprehensive Childcare Service within 10 years'.¹¹
- The **National Competitiveness Council** in 2009 called for the 'long-term development of a formal pre-primary education system in Ireland'.¹²
- The **Children's Rights Alliance** in its Report Card 2010 called for the Government to develop a ten-year national plan for the early years, arguing that: a 'comprehensive plan – outlining a vision for quality, accessible and affordable early years' education and care for children in each of the first six years – is required'.¹³

Ireland fails to meet international 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 (see box).¹⁴ 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: the Free Pre-School Year has been introduced, and there has been 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'.¹⁵ In particular, Ireland continues to lack a national plan for the organisation and financing of early childhood services.

UNICEF's 10 'minimum standards' for early care and education

1. A national plan for the organisation and financing of early childhood services
2. Parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary, with at least 2 weeks' leave for fathers
3. Subsidised and regulated childcare services for 25% of children under 3
4. Subsidised and accredited early education services for 80% of 4-year olds
5. 80% of all childcare staff trained, including childminders
6. 50% of staff in accredited early education services with relevant tertiary qualification
7. Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education
8. 1% of GDP spent on early childhood education and care
9. Child poverty rate less than 10%, as poverty is strongly associated with negative outcomes for children
10. Near-universal outreach of essential child health services, as a proxy measure of services to the most disadvantaged.

UNICEF (2008) *The Child Care Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.



Elements of a national plan for early childhood

In our Children 2020 policy brief, Start Strong set out some of the key elements that we believe should be included in a national plan for early childhood.¹⁶

- Children's rights and needs at the centre of the plan
- Supports for families
- Paid parental leave and statutory paternity leave
- Work/life balance – to meet children's needs
- Affordability and accessibility for all families
- High quality in services and supports for young children and their families
- A graduate-led, professional workforce
- Childminding as part of the plan
- Universal services, with additional supports for children who experience disadvantage
- Increased investment, as part of a strategy for national recovery.

New Zealand: Pathways to the Future

The New Zealand Government launched a '10-year strategic plan for early childhood education' in 2002, titled *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*. The plan, which committed the New Zealand Government to greater involvement in facilitating access to quality early childhood education services, has three core goals:

1. Increasing participation in quality early childhood education services, with an additional focus on groups with low participation levels.
2. Improving quality of early childhood education services.
3. Promoting collaborative relationships between early childhood education services, primary schools and parent support policies.

The plan involves seven stages, to be realised progressively over 10 years.

United Kingdom: 10-year strategy

In 2004, the UK Government published a 'ten-year strategy for childcare', *Choice for Parents: the Best Start for Children*. This built on commitments made in 1998, when the Government had set out its aim of ensuring high quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0 to 14 in every neighbourhood, which had initiated a major process of change in early childhood care and education in the UK. The objectives named in the 2004 strategy include:

- Creating more choice for parents in balancing work and family responsibilities.
- Creating Children's Centres in every community.
- Improving quality through strengthening workforce qualifications and regulatory reform.
- Making childcare more affordable.
- Creating a statutory duty for local authorities to secure sufficient provision.

In 2009, at the mid-point of the 10-year strategy, the UK Government published an update, *Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare: Building on the 10-Year Strategy*, following a review process which included establishment of an Early Years Stakeholder Group.

1. Start Strong (2009) *Why Early Care and Education?* Dublin: Start Strong.
2. CSO (2009) *Quarterly National Household Survey: Childcare, Quarter 4, 2007*, Dublin: CSO.
3. Start Strong (2009) *Children 2020: Giving Children a Strong Start in Life*, Dublin: Start Strong.
4. National Economic and Social Council (2008) *The Irish Economy in the Early 21st Century*, Dublin: NESF, p.268.
5. Start Strong (2009) *The Foundations of Growth – Investing in the Next Generation*, Dublin: Start Strong.
6. National Economic and Social Council (2009) *Well-being Matters: a Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESF, vol. 1, p.160.
7. Nóirín Hayes (1995) *The Case for a National Policy on Early Education, Poverty and Policy Discussion Paper No.2*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.
8. OECD (2004) *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Country Note for Ireland*, Paris: OECD, p.6.
9. National Economic and Social Forum (2005) *Early Childhood Care and Education*, Dublin: NESF, p.xiii.
10. Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights (2005) *Report on Childcare*, Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, p.7.
11. IBEC-ICTU Sub-Committee (2005) *Quality Childcare from a Social Partnership Perspective*, p.53.
12. National Competitiveness Council (2009) *Statement on Education and Training*, Dublin: Forfás, p.20.
13. Children's Rights Alliance (2010) *Report Card 2010*, Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance, p.11-12.
14. UNICEF (2008) *The Child Care Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.
15. National Economic and Social Council (2009) *Well-being Matters: a Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESF, vol. 2, p.34.
16. Start Strong (2009) *Children 2020: Giving Children a Strong Start in Life*, Dublin: Start Strong.

Start Strong is a national organisation committed to advancing early care and education in Ireland. **Start Strong** advocates evidence-based policy-making.

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