

Start Strong Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Health and Children.

Children's Early Care and Education – Access, Affordability and Quality.

20 February, 2014.

Start Strong welcomes the opportunity to be here this morning to discuss the issues of affordability and quality in children's early care and education.

Start Strong is a coalition of more than 50 organisations seeking to advance children's early care and education in Ireland, working from a children's rights perspective.

Young children are the politicians, farmers, teachers, carers, doctors, builders, artists, economists, nurses and entrepreneurs of the future. They are our most precious natural resource, and their future rests with us. We owe it to them to give them the very best possible start in life. That's why we need to look at the issue through the lens of children's education, and what will provide the best outcomes for children.

Children's early years are a crucial time – it is that early educational experience that has most impact on our learning throughout our lives. Quality early care and education gives young children the learning experience that they will carry with them through their lives. It's laying the foundations for life-long learning. It is not glorified babysitting.

There is a strong economic argument for public expenditure on early childhood that rests on its benefits for children. Longitudinal studies have shown that high quality services for young children can bring significant benefits for children's welfare, development, educational attainment and a range of long-term outcomes.¹

And yet, despite the importance of this early education, Ireland doesn't have a history of investing a huge amount of public money in it. The costs of early education and care in Ireland are largely met by parents, and very often are like a second-mortgage to parents. Often those costs are unaffordable, and can mean parents having to make a Hobson's-choice not to work.

According to the OECD Ireland invests only 0.4% of GDP annually in childcare and early education services, compared to the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP. To just reach average OECD expenditure the Irish government would need to invest an additional €450 million a year in children's early care and education. Internationally, 1% of GDP is the recognised benchmark for the level of annual investment required to achieve high quality early education.

I mentioned earlier that research has shown the impact of early learning throughout a child's life –our early education experiences impact on how we go on to do in school, which in turn influences whether we go on to third-level education and ultimately influences our work-life and the types of careers we have.

Access and quality

The other thing that research has shown is that early education only has this impact when it is of high quality. Poor quality means not only do children not benefit, but that they can be harmed by those experiences.

The most effective way to ensure services are of good-quality is to invest public money directly into services, rather than channelling it through tax-breaks. By investing directly into services, there can be greater control of quality, equitable access, training and co-ordination of services.

Countries where there are 'demand-side' funding such as tax-free allowances, like the UK, US and Canada are judged to have lower quality (UNICEF) and, ironically, tend to be less affordable to parents (OECD).

As a country, we have a huge-challenge ahead of us if we are to provide high-quality early education accessible to all children.

The Free Pre-School Year has significantly improved access (with 94% take-up). However, it only lasts for 38

¹ Start Strong (2011) *The Economics of Children's Early Years – Early Care and Education in Ireland: Costs and Benefits*. http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Economics_of_Childrens_Early_Years.pdf

weeks, and is only available in the year before school entry. For some children it only begins at the age of 4. There are two other schemes: the Community Childcare Subvention and CETS schemes which assist many families, but they are not available everywhere, and many families who need financial support are not eligible.

We welcome the fact that the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has announced that there will be a review of these two schemes. However, Start Strong believes that the review should look at the broader issues of affordability rather than focusing exclusively on these two schemes. We need to ensure that all children, regardless of where they live or how much their parents earn, can access high quality early education services.

Confronting low quality

We know that there is good practice in early care and education services in Ireland. However, we also know that there are examples of really poor practice, and that poor practice can result in children suffering harm.

The Prime Time investigation *A Breach of Trust* focused on three privately-operated full-day crèches, it made clear that the causes and the risks are systemic. At the same time, it showed that public funds have gone into services where quality standards are low or questionable, including through the Free Pre-School Year.

We need to make sure that no child is in a low-quality early care and education service. We cannot stand over a situation where public money is going to services that are of poor quality.

Recently, steps have been taken to ensure improvements in quality, including legislating for minimum qualifications in the workforce, increasing the sanctions for non-compliance, putting inspection reports online, and moving to establish a National Quality Support Service.

However, these are just first steps. Systemic reform will require significant additional public investment over the years ahead, especially to support the professionalisation of the workforce. Professionalisation is critical because the research evidence shows that high quality adult-child interactions are most consistently found where those working with children are highly qualified, and where wages are sufficiently high to reduce staff turnover to a low level and to reward staff for the investment they make in their education and training.²

In spite of the high cost of early care and education to parents in Ireland, the wages paid to those working in the sector are low, and there are very few career development opportunities. Many staff, including those with graduate qualifications, earn little more than the minimum wage.³ Many are on short-term contracts, often released in the summer months when funding for the Free Pre-School Year stops. It is no wonder that staff can often be stressed and unsupported. It is essential that any subsidy schemes do not continue to rest on this system of low wages, poor working conditions and low qualification levels.

When the Free Pre-School Year was introduced in Ireland, some limited steps were taken to use the scheme to lever quality improvements, e.g. through a higher capitation grant for services that employ qualified graduates, and contractual requirements that participating services should meet minimum standards in staff qualifications.

However, the requirements imposed so far have been limited. The Government could and should do more to lever quality improvements through the conditions attached to public funding.

² E. Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office, p.55; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, J. Shonkoff and D. Phillips (eds.) Washington, DC: National Academy Press, pp.314-8; and S. Mathers, K. Sylva and H. Joshi (2007) *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study*, London: Department for Education and Skills, pp.7-10.

³ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013) *Right from the Start: Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*, p.21.

Supporting *all* children

We very much welcome the on-going political commitment to maintaining the Free Pre-School Year and ultimately to extending its scope to a second universal, free pre-school year, subject to quality standards being met.

Outside of that free provision, we need to ensure that parents can access high-quality services, and avail of flexible work solutions – so that they can find an affordable solution that works for their families. This means public investment so that parents can access quality, affordable services. It also means stronger support for work-life balance measures.

Conclusions

- Children's early years are a crucial time, laying the foundations for life-long learning.
- Public expenditure on early care and education is an investment in children with significant long-term economic returns.
- Quality is critical if these economic returns are to be achieved, and if we are to avoid harm to children. Any funding schemes must have quality built in.
- The international evidence suggests the most effective way of ensuring both quality and access is through supply-side, universal funding schemes, of the type seen in the Free Pre-School Year.
- While we need to review and reform existing schemes, the policy priority for addressing quality and access should be a move towards a Second Free Pre-School Year, with a raising of quality standards.
- Outside of this free provision, early care and education services should be subsidised to ensure that all children can access high-quality services regardless of where they live or their parent's income. Such public funding, if invested in services, can be used as leverage to ensure high-quality services.

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Start Strong is a coalition of more than 50 organisations seeking to advance children's early care and education in Ireland.

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