



Submission to Department of Children and Youth Affairs on its Statement of Strategy 2011-2014

Overview

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs ("the Department") in relation to the development of its Statement of Strategy 2011-2014.

The creation of the Department for Children and Youth Affairs was a major step forwards. It was something we explicitly called for in our *Children 2020* report, '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'.¹

The change certainly has symbolic importance, yet its practical impact will depend on the new Department's strategic approach, and on how effectively the Department can work with other Departments, especially Education and Health. For these reasons, the Department's Statement of Strategy is a highly significant document.

In this submission, we point to a number of issues that we believe should be central to the Department's Statement of Strategy:

1. Identification of children's early years as a distinct strand in the Department's Statement of Strategy.
2. Development of strategies that encompass the whole 0-6 age range.
3. Prevention and early intervention as a core principle.
4. Identification of quality as a priority for children's early care and education services.
5. A cascading model of service provision, with targeted supports on a base of universal services.
6. Greater coordination and integration of services, both within the Department and in relations with other Departments.
7. Investment in early childhood as a policy priority.

1. Early years as a distinct strand

We urge the Department to identify children's early years as a distinct and high-priority strand within its Statement of Strategy.

While the Department and its predecessor the OMCYA have been at the forefront of rapid development of policies on children's early care and education (especially with the very welcome introduction of the Free Pre-School Year), there has been no national plan guiding policy development in this area. As a result policies have sometimes appeared ad hoc (e.g. the Early Childcare Supplement, introduced in 2006, abandoned in 2009) or disconnected from other areas of policy, e.g. health and education.

It will be important that the Department's high-level goals and objectives include an explicit focus on children's early years as a distinct strand of policy.

In particular, the Department has indicated that a new National Children's Strategy will be developed in 2012. The Department's Statement of Strategy is an opportunity to signal its intent to present an ambitious and coherent strategy for children's early years as part of the National Children's Strategy.

2. Strategies for the whole 0-6 age range

Early years policy development has been most rapid in relation to the 3-5 age group, through the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year. We welcome the Government's continued commitment to the Free Pre-School Year. The Government now needs to move to address the policy gap in relation to 0-3 year olds.

While maternity leave and the work of Public Health Nurses provide supports for children and families in the first months, there are few supports available between those early months and the age of 3.

Some supports are available in disadvantaged



communities, e.g. through the Community Childcare Subvention scheme and the Family Resource Centres, but even these supports do not reach all disadvantaged families, given their geographic limitations.

A recent UNESCO report summed up recent research in cautioning against a 0-3 (childcare) / 3-6 (early education) split in policy and in the governance of early childhood services.² All services for young children should be centrally concerned with *both* the care of young children *and* 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.

There are already good precedents for an integrated approach to the 0-6 age group in the Department's work, in the Aistear curriculum framework and the Síolta quality framework. Aistear and Síolta emphasise the importance of continuity in children's experiences right through early childhood, with the Aistear curriculum framework already being incorporated into the infant classes of primary schools.

It is essential that the 0-6 age-range is seen as a single period of childhood, and that objectives and monitoring indicators are developed that encompass this full age-range.

3. Prevention and early intervention

In announcing the formation of the new Department, the Minister stated that prevention and early intervention will be one of the "core principles" underpinning the new Department.³ Start Strong urges the Department to make prevention and early intervention a central theme in its Statement of Strategy.

A large and growing body of evidence has demonstrated that prevention and early intervention approaches are more effective and more cost-effective than remedial interventions. This is particularly true of interventions in very early childhood, given what we now know about brain development in children's earliest years.⁴ Investing in high quality services and supports for children in their early years can save public funds many times over in areas such as the criminal justice system, public health-care, and remedial education.

In January 2011, the Scottish Parliament's Finance Committee issued a report at the end of a major inquiry into preventative spending.

The committee concluded that:

*"Early intervention ... can significantly help to prevent or reduce the likelihood of children developing future social problems that may otherwise have necessitated an intervention by the state. The approach has the potential to save relevant public bodies significant sums of money as the number of interventions that they have to provide is thereby significantly reduced."*⁵

Prevention and early intervention approaches prioritised by the Department should include high quality early care and education, as well as the further development of mechanisms to ensure effective access routes to additional supports for children and families who need them.

4. Quality as a priority

Enhancing the quality of early care and education services should be a central objective for the Department. We recommend that the Department's strategies and performance indicators should include a strong focus on the quality of services.

If the Government's expenditure on the Free Pre-School Year is to achieve its intended impact, then the Government must take steps to ensure services are of high quality. We were therefore pleased to see the commitment in the Programme for Government to "improve the quality of the pre-school year by implementing standards and reviewing training options" (p.39).

Quality improvements must not be limited to the pre-school year, however. Research evidence identifies quality as the key to achieving positive outcomes for young children, whatever the age of the child.⁶ When quality is poor in early care and education, not only are the benefits minimal but children can suffer.⁷

We recommend that the Department's strategies for enhancing the quality of early care and education services should include:

- Further use of State funding as a policy lever to incentivise professionalisation of the early years workforce. We welcome the commitments in the national literacy strategy to continue raising the minimum qualification requirements for practitioners delivering State-funded programmes, and to maintain higher capitation rates for higher qualification levels.⁸ The Department's Statement of



Strategy is an opportunity to set out a clear time-frame for raising the minimum requirements.

- The full roll-out of the Síolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework to all early care and education services. While many services already operate to high quality standards, others do not, and those services need more intensive support.
- Reform of the inspection regime to enhance monitoring and evaluation of the quality of early care and education services. A regime that effectively combines the monitoring of the Pre-School Regulations, Síolta and Aistear would allow for regular, holistic assessments of services.
- Working with the Pre-School Inspectorate to develop an effective mechanism for enforcing the contractual requirement of State-funded early years programmes that services should have a satisfactory level of compliance with regulations.
- Working with the Pre-School Inspectorate to make all inspection reports publicly available on the internet.
- Introducing a system of compulsory registration for all paid childminders, or amending the Pre-School Regulations to require notification by paid childminders who care for one or more pre-school children. Currently the Pre-School Regulations only require notification where a childminder cares for 4 or more pre-school children from different families. Child protection concerns alone suggest this is unacceptable, but it is also a lost opportunity to engage with childminders to offer them positive supports.

5. Cascading model of service provision

The Department's Statement of Strategy should set out the Department's continued commitment to what the OECD terms a "cascading" model of service provision.⁹ That implies a base of universal services, with access and referral routes to more intensive, targeted supports for those children and families with additional needs.

The delivery of high quality services on a universal basis to all young children provides a non-stigmatising prevention mechanism, averting the need for additional supports for many children and families. Universal services also provide an effective means of identifying

children with additional needs, helping to ensure effective targeting.

The *Agenda for Children's Services*, which depicts this cascading model using the Hardiker diagram, points to the work of Public Health Nurses, GPs and health promotion services as being at the universal level.¹⁰ We believe the Free Pre-School Year should now also be identified as an essential universal service. We urge the Department to maintain the Free Pre-School Year as universal and free, to ensure it is effective as a preventative measure.

6. Joined-up services

We recommend the Statement of Strategy to make the coordination and integration of services for young children a priority, both within the Department and in relations with other Departments, especially Health and Education.

We welcome the statement made by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, when the new Department was announced, that the Department's work will include driving coordinated action across sectors, including health and education.¹¹ We also welcome the commitment made in the Programme for Government to adopt a new area-based approach to child poverty.¹²

Given the breadth of the Department's remit, the Statement of Strategy should encompass services and supports for children's early care and education in 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. Services and supports in all these areas, as well as health supports such as Public Health Nurses, should be closely linked and easily accessible to all who need them.

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 policies that help young children to move successfully from the home into settings outside the home and that later support their transition into primary schools.

To provide a framework for joined-up services and supports for young children and their families, in our *Children 2020* report we



proposed the development of “early childhood hubs”, which would involve using existing resources differently, rather than creating new organisations.¹³ We are currently engaged in a research project on the integration of services, which we hope will support the Department’s policy development in this area.

7. Investment

While the Department’s ability to increase investment in young children will be severely limited in the 2011-14 period by Budgetary constraints, we nevertheless believe the Statement of Strategy is an opportunity to indicate the importance of prioritising early childhood in investment decisions and to identify the need to plan for the long-term development of early childhood services and supports.

Given the evidence on the way children’s early years shape their development and life-chances, the OECD’s 2010 report *Doing Better for Children* argues that public spending on services for children should be front-loaded on children’s first six years.¹⁴

Among OECD countries, Ireland is below average in the proportion of social expenditure that goes on early childhood, as opposed to middle or late childhood. And Ireland’s spending on *services* for young children is even weaker by international standards, especially for the very youngest children (aged 0-2), as a large proportion of social expenditure for young children in Ireland takes the form of cash benefits rather than services.¹⁵

We are very aware that we cannot significantly increase levels of investment overnight, but the process of planning for change can begin in the short-term and initial steps can be taken during the period covered by the Department’s Statement of Strategy.

Start Strong

Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance children’s early care and education in Ireland.

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¹ Start Strong (2010) *Children 2020: Planning Now, For the Future*. Dublin: Start Strong, p.16.

² Yoshie Kaga, John Bennett and Peter Moss (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A Cross-National Study of Integration of Early Childhood Care and Education within Education*, Paris: UNESCO.

³ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011) press release, 3 June 2011.

⁴ Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child (2007) *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behaviour, and Health for Vulnerable Children*.

⁵ Scottish Parliament Finance Committee (2011) *Report on Preventative Spending*, SP Paper 555.

⁶ For an overview, see National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips (eds.), Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁷ Edward Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office.

⁸ Department of Education and Skills (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, p.29.

⁹ The 2011 OECD report, *Doing Better for Families* (p.60), argues that “cascading” is one of “the three Cs of efficient service delivery” (along with co-operation and co-location): “Cascaded services are services that are delivered in the first instance as universal, and then focused on families in need at later stages.”

¹⁰ Office of the Minister for Children (2007) *The Agenda for Children’s Services: A Policy Handbook*, p.23.

¹¹ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011) press release, 3 June 2011.

¹² Government of Ireland (2011) *Towards Recovery: Programme for a National Government 2011-2016*, p.22.

¹³ Start Strong (2010) *op. cit.*, pp.64-66.

¹⁴ OECD (2010) *Doing Better for Children*, Paris: OECD.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.74-76.

