



Start Strong submission to the DPER on Ireland's Partnership Agreement with the EU for the 2014-2020 European Structural Funds April 2013

Start Strong welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on Ireland's Partnership Agreement with the European Union for the 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds. Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance early care and education policies in Ireland.

Response to Consultation Paper Questions

Question 1: What are the problems / issues / opportunities within the remit of your organisation that are best addressed by the new round of Structural Funds / EDF Programmes – Heading 1 (a) above? (Please bear in mind the eleven Structural Funds thematic objectives from the draft regulations referred to above).

We recommend that the Government should make early childhood education and care (ECEC) a priority action area in its Partnership Agreement with the EU for the 2014-2020 Structural Funds, and should focus particularly on financial support for the training of the workforce in early care and education services, as well as support for equal access to ECEC services.

This focus would reflect EU priorities; would make a significant contribution to a number of the thematic objectives identified by the European Commission (see more detail under Question 2 below); would help to remedy major deficits in Ireland's ECEC system; and would contribute to the financial investment the Government must make if the forthcoming National Early Years Strategy is to have a significant impact.

ECEC is specifically identified by the European Commission as a key action area for both the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, under three of the thematic objectives: ¹

- *Investing in education, skills and lifelong learning:* "Reducing early school leaving and promoting equal access to good-quality early-childhood, primary and secondary education.... Addressing obstacles in access faced by children from disadvantaged families, in particular during the very first years of early childhood (0-3)." (p.35)
- *Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty* through "Enhanced access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality social services such as employment and training services, services for the homeless, out of school care, childcare and long-term care services; ...[and] Targeted early-childhood education and care services, including integrated approaches combining childcare, education, health and parental support" (p.31).
- *Promoting employment supporting labour mobility* through "Access to affordable care services, such as childcare, out of school care or care for dependent persons." (p.27)

The European Commission's 2011 Communication on ECEC called for the Commission to: ²

"Encourage Member States to invest in [early childhood education and care] through the Structural Funds, in particular through support for the training of staff and for the development of accessible infrastructure." (p.9)

The Council of Education Ministers' subsequent Council Conclusions endorsed this proposal and noted the contribution of ECEC to achieving the Europe 2020 objectives: ³

"The provision of generalised equitable access to high quality ECEC can make a strong contribution to the success of the Europe 2020 strategy, and in particular to achieving two of the EU headline targets:

- *reducing early school leaving to below 10%, and*



- *lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social inclusion."*

The reasons why the European Commission has recommended Member States to prioritise ECEC in the use of Structural Funds are compelling. As discussed under Question 2 below, high quality, universally accessible ECEC:

- Supports long-term economic growth through helping to create a more skilled and employable workforce. Cost-benefit analyses of high quality ECEC programmes in the US have estimated returns of between \$2.50 and \$16 for every dollar invested.
- Raises children's later educational attainment, and reduces the risk of early school leaving.
- Helps to reduce child poverty, both in the long-term through enhancing children's life-chances – especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds – and in the short-term through lowering the barrier to parental employment.
- Facilitates access to the labour market, especially for women, through reducing the cost of childcare and through work-life balance measures.

Additional investment in ECEC is of critical importance in Ireland given the substantial deficits in this area in terms of the level of investment, the quality of services, and outcomes for children. International comparisons of early childhood services reveal significant weaknesses in provision in Ireland:

- The level of public investment in ECEC in Ireland is very low by international standards. According to the OECD Family Database, in 2009 the Nordic countries invested between 1.1% of GDP (Finland) and 1.7% of GDP (Iceland) in early years services. Investment in Ireland was substantially below this at 0.4% GDP, of which two-thirds went to the infant classes of primary schools, with less than 0.2% of GDP invested in pre-school services.
- The 2008 UNICEF Report Card⁴ set 10 minimum standards for high quality, accessible early childhood services. Of the 25 countries studied, Ireland was joint bottom of the league table, with only 1 out of 10 standards met (though some progress has been made since 2008).
- The 2012 Starting Well Index, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit, attempted to rate the quality, affordability and accessibility of ECEC services for 3-6 year

olds. Ireland was ranked in 18th place, between the Czech Republic and Hong Kong.

- The proportion of graduates in the ECEC workforce in Ireland is between 6% and 12% – well below the 60% benchmark recommended in the European CoRe report⁵.
- Child poverty and labour market participation are affected by many factors, but there is no doubt that high quality, affordable early years and after-school services are essential both to the reduction of child poverty and to the labour market participation of parents, especially lone parents. Ireland's performance in relation to both issues is poor by international standards.⁶
- Literacy and numeracy are affected by many factors, and early care and education is one of those factors. On the PISA literacy and numeracy rankings, Ireland is at or below the OECD average.

The forthcoming National Early Years Strategy is a crucial opportunity for the Government to set out comprehensive plans for the reform of early care and education policies in Ireland. However, if reforms are to be ambitious and are to have a significant impact, the National Early Years Strategy must be accompanied by a substantial increase in the level of public investment in early care and education over the years ahead. Clearly the current economic context presents a major challenge to this imperative. That is why it is so important that the Government draws on EU Structural Funds to support its forthcoming policy commitments in the National Early Years Strategy.

Question 2: From the list of thematic objectives, in your opinion which four objectives should be included in the Partnership Agreement and Operational Programmes? – Heading 1 (b) above?

Below we identify three thematic objectives that we recommend for inclusion in the Partnership Agreement and Operational Programmes. In each case we explain why the issue of ECEC is relevant to the thematic objective.

Investing in education, skills and lifelong learning

ECEC is the first, and possibly the most critical stage of the education system. In Ireland, however, it is by far the least resourced stage of the education system. Dedicating a proportion of Structural Funds to Ireland's ECEC system could make a significant



contribution to educational outcomes.

The research evidence shows that quality services and supports in children's early years enhance children's readiness for school, helping children get on the right track from the start and preventing later problems. The educational benefits of quality early care and education are seen in the short-term – in greater school readiness – and in the long-term, right through the education system and beyond:

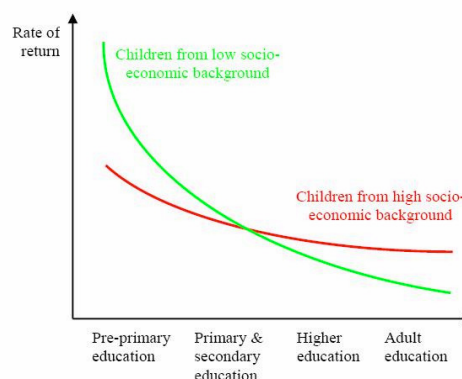
- The EPPE study in England, which has been following the progress of 3,000 children from pre-school age (now through to age 16), has found that educational outcomes are promoted where parents can offer a supportive “home learning environment” and where children go to high quality pre-school settings from the age of 2, at least on a part-time basis.⁷
- The latest PISA study of educational attainment among 15 year olds in OECD countries found that: ‘[I]n practically all OECD countries 15-year-old students who had attended some pre-primary school outperformed students who had not. In fact, the difference between students who had attended for more than one year and those who had not attended at all averaged 54 score points in the PISA reading assessment – or more than one year of formal schooling (39 score points).’⁸
- The 2010 Oireachtas education committee report on early school leaving concluded that: ‘The research has shown conclusively that early, quality intervention is the most effective in reducing early school leaving and other undesirable outcomes such as poor literacy levels.’⁹

Indeed, cost-benefit analyses indicate even higher rates of return for ECEC than for investments at a later stage in the education system. The following chart, which is taken from the European Commission's Communication on ECEC and which draws on the research of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, illustrates the higher rate of return to investment at pre-school level.

If Structural Fund measures to support ECEC specifically take the form of support for the training of staff, then such support will contribute to education, skills and lifelong learning not just through investment in children but also through supporting the training and professional development of the early years workforce. Qualification levels among staff in ECEC services in Ireland remain at a low

level, and there is minimal financial support for training or continuing professional development. There is further discussion of this issue under Question 3 below.

Returns to investment at different levels of education



Promoting employment and support labour mobility

Investing in ECEC promotes employment and labour market access in a number of ways:

- The education benefits for children of quality ECEC impact positively on employment and earnings prospects. For instance, the Abecedarian project in the US, which examined the impact of quality early education by tracking participants and a control group into adulthood, found that 47 per cent of participants were in high-skill jobs at the age of 21, compared to 27 per cent of control group members¹⁰. The Perry Pre-School project, which has tracked participants and a control group through to the age of 40, found the median monthly income of project participants at age 40 to be \$1,856 for pre-school attendees, 42 per cent more than the \$1,308 recorded for the control group¹¹.
- The provision of a comprehensive, accessible and affordable system of childcare is essential in order to support parental participation in the labour market, especially for women. Furthermore the OECD Family database illustrates that female labour market participation rates for those aged between 25 and 54 years in Ireland is 67.1% versus a maternal participation rate of 58.7%. Comparable rates in the Nordic country show higher participation as well as smaller deviations between the two (for instance, Denmark's female participation rate is 82.9% and its maternal participation rate is 84.0%).¹²
- Investment in ECEC services directly increases employment due to the labour-intensive nature of the work, because of



the high adult:child ratios required in high quality ECEC provision.

Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty

The latest poverty statistics¹³ indicate that in 2011 almost one in ten, or just over 106,000 children lived in consistent poverty. Universally accessible, high quality ECEC services can help to reduce child poverty in two ways:

- Where ECEC services are of sufficient quality, they have a beneficial effect on children's development.
- Where they are affordable and accessible, they enable parents to access employment, education and training.

Support for investment in ECEC as a means to tackling child poverty and disadvantage is evidenced in the European Commission's recently published Recommendation - *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. The Recommendation emphasises the importance of addressing disadvantage in the early years and outlines that this can be achieved through strategies that "combine support to parents to access the labour market with adequate income support and access to services that are essential to children's outcomes, such as quality (pre-school) education, health, housing and social services".¹⁴

As a means of preventing the continued spread of disadvantage, the Commission outlines three pillars for the development of integrated strategies – "access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services and children's rights to participate". An emphasis on the importance of investing in early childhood education and care as a means of reducing inequality is contained within the affordable quality services pillar. With a strong emphasis on quality the Commission also advocates for services which encourage participation in a non-stigmatised or segregated manner.

Question 3: Bearing in mind the thematic objectives, do you have any projects in mind that will contribute to bringing about the type of change, within the remit of your organisation, that you think is necessary?

If the forthcoming National Early Years Strategy is to have a significant positive impact, it must be accompanied by an increase in the level of public investment in ECEC services in Ireland. Dedication of Structural Funds to ECEC would be an

excellent way to stimulate this.

The two specific policy areas identified by the European Commission – in its Communication on ECEC¹⁵ – as appropriate for the use of Structural Funds in relation to ECEC are:

- Support for the training of staff.
- Development of accessible infrastructure.

Support for the training of staff is a critical issue in Ireland. The recent CoRe report prepared for the European Commission endorsed the international benchmark that 60% of early childhood educators should be graduates, given the link between the training and qualifications of the workforce and the delivery of high-quality services that are likely to achieve positive outcomes for children.¹⁶ In Ireland, the proportion of graduates in the ECEC workforce is in the region 6 – 12 %, ¹⁷ well below the CoRe benchmark. Only 76% of educators in Ireland have achieved the basic FETAC 5 qualification or higher, with 24% unqualified or with lower-level qualifications.¹⁸

If Structural Funds were made available to support the introduction of a training fund for ECEC staff, it would have a significant positive impact on the quality of ECEC services and thereby on outcomes for children, especially educational outcomes. At present there is no financial support available for staff in ECEC services who wish to raise their qualification levels. In addition, funding is needed to support the roll-out of the Síolta quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework, neither of which has yet been rolled out nationally, in spite of being published in 2006 and 2009 respectively.

Support for the development of accessible infrastructure should, in Ireland, focus particularly on measures to ensure that the existing infrastructure of ECEC services is accessible to all and that practice in ECEC services is inclusive.

Substantial capital investment was made in the early 2000s in Ireland – drawing on EU funding through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme – to increase the number of ECEC places. With the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in 2010, ECEC services are now in principle available on a universal basis, at least in the year before school entry. However, challenges remain in ensuring access for children with disabilities and for children from minority backgrounds, e.g. Traveller and Roma Children. In addition, much more intensive training and mentoring of staff in ECEC services is required in



approaches to support the full inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds within daily practice. Recent pilot initiatives have indicated the potential impact of such approaches, but supports for diversity and equality in ECEC services need to move from a pilot basis to national rollout.¹⁹

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 European Commission (2013) *Elements for a Common Strategic Framework 2014 to 2020: Annexes*, SWD (2012) 61 final.

² European Commission (2011) *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our Children with the Best Start for the World of Tomorrow*, COM (2011) 66 final.

³ Council of the European Union (2011) *Council Conclusions on Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our Children with the Best Start for the World of Tomorrow*, 3090th Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting, 19 and 20 May 2011, p.3.

⁴ UNICEF (2008) *Report Card 8: The Child Care Transition – A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

⁵ University of East London and University of Gent (2011) *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care: Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Care*.

⁶ Barnardos and Start Strong (2012) *Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0 to 12 year olds in Ireland* Dublin: Barnardos and Start Strong

⁷ K. Sylva et al. (2008) *EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase*. <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk>

⁸ OECD (2011) *PISA in Focus 1: Does Participation in Pre-Primary Education Translate into Better Learning Outcomes at School?* Paris: OECD

⁹ Houses of the Oireachtas, Joint Committee on Education and Skills (2010) *Staying in Education: A New Way Forward – School and Out-of-School Factors Protecting Against Early School Leaving*, p.138

¹⁰ E. Pungello et al. (2006) *Poverty and Early Childhood Educational Intervention, Poverty Brief No. 1* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, P.17.

¹¹ L. Schweinhart (2005) *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40*, Ypsilanti: High/Scope, p.2.

¹² OECD (2012), OECD Family Database, OECD, Paris

¹³ Central Statistics Office (2013) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2011 & revised 2010 results* Dublin: CSO

¹⁴ European Commission (2013) *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* C(2013) 778 final p.2

¹⁵ European Commission (2011) op. cit., p.9.

¹⁶ University of East London and University of Gent (2011) *Competence Requirements [CoRe] in Early Childhood Education and Care: Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Care*, http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2011/core_en.pdf

¹⁷ The proportion of early care and education services that have one or more staff member with a graduate qualification (Level 7) is 34.1% (Pobal (2012) *Annual Survey of the Early Years Sector 2011*, Pobal: Dublin, p.34.) As the average number of staff per service is 5.5, and most services with a graduate staff member are likely to have no more than one or at most two graduates, the proportion of graduates in the workforce as a whole is likely to be between 6% and 12%.

¹⁸ Pobal (2012) *Annual Survey of the Early Years Sector 2011*, Pobal: Dublin, p.34.

¹⁹ See for example the recent evaluation of a pilot, one-year training and mentoring project funded through the Dormant Accounts Fund: M. Duffy and A. Gibbs (2013) *Pre-School Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups: Evaluation Report*. <http://clarechildcare.ie/zdocs%5CEvaluation%20Report%20on%20the%20Pre-school%20Education%20Initiative%20for%20Children%20from%20Minority%20Groups.pdf>

