



Shaping The Future

Executive Summary April 2013



Introduction

Start Strong warmly welcomes the Government's decision to develop a National Early Years Strategy (NEYS). We were pleased to have been invited to be a member of the Expert Advisory Group on the NEYS, established by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in June 2012. In parallel with our participation in the Expert Advisory Group, we are making this submission to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, for her to consider as she develops the NEYS.

Our submission draws on:

- *Consultation with our supporters.* More than 100 people actively involved in children's early care and education took part in the two national consultation meetings we organised.
- *Consultation with children.* As part of our Children 2020 project, we carried out a consultation with more than 600 children aged 3–5 in 39 early care and education settings. The results are summarised in our publication, *If I Had a Magic Wand*.
- *Research evidence.* Our recommendations draw on the large and growing body of research on the importance of early childhood experiences for children's development and on the impact of different policy approaches.
- *National and international standards.*
Our recommendations also draw extensively on recent national and international reports that set out standards and benchmarks for children's early care and education.

This summary document is a shortened version of our full submission, which is available on our website and on request from Start Strong.¹



¹ <http://www.startstrong.ie>

Objectives

We urge the Government to develop an ambitious early years strategy. The last decade has seen rapid development of services and supports for young children

and their families, but there remain large deficits in our early years provision, especially in the quality of early care and education. We urge the Government to use this opportunity to commit to achieving international standards in early childhood services and supports over the decade ahead.

Our submission proposes 5 overarching objectives for the NEYS. The first three are core objectives that relate directly to services and supports for children and families:

- 1 **Ensure quality in services and supports.** Raise the quality of all services and supports for young children and their families. Ensure that no child is in an early care and education setting of low quality.
- 2 **Support families.** Support the role of families as children's primary educators through ensuring that all families with young children have sufficient resources, can balance work and caring responsibilities, and can access parenting supports.
- 3 **Improve access and inclusiveness of services and supports.** Enable all young children to access – and be fully included in – high quality services and supports.

The fourth and fifth are supporting objectives that relate to the resources and structures that need to be in place to ensure that services and supports for children and families are effective:

- 4 **Increase investment.** Incrementally increase the level of public investment in early care and education services to 1% of GDP.
- 5 **Strengthen governance.** Reform governance and monitoring systems, to enhance the development and implementation of early years policies, including the NEYS itself.



Preparing the NEYS

Process of preparing the NEYS

We welcome the decision of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to develop the NEYS. However, we are concerned at the lack of consultation in its development. Consultation is essential if the Strategy is to reflect current realities, is to be informed by a diversity of perspectives, is to benefit from expert inputs, and is to win the support of those who will be implementing it. We recommend:

- Public consultation on the draft NEYS.
- Consultation with young children in the development of the NEYS.

Scope of the NEYS

Policy areas. We welcome the Minister's decision to have a broad Strategy that will include 'all aspects of children's experiences in their early years'. We recommend the NEYS should encompass policies on: health-care; early care and education (both centre-based and childminders, the infant classes of primary schools, and transitions between all of these, as well as training institutions and the pre-school inspectorate); financial supports for families; parenting supports; and parental leave and family-friendly work policies.

Age-range. We support the Minister's stated intention to develop a Strategy for 0-6 year olds, though the Strategy should also acknowledge the continuities in children's lives at the age of 6. In developing the NEYS, we urge the Government to view early childhood as a whole, developing policies for the whole age-range 0-6, overcoming the split between policies for under-3s and policies for over-3s that has characterised Irish policies up till now. While children's abilities and needs change as they age, there is much that is constant, especially the need for high quality in services and supports.

Time-frame. We recommend a 10-year Strategy to allow for an ambitious strategy that sets a long-term vision for early years policies, with policies that aim to achieve significant progress towards international standards. We recommend a mid-term review of the NEYS, which could be timed to coincide with end of the National Children and Young People's Policy Framework.

Structure of the NEYS

The NEYS must link to the Children and Young People's Policy Framework, but it must have a clear vision and objectives of its own. The objectives should aim both to implement national standards (such as the Siolta quality framework) and also to move Ireland towards international standards and benchmarks.

The NEYS must involve targets, indicators and timelines, and include plans for monitoring and evaluation of progress in implementing the NEYS and for measuring its impact. In identifying indicators and targets, care must be taken to ensure that outcome-measures are broad – not just school-related outcomes (such as better literacy and numeracy) and physical health outcomes (such as lower levels of obesity), but also wider outcomes for children, including: social and emotional outcomes and positive dispositions, such as better mental health, resilience, sociability, persistence and creativity.

Given the difficulty of identifying outcome measures in some of these areas, input and process indicators can be more appropriate. In particular, the qualification level of the workforce in early care and education settings is widely recognised as a critical indicator of quality and as being closely linked with a wide range of positive outcomes for children.

When she announced the development of the Strategy early last year, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs stated that she wanted the NEYS to be 'an innovative and exciting blueprint for the future strategic development of Ireland's Early Years Sector'.

Vision for the NEYS

If the NEYS is to have a significant impact, it must start from an ambitious vision of what a successful strategy would look like – an inspiring description of what we hope to achieve by the end of the NEYS. The vision that is articulated in the NEYS should match the Minister’s aspiration, and the actions identified within the strategy should provide the roadmap for how we can achieve it. Our recommended vision for the NEYS is that;

The early years will be valued as a critical period in every child’s life, and the quality of their early experiences will support all children to make the most of their early years and to fulfil their potential, with families, communities, early childhood educators and other professionals themselves supported to help nurture young children and to help realise young children’s rights.



Our vision is well illustrated by the examples of New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries.

New Zealand – a successful national strategy

The vision for the National Early Years Strategy should draw on New Zealand's recently completed strategy. *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki* was New Zealand's national strategic plan for early childhood education, a 10-year strategic plan covering the period 2002-2012. The plan was ambitious, and the official evaluation shows that it was successful.

The strategy led to major changes, including the introduction of 20 hours per week of free early education for every child for a 2-year period before school entry, as well as a new funding system that incentivised services to employ graduates. The strategy aimed to bring about a fully graduate workforce in early childhood education. The initial target has not quite been met, but New Zealand is getting close, with the proportion of graduates in the early years workforce rising from 37% in 2004 to 69% in 2011.

Overall, the impact on quality has been impressive, according to a quality assessment in a sample of services. In 2004, a large proportion of the services were rated 'fair' and several 'poor'. By 2009, 'good' had replaced 'fair' as the most common quality rating, the number rated 'very good' had increased significantly, and there were no longer any 'poor' services.

Scandinavia – international best practice in childcare systems

The vision underpinning the National Early Years Strategy should also draw on the Scandinavian model of childcare systems, which were endorsed in April 2012 by the Minister for Social Protection. Barnardos and Start Strong recently worked together to prepare a short paper that compares childcare and after-school services for 0-12 year olds in Ireland with Scandinavian systems.²

Scandinavian childcare is widely regarded as being among the best in the world, and the outcomes for children and families are very positive. Educational attainment is high, child poverty rates are among the lowest in the world, and there is a high labour market participation rate among parents, including lone parents. But a Scandinavian childcare system comes at a cost – the level of Government investment in childcare in the Scandinavian countries is far higher than in Ireland.

Key features of the Scandinavian model include:

- High quality services, with a high proportion of graduates working directly with children.
- Universally available services, with a strong focus on children's rights and entitlements to places.
- Affordable services, with high levels of public subsidy to ensure costs to parents are low.
- Close links between pre-schools, schools and after-school services.
- Family-friendly work, with a year's paid parental leave, and strong work-life balance policies.

² Barnardos and Start Strong (2012) Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0-12 Year Olds in Ireland? http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Barnardos_Start_Strong_Childcare_Briefing_Paper_final_version.pdf

Principles to underpin the NEYS

We propose that the NEYS should be underpinned by the following 5 principles:

1. Early childhood should be valued as a significant and distinct time in life.

Although there is plenty of evidence that quality early care and education can bring substantial economic and social benefits, the NEYS should rest upon – and promote – recognition that early childhood is of value in and of itself. Those who support and work with young children should themselves be valued for the importance of the work they do, whether as parents or educators.

2. Families are children's primary educators.

Children's own homes play a highly significant role in their overall early care and education, shaping their well-being, health, emotional development and early learning. Families are also absolutely central to children's own visions and ideas about early care and education, as our consultation with young children showed.

3. Caring and learning together – high quality care and education matters at *all* ages of early childhood and in *all* settings.

Quality standards for under-3s should be just as high as for over-3s, and there should be no divide between 'childcare' services and 'early education' services. High quality services for young children of all ages support the *whole* child.

4. Services and supports should work together in partnership.

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, working together in partnership.

5. Services and supports should be provided for all children, with additional supports for those with additional needs.

This principle – termed 'progressive universalism' – should govern early care and education services, health services for young children and their families, and parenting supports. With children's rights as its cornerstone, the NEYS must be a strategy for *all* young children.



Objective 1: Ensure quality

Core objective: Raise the quality of all services and supports for young children and their families. Ensure that no child is in an early care and education setting of low quality.

a) Implications of research and international standards

The quality of young children's experiences in all settings – both in the home and in services outside the home – is critical to their impact. Quality matters just as much for under-3s as it does for over-3s.

Where early care and education services are of 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 low quality, children can suffer harm.

Parents too need supports – including parenting supports and home visiting – and those supports must also be of high quality. Furthermore, a feature of some of the best early care and education services is a high level of parental involvement and support for parents.

The professionalisation of the workforce is central to the achievement of high quality, equally for under-3s and over-3s. The importance of this issue is seen in the research evidence that high quality adult-child interactions are most consistently found where educators are highly qualified, and where wages are sufficiently high to reduce staff turnover to a low level and to reward educators for the investment they make in their education and training.

The EU 'CoRe' report on *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* recommends that 60% of early childhood educators should be graduates, with at least one member of staff qualified to this level in each 'room' or with each group of children. The CoRe report also focuses on the need for a 'competent system', with qualified educators supported by paid non-contact time, team-work, training institutions, and governance structures.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

- There is little data available on the quality of early care and education services in Ireland. What evidence there is suggests that quality is variable. While some services meet the highest standards, some services fail to meet minimum standards set out in the Regulations.
- Only 76% of educators have achieved the basic FETAC 5 qualification or higher. Some early childhood educators themselves have literacy difficulties. Many community childcare services remain dependent on Community Employment schemes for meeting minimum adult:child ratios. The proportion of graduates in the workforce as a whole is likely to be between 6% and 12%, well below the CoRe benchmark. The infant classes of primary schools, which cater for a large proportion of 4 and 5 year olds, are staffed by qualified teachers with graduate qualifications in education, but have poor ratios of pupils to teachers.
- Contrary to international best practice, Ireland continues to have a 'split system' of early care and education, with services for over-3s typically regarded as 'early education', and those for under-3s regarded as 'childcare' – and with a corresponding divide in standards. Those teaching in the infant classes of primary schools are graduates. Those caring for under-3s are not required to have any qualifications at all. The Free Pre-School Year has for the first time introduced qualification requirements into early care and education services, but only for the Free Pre-School Year itself.
- Six years on from the publication of the Siolta National Quality Framework, it is disappointing that there is still no plan for the full national roll-out of Siolta. We welcome the fact that since September 2012 services delivering the Free Pre-School Year have been required to 'use' Siolta, rather than simply 'adhere to its

principles' as previously. However, this requirement only relates to the Free Pre-School Year, and the very limited roll-out of supports for Síolta means that the contractual requirement will in practice be ineffective. The roll-out of Aistear has been even more limited than that of Síolta, except within the infant classes of primary schools.

- A 2012 survey carried out by Early Childhood Ireland found that while the average wage of unqualified staff in the sector is €10.10 per hour, the average for those qualified to FETAC Level 5 or 6 is €10.85, and the average for graduate educators (Level 7) is just €11.24, implying a minimal incentive for educators to invest in training or higher qualifications.
- Childminding remains one of the most common settings for early care and education, but only just over 1% of all paid, non-relative childminders are regulated. Few childminders have relevant formal qualifications.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

- i **Prioritise quality.** Carry out an initial audit of quality in order to assess the levels of quality across settings and to provide a baseline for monitoring progress. Over the course of the NEYS, raise the quality of all early childhood services, with the aim of ensuring that all settings are of high quality. By the end of the NEYS, no young child should be in a low-quality setting.
- ii **Professionalise the workforce.** Extend minimum qualification requirements to all ages within early care and education services, not just the Free Pre-School Year. Incrementally increase qualification requirements and supports for upskilling, with the aim of achieving the CoRe benchmark of a 60% graduate workforce, and with no room in a centre-based early care and education setting led by an unqualified staff member.
- iii **Incentivise training and higher qualifications.** Provide financial support for training and build on the

higher capitation grant to further incentivise services to employ graduates and to reward higher qualifications. Higher wages are central to achieving professional status for early childhood educators.

- iv **Roll out Síolta and Aistear together to all early care and education settings.** Develop an implementation plan for the full national roll-out of both Síolta and Aistear, which should include not just the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme in higher-capacity services, but also mechanisms for rolling out Síolta and Aistear in lower-capacity services. The roll-out of Síolta and Aistear should involve CPD and mentoring for existing educators, paid non-contact time to facilitate training and team-work, as well as reform of the content of initial training.
- v **Support children's transitions** from pre-school settings to primary schools, and strengthen quality in the infant classes of primary schools, through developing mechanisms and tools for local cooperation between pre-schools and schools, through revising the infant class curriculum in line with Aistear, and through reducing the pupil-teacher ratio in the infant classes.
- vi **Enhance the system of regulation and inspection.** Tie public funding more closely to the outcomes of inspections and other quality standards, while enhancing the inspection system (including appropriate training for inspectors, broadening the composition of inspection teams, and reviewing the inspection process to ensure the inspection system rests on a broader understanding of quality that encompasses Síolta and Aistear). Publish inspection reports online.

- vii **Ensure children can go outdoors.** Revise the Pre-School Regulations to ensure all children in early care and education services have access to – and make regular use of – outdoor spaces.
- viii **Protect adult/child ratios.** Return the 1:11 adult/child ratio introduced in 2012 for the Free Pre-School Year to 1:10, as before, and avoid any further worsening in minimum ratios. Ensure that Community Employment schemes do not count towards meeting minimum adult/child ratios.
- ix **Regulate and support all paid childminders.** Introduce the regulation of all paid childminders, with amendment of the Child Care Act 1991. We recommend a transition phase prior to the removal of legal exemptions to allow for the provision of supports for all paid childminders and to raise awareness of the benefits of regulation for children, for parents and for childminders themselves. Review regulations and the inspection process to ensure they are proportionate and appropriate to the home environment that childminders work in.



Objective 2: Support families

Core objective: Support the role of families as children's primary educators through ensuring that all families with young children have sufficient resources, can balance work and caring responsibilities, and can access parenting supports.

a) Implications of research and international standards

The material resources available to families shape the investments they can make in their children. Families' incomes, the services they can access, the opportunities open to them and the neighbourhoods children grow up in – all impact on children's development and life-chances and all affect their expectations of success in life. Growing up in poverty has a particularly negative impact on child outcomes. Research in the UK has found that by the age of 5, children from the poorest fifth of homes are nearly a year behind children from middle-income households in developmental outcomes.

Young children benefit when families can combine financial security with the time and energy to provide a happy, stimulating home environment. That's why work-life balance policies and paid leave entitlements can be so valuable for young children. In particular, research indicates children benefit when parents can take paid parental leave right through a child's first year.

The ways families bring up children – the way they interact day-to-day, the learning opportunities they offer, the warmth of their relationships, the boundaries they set on their children's behaviour, and the way they model behaviour themselves – these different aspects of 'parenting' have a significant impact on children's learning, behaviour, emotional self-regulation and long-term development.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

- Child poverty has continued to increase during the recession, with the latest poverty statistics showing that almost a fifth (18.8%) of all children in Ireland were living in households with incomes below the relative poverty line in 2011. Given the very limited subsidisation, the cost of childcare remains a major barrier for many families seeking to move off social welfare payments and into employment – and is therefore a barrier to the elimination of child poverty.
- Leave entitlements in Ireland are very limited in comparison with the leading countries, in spite of improvements in maternity leave over the last decade. Paid leave only lasts for 26 weeks.
- Financial pressures in the recession have pushed more women to return to work early. Recent Irish data shows that fewer than half of mothers use any of their entitlements to unpaid leave.
- While parenting supports are increasingly widespread, they are not yet delivered as mainstream services and there is still a long way to go before they are seen as 'normal'. There are many parenting courses and supports, offered by wide range of organisations, but they operate on a pilot basis or as local initiatives. Availability varies, and there is no national strategy for parenting.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

- i **Family resources.** Support the investment that families can make in their own children by retaining a strong universal component in Child Benefit, and linking the NEYS to cross-Government policies for the elimination of child poverty.
- ii **Parental leave entitlements and family-friendly work policies.** Move towards the international target of achieving paid parental leave right through a child's first year, introducing two weeks' paid paternity leave, and extending the right to request flexible working arrangements to all parents with young children.
- iii **Parenting supports.** Develop a national strategy for parenting supports. This should involve making evidence-informed parenting supports available free of charge to all parents with young children; with the implementation of this building on universal services such as Public Health Nurses and early care and education services.

Review the structure of the Public Health Nursing service to ensure a proportion of PHNs have a dedicated role in supporting families with young children. **Enhance the capacity of early care and education services** to support parental engagement and parent education at the same as directly supporting children.



Objective 3: Improve access and inclusion

Core objective: Improve access to and inclusion in services and supports. Enable all young children to access – and be fully included in – high quality services and supports.

a) Implications of research and international standards

While the benefits are greatest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, *all* children benefit from high quality early care and education. From a children's rights perspective, therefore, high quality services and supports should be affordable and accessible to *all* children. Of course, there is a need for additional supports for children with additional needs, but these are most effectively provided on a base of universal services. Parenting supports, similarly, should be available on a universal basis, with additional supports for children or families with additional needs. Universal provision is an effective means of reducing the stigma that is sometimes attached to parenting supports.

For all young children to benefit, high quality services and supports for young children and their families need to be genuinely affordable. While cost matters for young children of all ages, the argument for *free* provision is strongest for children from the age of 2 onwards as the research evidence suggests that from the age of 2 onwards children do better in high quality care and education services than they do if they remain at home full-time.

Genuinely universal access has implications not just for affordability, but also for practices within services. Mainstream services need to be inclusive, welcoming and supportive for children of all abilities and all backgrounds – social, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and family structure.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

- The introduction of the Free Pre-School Year was a milestone in delivering early care and education on a free, universal basis. Outside the Free Pre-School Year, early care and education services in Ireland remain among the most costly to parents in all EU and OECD countries.
- Parenting supports in Ireland are largely targeted at disadvantaged families and disadvantaged children. Pilot initiatives have offered parenting supports universally in some counties, working with Public Health Nurses, and the uptake has been very high in those counties.
- Inclusive practice has been constrained by the low qualification levels of early childhood educators and by the lack of roll-out of Siolta, Aistear and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines. There is a lack of data on access. Recent Irish research on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early care and education services has found the quality of practice often to be poor.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

Quality and affordability of services must go hand-in-hand for all children, right through the age-range 0-6. Public funding of services must be linked to the achievement of quality standards.

- i **Universal services and supports.** Provided quality standards are met, extend the Free Pre-School Year to a universal, second, earlier Free Pre-School Year. Make parenting supports available locally and free of charge to all families with young children. Regulate and subsidise high quality after-school services for children in primary schools, and increase the scale of provision.
- ii **Affordable services and supports.** Introduce a subsidy – available in all settings where quality standards are met – for early care and education outside the free provision, with a tiered fee structure that reflects parents' ability to pay. Extend the Free Pre-School Year(s) to 48 weeks a year and at least 3.5 hours per day, in line with the NESF's recommendations.
- iii **Inclusive services and supports.** High quality provision involves the full inclusion in mainstream settings of children from minority communities (including Traveller and Roma children) and of children with disabilities and additional needs, whenever this is in the child's best interests. This requires actions both to ensure access to services and to ensure inclusive practice within services, including diversity in the workforce, training of early childhood educators and national guidelines on inclusion, diversity and equality. Roll out the Diversity and Equality Guidelines, and provide comprehensive diversity and equality training for all early childhood educators.



Objective 4: Increase investment

Core objective: Incrementally increase the level of public investment in early care and education services to 1% of GDP.

a) Implications of research and international standards

Economists are increasingly recognising that public expenditure in children's early years is a form of investment – it's an investment in children and it's an investment in the future of our society and our economy. Early care and education – when it's of high quality – produces widespread benefits.³ It:

- Raises educational outcomes.
- Enhances employability and competitiveness.
- Reduces child poverty.
- Improves health.
- Prevents social problems.

Cost-benefit analyses of high-quality early care and education programmes in the US have estimated returns of between \$2.50 and \$16 for every dollar invested. Similarly, a wide range of prevention and early intervention initiatives, including parenting initiatives, have received very positive cost-benefit analyses. Reviewing the findings of international research, Professor James Heckman – the Nobel prize-winning economist – concludes that the economic return to investment in children's early years is higher than the return to investment in later childhood. UNICEF and the EC Childcare Network have used the figure of 1% of GDP as a benchmark for the level of annual investment required to achieve a high quality system of early care and education services. In New Zealand and all the Scandinavian countries, which are widely recognised as international best practice in early childhood services, investment exceeds the 1% of GDP target. The average level of investment in OECD countries is 0.7% of GDP.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

- The most recent OECD data indicates that public investment in 'childcare and early education services' in Ireland amounted to 0.4% of GDP in 2009, well below the OECD average. Figures from 2012 suggest the level of investment may now be 0.5% of GDP. However, two-thirds (65%) of this investment goes on 4 and 5 year olds in the infant classes of primary schools. Less than 0.2% of GDP goes to early care and education services for children prior to school entry.
- Taking a wider view of spending on young children, including for example child income supports, OECD data indicates that in Ireland only 19% of social expenditure on children and families goes to early childhood, compared to the OECD average of 24% and compared to between 28% and 36% in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, an unusually large proportion of social expenditure on early childhood in Ireland takes the form of cash benefits, rather than services for children.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

- 1% of GDP.** We call for total investment in early care and education services to be increased incrementally to the international standard of 1% of GDP within 10 years. In the immediate term we urge the Government to make no cuts to early years services and supports in Budget 2014. Within 5 years, we recommend the Government aim to reach the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP.
- Prioritise prevention and early intervention.** We urge the Government to use the NEYS to prioritise prevention and early intervention measures, including universal early childhood services and supports.
- Evidence-informed policies.** The NEYS should involve evidence-informed policies to ensure a broad range of positive outcomes for children and to ensure value for money in public investment.

³ Start Strong (2011) *The Economics of Children's Early Years – Early Care and Education in Ireland: Costs and Benefits*, Dublin: Start Strong.

Objective 5: Strengthen governance

Core objective: Strengthen governance. Reform governance and monitoring systems, to enhance the development and implementation of early years policies, including the NEYS itself.

a) Implications of research and international standards

A range of policy areas impact on young children and their families both directly and indirectly, including: health-care, education, early care and education, parenting and family supports, social welfare and labour market activation policies, as well as strategies to eliminate child poverty. Given the interconnections between these different policy areas, it is essential to coordinate policy-making at national level, and also to coordinate the delivery of services and supports at local level.

In building an integrated approach to policy-making for young children, international research indicates that it is especially important to draw together 'childcare' and 'early education' policies. According to international research recently published by UNESCO, countries where childcare policy and early education policy have been fully integrated, e.g. within a Ministry of Education (as was done in both New Zealand and Sweden) have seen significant progress on many indicators of success.

For well-informed policy-making and for effective policy implementation, data and monitoring systems are crucial. Data is needed at many levels: on services, on educators, and on children and their families. Monitoring and evaluation systems are also critical for the review and revision of national strategies such as the NEYS.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

- The development of the NEYS as a multi-sectoral strategy is in itself an important step forward in the governance of services and supports for young children and their families.
- The Child and Family Support Agency will draw together a range of services, under the aegis of the Department of

Children and Youth Affairs. However, many policy areas that impact on young children will remain fragmented, with Public Health Nurses for example remaining in the HSE for the time being. At present, there also remains a risk that the Agency's primary focus on child welfare and protection will limit the attention given to preventative measures and to universal services and supports.

- Ireland continues to have a 'split system' of childcare and early education, with different standards of provision for under-3s and over-3s. This split system is closely linked to fragmentation of policy responsibility for early care and education across Government Departments and agencies.
- There is a severe lack of data in Ireland on early care and education services, particularly on the quality of services, as well as on access, including attendance rates of minority communities.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

i Coordination of the wide range of policies that impact on children and families.

- At national level, develop cross-departmental mechanisms for implementing and monitoring progress on the NEYS, including the appointment of a coordinator or special rapporteur with responsibility for the NEYS, who should be an individual with specialist expertise in early years services and policies. Ensure the Child and Family Support Agency has a strong focus on prevention measures.
- At local level, further develop county-level governance structures for the coordination of services for young children and families, linked to the implementation of the NEYS. Ensure the Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative informs mainstream service development.

- 16
- ii **Integration of 'childcare' and 'early education' policies.** Re-examine the allocation of policy responsibilities for 'childcare' and 'early education', with a view to moving all policy responsibility for early care and education into a single Government Department.
 - iii **Data and monitoring.** Carry out an initial audit of quality in services, to give a baseline for monitoring progress. Develop a programme of research and data collection, including measures of both quality and access. Commit to a mid-term review and final evaluation of the NEYS.





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Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals committed to advancing high quality care and education for all young children in Ireland.

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