



Shaping The Future

April 2013

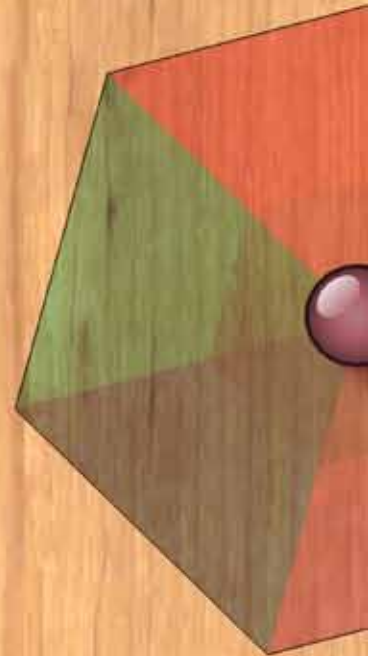


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Chairperson's foreword and acknowledgements

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In January 2012, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced her intention to develop Ireland's first National Early Years Strategy. It was an important step forward for early care and education in Ireland, and one that Start Strong warmly welcomed.

The process of preparing that strategy is now under way. Start Strong was pleased to be appointed to the Minister's Expert Advisory Group on the strategy, and we are participating actively in the group's work.

This submission presents our recommendations on the National Early Years Strategy. It draws together the research and advocacy work Start Strong has carried out since we were established in 2009. All along, our primary call has been for the introduction of a national plan for early care and education.

We would like to thank all of those who have helped us during this time, and especially all those who helped in the preparation of this submission. In particular, I would like to thank the members of Start Strong's Board of Directors and the staff of Start Strong: Cíairín de Buis, Toby Wolfe, Lorraine Whitty and Naomi Feely. I would also like to thank the many organisations and individuals who are our supporters – Start Strong's work would not have been possible without their active involvement.

To help us prepare this submission, more than 100 people took part in consultation meetings and their inputs were crucial in ensuring that our arguments are valid and that our recommendations are appropriate. Many others have also participated actively in working groups on specific issues, and their contribution is greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank the more than 600 children and 39 settings that took part in our consultation with children, If I Had a Magic Wand, which fed into the preparation of this submission.

A National Early Years Strategy provides the opportunity to address in a comprehensive way all the challenges facing Ireland's system of early care and education, through both short-term and long-term commitments. Success will require an ambitious vision and strong political leadership.

We are at a critical moment in the development of early care and education in Ireland. We may not have another opportunity like this for years. It's essential we get this Strategy right. Investment in high quality early care and education makes sound economic sense. It is good for society. Above all, it is good for children.



Dr Tony Crooks

Chairperson, Start Strong

Summary of key recommendations

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.

Process of preparing the NEYS

We welcome the decision of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to develop the National Early Years Strategy (NEYS). However, we are concerned at the lack of consultation in its development. 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.
- *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 the 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.
- Objectives should aim both to implement national standards (such as the Siolta quality framework) and also to move Ireland towards international standards and benchmarks.
- It 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.

Vision of the NEYS

- The NEYS should set out a vision of what success would look like. 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.

- *New Zealand.* The vision underpinning the NEYS should draw on the experience of New Zealand's recently completed 10-year strategy for early childhood education, which received a very positive evaluation.

- *Scandinavia*. The vision underpinning the NEYS should also draw on the Scandinavian model of childcare systems, which are widely regarded as the best in the world and which were endorsed in April 2012 by the Minister for Social Protection.

Principles to underpin the NEYS

Deriving from the overall vision of the strategy, the NEYS should include a clear set of principles or value-statements that should underpin all the specific objectives and actions named in the strategy. 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.
- 2 Families are children's primary educators.
- 3 Caring and learning together – high quality care and education matters at *all ages* of early childhood and in *all settings*.
- 4 Services and supports should work together in partnership.
- 5 Services and supports should be provided for all children, with additional supports for those with additional needs.

Objectives and actions

In this section of our submission, we identify specific objectives and actions that we recommend for inclusion in then NEYS, which embody the principles outlined above and would help move Ireland towards the vision we previously articulated.

We name 5 overarching objectives, and there are 5 sub-sections below, each centred on a different overarching objective. 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.

Objective 1: Ensure quality in services and supports

- a *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.

- b *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.
- c *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.
- d *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.
- e *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.
- f *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.
- g *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.
- h *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 Community Employment schemes do not count towards meeting minimum adult/child ratios.
- i *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 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

- a *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.

- b *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.
- c *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 inclusiveness of services and supports

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.

- a *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.

- b *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.
- c *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 training of early childhood educators and national guidelines on inclusion, diversity and equality. Roll out the Diversity and Equality Guidelines, and provide diversity and equality training for all early childhood educators.

Objective 4: Increase investment

- a 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.
- b We urge the Government to use the NEYS to prioritise prevention and early intervention measures, including universal early childhood services and supports.
- c 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.

Objective 5: Strengthen governance

- a *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.
- b *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.
- c *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.

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. Since our establishment in 2009,¹ our primary focus has been campaigning for a national plan for children's early care and education. When the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced in January 2012 that she intended to develop Ireland's first NEYS, Start Strong welcomed the announcement.²

A major step forwards

As Ireland's first NEYS, it is a major step forwards. It is a significant opportunity to set Ireland's early years services and supports on an ambitious path of progress towards both national and international standards.

It should, however, be recognised that the NEYS will build upon an infrastructure, a workforce, standards, and a body of research that have all developed rapidly in recent years, especially since the late 1990s:³

- Rising demand for childcare and major capital investment in the early 2000s led to a rapid increase in the number of early care and education services (now about 4,500) and the number of places (now in excess of 140,000).
- There has been a corresponding increase in the number of early childhood educators (now more than 22,000).

- An organisational infrastructure has been developed to support the sector, including the establishment of City and County Childcare Committees.
- Pre-School Regulations were introduced (1996) and revised (2006).
- The Free Pre-School Year was introduced (2010).
- A national quality framework (Síolta) and national curriculum framework (Aistear) for early care and education services were developed.
- Maternity leave was extended and unpaid parental leave was introduced.
- There has been a rapid increase in the number of local parenting programmes and initiatives.
- The Prevention and Early Intervention Programme was begun, with a significant number of projects around the country co-funded by the Government and The Atlantic Philanthropies, and now an emerging body of research on those projects.

Nevertheless, comparative indicators show that Ireland's services and supports for young children and their families still have a long way to go to meet international standards. UNICEF's 2008 Report Card on early childhood services, for example, placed Ireland joint bottom of an international league table of 25 developed countries, meeting just one out of ten 'minimum standards'.⁴

A 10-year *National Children's Strategy* was published in 2000. However, while progress on its first two goals was impressive (giving children a voice, and understanding children's lives better), progress on the all-important third goal ('Children will receive quality supports and services') has been limited, in part because of the lack of an implementation plan.⁵

¹ Start Strong was initially established in 2004 as the Irish Childcare Policy Network, and became Start Strong in 2009.

² Start Strong, 26 January 2012, press release, 'Start Strong welcomes announcement of preparation of Ireland's first National Early Years Strategy.'

³ Figures derived from Pobal (2012) *Pobal Annual Survey of the Early Years Sector 2011*, Dublin: Pobal.

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 Children's Rights Alliance (2011) *Ten Years On: Did the National Children's Strategy Deliver on its Promises?* Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance.

Since then, there have been many calls for the development of a national plan for early childhood education and care in Ireland, including calls made by the OECD, the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, IBEC and ICTU.⁶

The NEYS, which the Government is now developing, is a critical opportunity to address the many deficits in quality supports and services for young children, while building on the structures that have already been developed.

Process of preparing our submission

Our submission draws on research evidence, on both national and international standards and benchmarks for early care and education, as well as on consultation processes that we have carried out:

- **Consultation.** Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance children's early care and education in Ireland. Our Supporters include more than 50 organisations and more than 50 individuals. During autumn 2012, when preparing this submission, we carried out a consultation process with our supporters, to ensure that our analysis matches the reality on the ground and that our recommendations accord with the views of the wide range of organisations and individuals we work with. Approximately 100 people took part in consultation meetings we organised.
- **Consultation with children.** As part of our Children 2020 project, in 2010 we carried out a consultation with young children, in conjunction with Early Childhood Ireland (then IPPA), Barnardos and BCCN. More than 600 children aged 3–5 in 39 settings around the country took part in the consultation, which asked children to say what they wanted early care and education settings to be like. The results were summarised in our publication,

If I Had a Magic Wand, which was launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in July 2011.

- **Research evidence.** Start Strong advocates evidence-informed policy making, and our recommendations for the NEYS 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 in the early years. Much of the research evidence is international, and includes cost-benefit analysis of early childhood interventions in the US (summarised on page 56 below) as well as the EPPE study in the UK,⁷ which offers the best evidence on the likely impact of universal pre-school services in a social and institutional context similar to Ireland's. Relevant Irish research includes the findings of the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme.
- **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, including the recommendations of: the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF),⁸ the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No.7,⁹ the OECD *Starting Strong* series,¹⁰ the European Commission's 2011 Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care,¹¹ the UNICEF Report Card 8, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Starting Well Index,¹² the EU's Eurydice Network report on Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities in ECEC,¹³ the European Childcare Network's 40 Quality Standards,¹⁴ and the European Commission's CoRe report.¹⁵

⁶ For a summary, see Start Strong (2009) *Planning for the Early Years*, Dublin: Start Strong. http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Planning_for_the_Early_Years.pdf

⁷ K. Sylva et al. (2008) EPPE 3-11: *Final Report from the Primary Phase*; K. Sylva et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*, Oxford: Routledge.

⁸ National Economic and Social Forum (2005) *Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: NESF.

⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*, General Comment No.7.

¹⁰ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Paris: OECD; OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD.

¹¹ EC (2011) *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing All Our Children With The Best Start For The World Of Tomorrow*, COM (2011) 66.

Building on these different sources, Start Strong has published a series of policy briefs and submissions, in addition to our *Children 2020* report, which sets out a vision for early care and education in Ireland in the year 2020.¹⁶ All of these publications have fed into the development of this submission, and references to them are made at a relevant points in the submission, where they provide further detail or analysis.

In addition, in September 2012, Start Strong invited Professor Linda Mitchell, from the University of Waikato in New Zealand, to visit Ireland for a series of meetings in which she described and assessed New Zealand's experience of developing and implementing a 10-year strategy for early childhood education, which ran from 2002-2012. Professor Mitchell led the official evaluation of the national strategy on behalf of the New Zealand Government. Her visit to Ireland included a seminar to which members of the Expert Advisory Group on the NEYS were invited.

12 Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) *Starting Well Index: Benchmarking Early Education Across The World*. EIU: London.

13 Eurydice Network (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*, Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.

14 European Commission Network on Childcare and other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women (1996) *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children: Proposals for a Ten-Year Action Programme*.

15 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*.

16 All Start Strong publications are available at <http://www.startstrong.ie>

Process of preparing the NEYS

Start Strong welcomed the establishment by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs of an Expert Advisory Group on the NEYS and Start Strong's inclusion as a member of the Group. We also welcomed the initial public consultation carried out in June-July 2012 on the full range of children's strategies to be developed, 'Improving the Lives of Children and Young People'. The format of that initial consultation allowed for submissions to focus on a specific age-group, and Start Strong's submission addressed children's early years.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Start Strong is concerned at the lack of consultation specifically in relation to the NEYS. 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:

- 1 As the Department's public consultation in the summer was very broad, it will be essential also to have a public consultation process that is specifically on the Draft National Early Year's Strategy, when the Draft is ready. This should involve (a) the dissemination of the Draft Strategy and the opportunity for people to send in written comments, (b) the opportunity for key stakeholders to be invited in to discuss and comment on the Draft Strategy in a series of meetings with the team that is responsible for the Strategy, and (c) an on-going role for the Expert Advisory Group in commenting on the Draft Strategy and advising on the final document.
- 2 As the national consultation with children ('Life as a Child and Young Person in Ireland') only involved consultation with 7-18 year olds, it is very important that a consultation process should also take place with young children (6 and under), so that the National Early Years

Strategy can be informed by children's own views. While there are additional challenges in consulting young children, there is plenty of national and international experience on how to do this, and there are meaningful ways in which issues of relevance to Government policy can be addressed. Two recent practical examples that may help the Department in this are:

- a In October 2012, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People published the results of a consultation which resulted in 612 submissions involving more than 12,000 children aged 2-5, *A RIGHT Wee Blether*.¹⁸
- b In 2010, Start Strong – in conjunction with the IPPA (Early Childhood Ireland), Barnardos and the Border Counties Childcare Network – carried out a consultation with more than 600 children (mostly aged 3-5) in 39 early care and education settings. The resulting publication – 'If I Had a Magic Wand' – was launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in July 2011, in the Deansrath Family Centre, Clondalkin.¹⁹ Start Strong would welcome the opportunity to share our learning with the Department on methods for consulting with young children.

These changes to the process of preparing the NEYS would result in a delay in the final publication of the Strategy. However, it is much more important for the Strategy to be good than for it to be published quickly. To make our recommendations possible, we suggest that the Government delay publication of the final Strategy until – at the earliest – the summer of 2013.

¹⁷ Start Strong (2012) *Submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on Improving the Lives of Children and Young People*. http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Start_Strong_-_submission_on_improving_the_lives_of_children_and_young_people.pdf

¹⁸ The final report is available here: http://www.sccyp.org.uk/downloads/Adult%20Reports/A_Right_Wee_Blether_final.pdf.

¹⁹ The launch event and key conclusions are summarised here: <http://www.startstrong.ie/contents/215> - and the report is available here: <http://www.startstrong.ie/contents/213>.

Scope of the NEYS

Policy areas

In announcing the Government decision to develop the NEYS, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs stated that the Strategy will encompass ‘all aspects of children’s experiences in their early years including health, family support, care and education’.²⁰ We very much welcome this decision, and we urge the Government to ensure that the Strategy is genuinely holistic in approach, with actions that are interconnected and that require different Government Departments to work together.

A wide range of policy areas impacts on the lives of young children. **Healthcare** and **early care and education** are two areas where the role of Government in delivering services for young children has long been recognised.

While **financial supports for families** are also a long-established means by which the Government supports young children, it is only more recently that there has been growing recognition of the importance of other supports for parents (and for grandparents and other family members) in their parenting role. These include parenting supports (both universal and targeted), as well as **parental leave** and **family-friendly work policies** that enable parents to combine work and caring responsibilities. All of these policy areas should feature strongly in the NEYS.

In relation to care and education outside the home, it is essential that the NEYS address all the settings in which early care and education takes place, as well as the structures that support early care and education services, e.g. training institutions and the **pre-school inspectorate**. The NEYS should encompass not just **centre-based early care and education services**, but also:

- **Childminders.** There is little data on the extent of childminding in Ireland – which reflects childminders’

position at the margins of the early years sector – but we know the numbers are large. Recent estimates suggest nearly 50,000 young children in Ireland have a childminder.²¹ Young children often spend long hours with childminders on a daily basis.

- **Infant classes of primary schools.** A large proportion of young children begin primary school at the age of 4 or 5, which means that the infant classes of primary schools are a setting for early care and education, and what happens within those classes must form part of the NEYS.
- **Transitions.** The NEYS should also address the 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 practices that help young children to move happily from the home into settings outside the home and that later support their transition into primary schools.

More broadly, connections should be drawn within the NEYS to the wide range of social policy areas that impact on child poverty, given the very negative impact that **child poverty** has on child development, especially in early childhood. Research in the UK has found that by the age of 5, children from the poorest fifth of homes are already nearly a year behind children from middle-income households in developmental outcomes.²²

Age range

The Government has stated that the NEYS will cover the age-range from birth to 6 years old, which fits with much international practice. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has defined ‘early childhood’ as ‘at birth and throughout infancy; during the preschool years; as

²⁰ DCYA, press release, 6 March 2012, *Government Approves Development of Ireland’s First National Early Years Strategy for Children from birth to 6 years*.

²¹ Estimate by Goodbody Economic Consultants (Children 2020: Cost-Benefit Analysis, 2011, p.50), prepared on behalf of Start Strong, using CSO data for paid, non-relative childminders (CSO, 2009, Quarterly National Household Survey: Special Module, Childcare, Quarter 4, 2007, p.4).

²² Economic and Social Research Council (2012) Evidence Briefing: Child Poverty Casts a Long Shadow Over Social Mobility.

well as during the transition to school'. As the transition to school happens at 7 years old in some countries, the UN Committee goes on to define early childhood as the period from birth to 8 years old. However, given that the compulsory school starting-age in Ireland is 6, and most children begin school at 5 or earlier, we believe it is appropriate for the NEYS to encompass the period birth to 6, as proposed by the Government.

At the same time as focusing on the 0-6 age-range, however, the Strategy should acknowledge the continuities in children's lives at the age of 6. As well as linking the NEYS to other children's strategies being developed, including the National Children and Young People's Policy Framework, some objectives and actions named in the NEYS itself will need to extend beyond the age of 6. For example:

- Many policies that affect the provision of early care and education services, including childminding, also affect the provision of after-school services. In many cases, services cater for both age-ranges on the same premises and with the same staff.
- Prevention and early intervention measures may often be focused on young children, but need not be, and in many cases support children of a wider age-range.
- Given the flexibility in relation to the school starting-age, the infant classes of primary schools include children aged from 4 through to 7 and sometimes 8.
- Child poverty affects children of all ages, and many of the measures to address child poverty extend throughout childhood.

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. International experience indicates that high quality in early care and education services is only achieved where governance and policies provide for the integration of care and education right through the age-range 0-6.²³

Time-frame

Recent comparative international assessments of early care and education systems indicate that early care and education services in Ireland are well behind international standards.²⁴ For this reason, there is a strong argument for the NEYS having a 10-year timeframe, to allow for the development of ambitious plans that could move Ireland towards international standards. Such a strategy could distinguish short-term actions that can be achieved within current economic constraints, and longer-term actions that are achievable over a 10-year period. Even though the current economic context constrains immediate actions, it is critical that it should not limit the ambition of the NEYS, otherwise the NEYS will fail to bring Ireland up to international standards in early years services and supports – and will not contribute to laying the foundations for future economic growth.

Given the uncertainty over the economic situation in the years ahead, and the need to ensure sustained progress, we recommend that a mid-term review should be carried out of the NEYS, to allow for a re-assessment of objectives and actions. This mid-term review could be timed to coincide with the end of the National Children and Young People's Policy Framework, if this has a 5-year timeframe.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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.
Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) *Starting Well: Benchmarking Early Education Across the World*, London: EIU. OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Paris: OECD. OECD (2013) OECD Family Database.

Structure of the NEYS

The NEYS will only have a significant impact if it is consistent with other areas of Government policy, is ambitious in its goals, specifies actions that will help to achieve those goals, and is implemented effectively. To make this more likely, we recommend that the Strategy should include:

- Clear **links** to the overarching Children and Young People's Policy Framework, to the other children's strategies the Government is developing, to strategies and policies developed by the Departments of Education and Skills, Health and Social Protection, and to strategies for the elimination of child poverty.
- A clear **identity** of its own. At the same time as linking to other Government strategies, and fitting within the Children and Young People's Policy Framework, the NEYS should be a self-standing document, with a vision and objectives that relate specifically to children's early years.
- A **vision of what success would look like**. The vision should be clear and ambitious.
- **Principles** that should form the basis of all objectives and actions specified within the strategy.
- **Objectives** should aim both to implement national standards (such as the Siolta quality framework) and also to move Ireland towards international standards and benchmarks.
- **Indicators** and **targets** to allow for the measurement of progress. 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.

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.

- Clear allocation of **responsibility** for every action identified in the strategy. While overall responsibility for the NEYS should lie with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, it must be an all-of-Government strategy, with responsibilities clearly identified for other Government departments, especially the Departments of Education and Skills, Health, and Social Protection.
- **Timelines** for activities.
- A plan for **research** and the regular gathering of **data** on early childhood services and supports; for **monitoring** of the Strategy, including a **mid-point review** to allow for adjustment of implementation plans depending on progress; and for a final **evaluation** to inform the preparation of the next early years strategy.

Vision of what success would look like

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. 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 Sector²⁵. 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.

It is significant that New Zealand’s 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education – which has just completed and which had an extremely positive impact²⁶ – included an inspiring and detailed vision. The strategic plan opens with the statement:

‘[I]t is vital that all those working within the ECE [early childhood education] sector share a common vision of what success looks like. The Strategic Plan for ECE draws a picture of that vision for ECE and provides a 10-year plan of action for improvement.’²⁷

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.

²⁵ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, press release, 6th March 2012.

²⁶ L. Mitchell et al. (2011) *Locality-Based Evaluation of ‘Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki’*, Ministry of Education, New Zealand.

²⁷ Ministry of Education (2002) *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki – A 10-Year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education*, Wellington, New Zealand, p.2.

Elements of the vision

- Early childhood will be valued in and of itself and will be recognised as a critical period in children's development.
- Young children's rights will be realised, including their rights to health and well-being and to social, emotional, cultural and learning experiences as young children.
- The quality of children's experiences in their early years will give them strong foundations – both for their present and for their future.
- Every child will matter, and all children will be supported to fulfil their potential, regardless of who they are, where they live, their abilities or their background.
- Parents and other family members, early childhood educators, other professionals working with young children and Government all play important, complementary roles and will work together in the realisation of young children's rights.
- All those who support and work with young children – including parents and other family members, early childhood educators, and other professionals working with young children – will themselves be supported in their different roles, so that they can provide the best possible support to those children.

This vision of success for the Strategy is underpinned by an image of the child in his/her early years as:

- Competent, active, with rights, strengths and potential.
- A person whose well-being and experiences matters here and now, not just for the future.
- Supported by a range of significant people in his/her life, including parents or guardians, other family members and early childhood educators, and – less immediately – by the community in which he/she lives and by a range of services and supports for the child and the child's family.

On the next three pages, we illustrate our vision of what a successful strategy would look like by describing first New Zealand's 10-year strategy and its outcomes, and then outlining the key features of the Scandinavian childcare systems:

- We use New Zealand as an example as it is similar to Ireland in population size, cultural background, and economic and social structures, and because it has just completed a very successful 10-year national strategy for early childhood education.
- We describe the Scandinavian model as the Scandinavian countries are widely acknowledged to be the world-leaders in early childhood education and care systems and they have achieved very positive outcomes for children and families as a result.

Neither example as presented here illustrates the full scope of the NEYS (omitting, for example, parenting supports and health-care services), but they offer inspiration on core aspects of our vision.

New Zealand – a successful national 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 in its intent, and the official evaluation shows that it was successful in its outcomes.

The strategic plan involved four key action areas:

- *Promoting participation in quality services*, supporting additional provision in areas of low participation or high population growth.
- *Improving quality*, with targets and incentives to get practitioners qualified to graduate-level, along with resources and opportunities to support professional development, including establishing a network of Centres of Innovation.
- *Promoting collaborative relationships* with parents, schools and others, and supporting inter-agency work.
- *Supporting strategies*, with a major review of funding that led to the introduction in 2007 of a scheme of 20 hours free early childhood education (ECE) per week for 3-4 year olds, and a review of regulations.

Professor Linda Mitchell from the University of Waikato led the official Government evaluation of the strategy.²⁸

The evaluation involved surveys of parents, interviews with practitioners and managers, as well as observations of process quality within 32 early years settings in 8 localities. Changes were observed at three points in time: 2004, 2006 and 2009.

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. A central feature of the strategy is a rapid shift towards 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.

Key findings of the evaluation are that:

- The '20 hours ECE' funding scheme had a positive impact in promoting participation, particularly among low-income parents, 30% of whom said it was their reason for participating.
- Among the many settings that took up strategic plan opportunities for professional development and the incentives for employing graduates, there was a significant increase in the proportion of settings rated 'good' or 'very good'. In particular, every single centre that was given a 'very good' quality rating in the evaluation employed 100% 'registered teachers' with a graduate-level qualification in early childhood education.
- Overall, the impact on quality has been impressive. In 2004, a large proportion of services were rated 'fair' and several 'poor'. By 2009, 'good' had replaced 'fair' as the most common quality rating, there were no longer any 'poor' services, and the number of services rated 'very good' had increased significantly.
- Relations between services and parents and between services and schools both improved. Links to health services saw little change, but this reflected the lack of concrete actions in the strategic plan.

The New Zealand experience offers important lessons for Ireland - in particular, the need to be ambitious about what can be achieved through a national strategy, and the need for the Government to be proactive in incentivising change. The fact that all this could be achieved in a country that is similar to Ireland in many ways, including its population size of 4.5 million, shows that Ireland can - and should - be equally ambitious.

²⁸ L. Mitchell et al. (2011) *Locality-Based Evaluation of 'Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki'*, Integrated Report 2004, 2006 and 2009, Ministry of Education, New Zealand, http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/100916/973_ECE-Strategic-Plan-web.pdf.

Scandinavia – international best practice in childcare systems

Speaking in the Dáil on 18 April 2012, the Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton TD, said that she would only proceed with plans to reform the One Parent Family Payment by 2014/15 if she got a 'credible and bankable commitment' by the time of this year's Budget that the Irish Government would put 'a system of safe, affordable and accessible child care in place, similar to what is found in the Scandinavian countries to whose systems of social protection we aspire'.

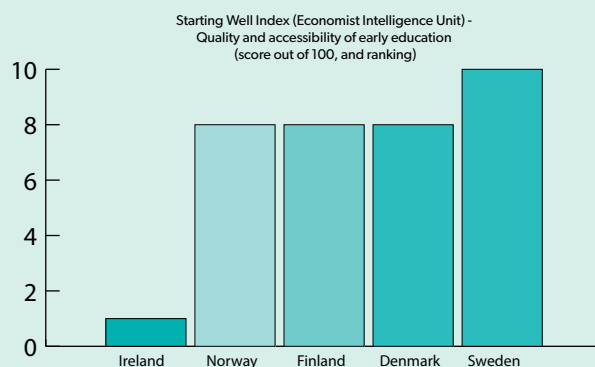
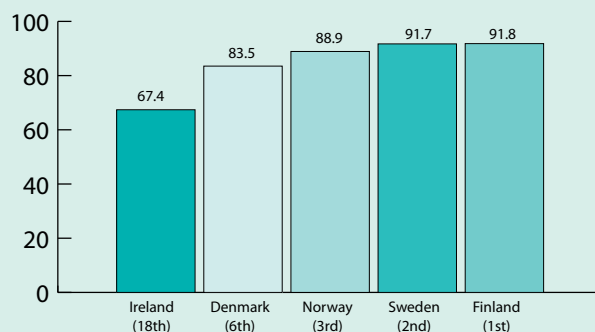
Barnardos and Start Strong worked together to prepare a short paper that compares the current provision of childcare and after-school services in Ireland for 0-12 year olds with the Scandinavian systems to which Minister Burton referred.²⁹

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.

Two recent international surveys of early care and education have positioned Ireland well down the international league table. The Nordic countries, by contrast, are all at or near the top:

- The 2012 Starting Well Index, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit, attempts to rate the quality, affordability and accessibility of early childhood education services. Finland, Sweden and Norway receive the top 3 scores in the world. Ireland comes well down the ranking in 18th place, between the Czech Republic and Hong Kong.
- The 2008 UNICEF Report Card set 10 international standards for high quality, accessible early childhood services. Of the 25 countries studied, Ireland came

joint bottom of the league table, with only 1 out of 10 standards met (though some progress has been made since 2008). Sweden came top, meeting all 10 standards, while Denmark, Finland and Norway followed close behind, meeting 8 standards each.



There is no single 'Scandinavian' system, but there are features that are common to all the Nordic countries, in varying degree. It should be stressed that these features are interconnected, drawing on a shared commitment to children's rights, a broad understanding of 'education', recognition of the importance of quality in childcare and early education services, and a shared view of the role of the State in ensuring the availability of quality, affordable services. The following policy approaches are common to the Nordic countries' provision of both early care and education services and after-school services:

High quality services. The provision of high quality services is central to the Nordic model of both early care and education and after-school services. The quality of these services rests above all on the skills and experience of staff. Those working in both early care and education and after-school provision are recognised as professionals, with high levels of qualifications. Quality standards are high in services for children right through the age-range 1-12.

- The proportion of contact staff in early years services who have a three-year graduate qualification ranges from 30% in Finland to 60% in Denmark.

Universally available services. The Nordic countries share a strong focus on children's rights and universal entitlements.

- Children are entitled to a place in an early care and education service and an after-school service – just as they are entitled to a place at school – regardless of whether their parents are working. In Norway, there is a legal right to a place in an early care and education service for every child from the age of 1. In Sweden, every child between the ages of 1 and 12 has a right to a place in an early years or after-school service.

Affordable services. While fees may be charged, both early care and education services and after-school services are affordable to all, with high levels of public subsidy.

- While the Nordic model typically involves some free pre-school provision, other early years services receive a large direct subsidy, with parents paying only a fraction of the cost, and fees means-tested to ensure they are affordable to all. In Norway, there is a cap on parental fees of approximately €300 a month in both public and private early care and education services. In Denmark, parents pay at most 30% of the running costs, and services are free to many low-income families.

Joined-up service provision, rooted in a broad understanding of 'education'. The Nordic models are based on a broad understanding of education, encompassing all ages and both schooling and after-school

services, with the integration of care and education across the age range 1-12. Those working in both pre-school and after-school services are viewed as 'pedagogues' – a term understood to imply a holistic understanding of care and education, supporting children's full development, including social and physical skills.

- There is joined-up service provision, with pre-schools, schools and after-school services working together, sometimes on the same site.
- There is joined-up governance of services, at both local and national levels. In both Norway and Sweden, the Ministry of Education has responsibility not just for schools, but for all early years services and after-school services.

Family-friendly work policies. The Scandinavian model combines family-friendly work policies such as parental and paternity leave with publicly subsidized early years facilities. Leave policies and entitlements to early years services are linked.

- Through paid leave – combining maternity leave, paternity leave and paid parental leave – a parent is enabled to remain at home for at least a child's first year. In Norway, Sweden and Denmark, there is an entitlement to a year's paid leave. In Norway and Sweden, payment is at 80% of previous earnings, throughout this period.
- In none of the Nordic countries is there a gap between the ending of paid leave and the beginning of an entitlement to subsidised childcare.
- Strong work-life balance policies make it easier for families to balance work and care responsibilities, both in children's early years and their school years. In Sweden, parents are entitled to work part-time (75%) until a child is 8 years old.
- Leave policies in the Nordic countries support gender equality in caring responsibilities, with mothers and fathers able to share paid parental leave, and a proportion of paid leave reserved for fathers.

Principles

Deriving from the overall vision of the strategy, the NEYS should include a clear set of principles or value-statements that should underpin all the specific objectives and actions named in the strategy. 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.
- 2 Families are children's primary educators.
- 3 Caring and learning together – high quality care and education matters at *all ages* of early childhood and in *all settings*.
- 4 Services and supports should work together in partnership.
- 5 Services and supports should be provided for all children, with additional supports for those with additional needs.

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

The first principle of the Síolta national quality framework is:

'Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.'

Early childhood, the period from birth to six years, is a significant and unique time in the life of every individual. Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood. As with every other phase in life, positive supports and adequate resources are necessary to make the most of this period. Provision of such supports and resources should not be conditional on the expectations of the economy, society or other interests.'

This principle is clear statement of the importance of early childhood and it is a principle that should lie at the heart of the National Early Years Strategy and its ambitions. Although there is plenty of evidence that quality early care and education can bring substantial economic and social benefits (see page 56), it is important that the NEYS should rest upon – and promote – recognition that early childhood is of value in and of itself.

And if early childhood is of value in and of itself, then those who support and work with young children should themselves be valued for the importance of the work they do, whether they are parents or other family members acting in a parenting role, or early childhood educators.

It is significant that the first principle of Síolta refers to the *right* of every child to positive experiences – a right for each and every child, and a right that is not conditional. The November 2012 children's referendum marked a historic change, and the coming years will be crucial in progressively realising children's rights. To help this process, the NEYS should state clearly that *young* children also have rights, and should set out objectives and actions to give reality to those rights.



Asserting the rights of young children means putting children's interests first in early years policies. And it means that every child matters, regardless of who they are, their social background, their age, or the setting they are in. It means that the Early Years Strategy must aim to achieve positive outcomes for children, and those positive outcomes must include children's well-being here and now, not just their future development.

In 2005 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published General Comment No. 7, in which it drew attention to children's rights in early childhood and Government obligations towards young children.³⁰

Among its conclusions, the UN Committee commented that:

- 'For the exercise of their rights, young children have particular requirements for physical nurturance, emotional care and sensitive guidance, as well as time and space for social play, exploration and learning.' (p.3)
- 'Under normal circumstances, a young child's parents play a crucial role in the achievement of their rights, along with other members of family, extended family or community, including legal guardians as appropriate.' (p.7)
- 'Appropriate assistance to parents can best be achieved as part of comprehensive policies for early childhood, including provision for health, care and education during the early years.' (p.10)
- 'The Committee calls on States parties to ensure that all young children (and those with primary responsibility for their well-being) are guaranteed access to appropriate and effective services, including programmes of health, care and education specifically designed to promote their well-being.' (p.11)

- 'The Committee interprets the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development.' (p.13)
- 'Work with young children should be socially valued and properly paid, in order to attract a highly qualified workforce, men as well as women.' (p.11)
- 'States parties are urged to adopt comprehensive, strategic and time-bound plans for early childhood within a right-based framework. This requires an increase in human and financial resource allocations for early childhood services and programmes.' (p.18)

2. Families are children's primary educators

Children's primary educators are their families. 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. The way adults talk with children when very young and the learning opportunities they create in everyday home life shape children's development. The way in which parents, guardians, grandparents and other family members bring up children – the way they interact day-to-day, the warmth of their relationships, the boundaries they set on behaviour – impacts on children's well-being, and social and emotional development.

Families are also absolutely central to children's own visions and ideas about early care and education, as our consultation with young children showed.³¹

As the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child makes clear, a young child's family plays a crucial role in the achievement of their rights,

'Early childhood is the period of most extensive (and

³⁰ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood, General Comment No. 7*. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf>

³¹ Start Strong (2011) *If I Had a Magic Wand: Young Children's Visions and Ideas for Early Care and Education Services*, Dublin: Start Strong.

³² UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005), *op. cit.*, pp.9-10.

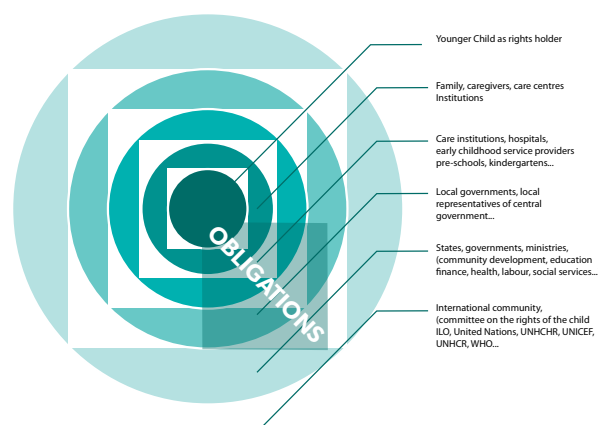
*intensive) parental responsibilities related to all aspects of children's well-being covered by the Convention: their survival, health, physical safety and emotional security, standards of living and care, opportunities for play and learning, and freedom of expression. Accordingly, realizing children's rights is in large measure dependent on the well-being and resources available to those with responsibility for their care.'*³²

The UN Committee also makes clear that families – in turn – require assistance from the State 'in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities'. The NEYS must both recognise the central importance of families in young children's lives and also families' needs for a range of supports. The UN Committee recommends that:

*'An integrated approach would include interventions that impact indirectly on parents' ability to promote the best interests of children (e.g. taxation and benefits, adequate housing, working hours) as well as those that have more immediate consequences (e.g. perinatal health services for mother and baby, parent education, home visitors).'*³³

A growing body of research shows that parenting supports – such as parenting programmes – can make a real difference. At the same time, however, families live in economic, social, work and neighbourhood contexts that shape the investments they can make in their children. Children who grow up in poverty have the odds stacked against them from the start. Government policies should support families' capacity to support and invest in their children, and must reflect the diversity of families and communities.

The chart below, which echoes Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model of child development, illustrates how families are the first and most immediate actor in the achievement of young children's rights, but that the circles of influence and obligation in relation to children's rights spread out to ever-wider circles of actors including, crucially, Governments.



Source: Human Early Learning Partnership (2012) *Early Childhood Rights Indicators* (<http://crc-indicators.earlylearning.ubc.ca/index.php/content/overview>), adapted from International Save the Children Alliance (2007) *Circles of Influence and Obligation: Getting It Right For Children, A Practitioners' Guide to Child Rights Programming*.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.10.

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

Early care and education settings include not just centre-based services, but also the infant classes of primary schools, childminders and children's *own* homes.

The quality of young children's daily experiences matters in each and every one of those settings.

In children's early years, care and learning are inseparable. Quality standards for under-3s should be just as high as for over-3s – indeed, children's learning and development are at their fastest before the age of 3. At all ages from 0 to 6 and beyond, the quality of young children's experiences in all care and education settings is critical to their current well-being, to their development and to the future life-chances. Those who work with 2 year olds are just as much educators as are primary-school teachers.

Furthermore, there is also no clear age at which children suddenly become ready for formal schooling. At whatever age children move into school, policies and practice must support a smooth and positive transition to school. The infant classes of primary schools must themselves be high quality settings for early childhood care and education.

Given the many ways in which care and learning are interconnected in young children's lives, our vision is that all services for young children should be centrally concerned with both the care of young children and early education. There should be no divide between services for children with a 'care' focus and services for children that focus on '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 and happiness.

According to UNESCO, countries where young children's

care and learning have been fully integrated not only in the structure of a Government department but also in an integrated understanding of 'care and education' have seen significant progress on many indicators of success. New Zealand, for example, which began a major integration process in the late 1980s, saw significant improvements in participation rates (including for disadvantaged groups), in qualification levels in the workforce, in curriculum development and in resources for the sector.³⁴

4. Services and supports should work together in partnership

Throughout early childhood, young children's care and education are inextricably linked and encompass many aspects of their well-being and development, including their physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, and their early learning and cognitive development.

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.

According to the comprehensive overview of child development research, published by the US National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*:

*'Although the study of child development has traditionally sorted [early childhood] accomplishments into discrete functional categories (e.g., cognitive, linguistic, social), in practice they are inseparable beginning in the earliest years of life. Acknowledging and acting on this fundamental principle is critical to the success of a wide array of initiatives in child health, mental health, early education, and early intervention.'*³⁵

³⁴ 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, pp.80-85.

³⁵ 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, p.386.

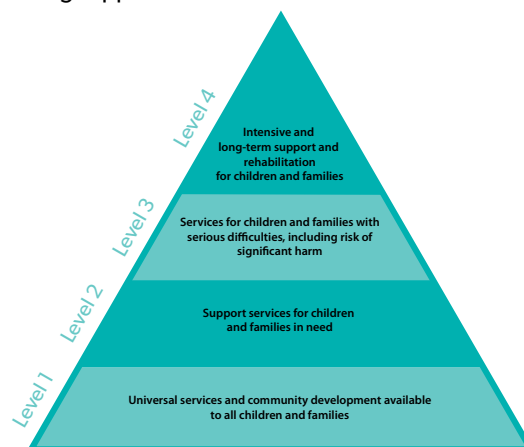
Young children develop and learn in many settings: in their homes, with their extended families, in early care and education services, with childminders, in their neighbourhoods and communities, in playgrounds and in the natural environments around them. All these settings matter, and the NEYS should aim to support quality experiences in all settings – and access to services and supports for all children. Furthermore, research shows that services and supports are most effective when they work together, with:

- Early childhood educators working in partnership with parents.
- Pre-school services and schools working together to support children during transitions.
- Health services, early care and education services and family supports offering effective information and referral pathways.
- Specialist services linking effectively with universal services.
- Early childhood educators and other professionals themselves supported through training and continuing professional development.
- All services brought close to families to facilitate access.

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

With children's rights as its cornerstone, the NEYS must be a strategy for all young children. 'Progressive universalism' is the principle that services and supports should be provided for all, with additional services and supports for those with additional needs. It is a principle that should govern a wide range of policy areas that will form part of the NEYS, including early care and education services,

health services for young children and their families, and parenting supports.



The provision of services and supports on a universal basis is important because:

- All children benefit from universal provision – the EPPE study in the UK has demonstrated that high quality pre-school provision benefits children from all social backgrounds³⁶ – and disadvantaged children benefit the most, with larger benefits in settings that include children from a mix of social backgrounds.³⁷
- It is difficult to deliver targeted services that are effective in reaching all those who need them. For example, a large proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not live in disadvantaged communities that receive targeted supports.³⁸
- Targeted interventions sometimes exacerbate disadvantage through segregating or stigmatising children and families, thus reducing take-up or worsening outcomes.³⁹

36 K. Sylva et al. (2008) EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase, p.29.

37 P. Sammons (2010) 'Does pre-school make a difference?' in K. Sylva et al., *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge, p.105

38 E. Smyth and S. McCoy (2009) *Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage*, Dublin: ESRI, pp.16-7.

39 Eurydice Network (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*, Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, p.39.

40 Office of the Minister for Children (2007) *The Agenda for Children's Services: A Policy Handbook*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Objectives and actions

Of course there is a need for additional, targeted supports for children with additional needs, but these can be built on a base of universal services. This requires that more intensive services and supports for those with additional needs are closely linked to the universal services and supports, with effective referral systems allowing for a continuum of supports, and allowing children and families to move up and down the continuum. Universal services then act in a preventative capacity, with additional targeted services acting as a form of early intervention.

This approach fits with the vision of ‘progressive universalism’ that is described in the *Agenda for Children’s Services* and depicted in the Hardiker model (see chart).⁴⁰

In this section of our submission, we identify specific objectives and actions that we recommend for inclusion in the NEYS, which embody the principles outlined above and would help move Ireland towards the vision we previously articulated.

We name 5 overarching objectives, and there are 5 sub-sections below, each centred on a different overarching objective. 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. (See p.26)
- 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. (See p.40)
- 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. (See p.47)

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. (See p.56)
5. **Strengthen governance.** Reform governance and monitoring systems, to enhance the development and implementation of early years policies, including the NEYS itself. (See p.62)

Each sub-section is divided into 3 parts:

- a Implications of research and of international standards.
- b An analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland.
- c Recommendations on specific actions that should be named in the NEYS in order to achieve the core objective.



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. Where 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.

According to the OECD's latest *Starting Strong* report, which focuses on tools to achieve quality:⁴¹

A growing body of research recognises that early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits... But all these benefits are conditional on 'quality'. Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects.

Young children need experiences that are positive, stimulating, rich in language, full of opportunities, and safe. At the core, the quality of children's experiences lies in the interactions between children and the adults around them, whether those adults are their parents or guardians, their grandparents or other relatives, their childminders, early years practitioners in crèches and pre-schools, or school-teachers.

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.

Quality matters just as much for under-3s as it does for over-3s. There is no basis for policies that require higher quality standards for over-3s than for under-3s. Not only is the positive impact of early care and education services conditional on high quality at all ages of early childhood,⁴² but the research shows that it is particularly at a very young age (under the age of 2, and especially under the age of 1) that low-quality services can have a negative effect on children's development.⁴³

Building on the 2011 European Commission Communication on early childhood education and care, the European Commission is now leading a process that it hopes will lead to a European Quality Framework in early care and education. While work on this is still at an early stage, it will be essential that the Irish Government plays an active role in this process.

Dimensions of quality

Quality in services for young children has many different dimensions. These are often characterised as either 'structural' or 'process' features of quality. Structural features include high adult-child ratios, plenty of space for each child including outdoor space, and a high proportion of qualified practitioners – features which can clearly be adjusted through policy decisions. Process features relate to the daily experience of children within the services, and the interactions between staff and children – features which are harder to control but which can be positively influenced through the professional development of staff and the introduction of curricula into services.

According to a recent review of international research, the following aspects of quality within services 'are most important for enhancing children's development:

- Adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available

41 OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD, p.9.

42 M. Burchinal et al. (2010) 'Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programmes', in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol.25, issue 2. D. Lowe Vandell et al. (2010) 'Do effects of early child care extend to 15 years? Results from the NICHD study of early child care and youth development', in *Child Development*, vol.81, issue 3.

43 D. Lowe Vandell et al. (2010) 'Do Effects of Early Child Care Extend to Age 15 Years? Results From the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development', in *Child Development*, vol.81, no.3; Edward Melhuish (2010) 'Why Children, Parents And Home Learning Are Important', in Kathy Sylva et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge, pp.54-55.

- Well-trained staff who are committed to their work with children
- Facilities that are safe and sanitary and accessible to parents
- Ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact appropriately with children
- Supervision that maintains consistency
- Staff development that ensures continuity, stability and improving quality
- A developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content.⁴⁴

Professionalisation

The professionalisation of the workforce is central to the achievement of high quality – equally for those working with under-3s and those working with 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.⁴⁵

Those working in the care and education of young children should:

- Have appropriate training and qualifications, relevant to early childhood, the attainment of which should require both a theoretical understanding of early childhood care and education and an extended period of monitored practical experience.
- Be required, in order to retain their professional status, to take part in on-going professional development.
- Have the status, wages and working conditions that go along with being a professional, both to recruit and to

retain qualified and experienced practitioners within the profession, and to ensure that practitioners have the time for preparation and for in-service training.

- Have career development opportunities. Those in supervisory and advisory positions at local and national levels should have experience as practitioners and relevant professional expertise.

The qualification level of staff is a key indicator of quality, and high-performing early childhood systems have high proportions of graduates. In the Nordic countries, the proportion of contact staff in early care and education services who have a three-year graduate qualification ranges from 30% in Finland to 60% in Denmark.⁴⁶

In New Zealand, the recently completed national plan for early childhood educator resulted in an increase in the proportion of graduates from 37% in 2004 to 69% in 2011.

But professionalization requires much more than qualifications for individual educators – it requires system change. The central conclusion of the recent 'CoRe' study for the European Commission – *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*⁴⁷ – is that we should not be solely concerned with the knowledge and skills of the individual educator, though these are of course vitally important. We must also look to the ways in which educators work together in joint learning and reflection, at paid non-contact time, at the mix of different occupation levels within a setting (not just leaders, but assistants too), at the working conditions that reduce staff turnover, at the supports and opportunities created through training institutions, and at governance structures. In short, what we should be looking for is not just the 'competent practitioner', but the 'competent system'.

44 Edward Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office, p.4.

45 Edward Melhuish (2004) op. cit., p.55; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) op. cit., pp.314-8; and Sandra Mathers, Kathy Sylva and Heather Joshi (2007) *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study*, London: Department for Education and Skills, pp.7-10.

46 Barnardos and Start Strong (2012) *Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0-12 Year Olds in Ireland?* p.8.

47 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*.

CoRe – Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care

Recommendations of the CoRe report, prepared for the European Commission, include:

- Initial training for new practitioners should be at least to graduate level for core staff, with at least one member of staff qualified to this level in each 'classroom' or with each group of children. The CoRe report endorses the international benchmark that 60% of early childhood educators should be graduates.
- Continuing professional development is essential and should involve comprehensive, long-term programmes - not just short term courses of a few days each year.
- Practitioners need to have scope for job mobility, allowing for career progress as a result of professional development.
- There is a need to develop qualification routes for 'assistant' staff who have lower qualification levels.

Childminding

The need for early care and education to be of high quality relates to all settings – including childminders. Children in home-based care and education settings should receive the same protection and support as children in centre-based care and education settings. To ensure the quality of childminding – and to build the professional skills of childminders – requires the regulation of childminders, and their recognition as important settings for children's early care and education.

Regulation helps to protect children:

- **In the homes of childminders.**⁴⁸ Childminders care for young children in their homes often for long hours,

without any supervision or support. It is unacceptable that most childminders are exempt from inspection, child protection training or even Garda vetting.

- **In their daily lives.** As individuals who have close and frequent contact with young children and their families, childminders are well-placed to identify concerns around children's welfare in their daily lives outside the childminder's home.

And regulation helps to raise quality standards:

- **Through inspection.** Without inspection, families have no assurance that childminders meet basic quality standards. While the inspection system itself needs reform to reflect a broader understanding of quality and to ensure inspection is appropriate to a home setting, it is essential nevertheless that all paid childminders are subject to inspection.
- **Through positive supports.** Bringing childminders into the regulatory framework opens up wider opportunities to raise quality standards through training, supports, childminder networks, development grants, and the incentive for childminders to take part in public funding schemes when they meet quality standards.
- **Through recognition of their role.** Childminders have long had low status among early care and education settings. Regulation would enhance childminders' professional standing. In turn, higher status would help to recruit and retain high quality childminders within the profession.

⁴⁸ Similar quality concerns arise in relation to nannies, who work in the child's own home. However, the legal and regulatory situation differs, as nannies are employees of parents, whereas childminders are self-employed providers of a care and education service.

Scotland provides a good example of the benefits of requiring the registration and inspection of all childminders. The impact of Scotland's childminding policy (see box) is significant. A much larger number of childminders are registered in Scotland than in Ireland. Ireland has just 257 notified childminders, compared to Scotland's 6,000 registered childminders – in a country with a similar population (5.2 million, compared to 4.6 million in Ireland). In addition, quality standards among childminders in Scotland are high. The Care Inspectorate (the independent regulator of all social care services in Scotland) publishes all its inspection reports, including reports on every childminder. An analysis of recent inspections found that 31% of registered childminders achieved Grades 5 or 6 (the top grades) on every aspect of the inspection, compared to 21% of centre-based care and education services.⁴⁹

Childminding policy in Scotland

- Scotland has a registration system - not a notification system - for all early years services, including childminders.
- No childminder is exempt. Anybody who looks after one or more children under 16 for reward must register if they do so for more than two hours a day on six or more days a year.
- Registration requirements include personal references, police checks on the potential childminder and every other adult in their household, inspection of their home to ensure it's safe and suitable, and public liability insurance.
- The regulation and inspection framework for childminders is the same as for centre-based services, though it is applied in a proportionate manner to reflect the home environment.

- As a result of positive reports in inspections, the frequency of inspections has been reduced for the majority of childminders.
- Community Childminding schemes operate in some parts of Scotland, in which childminders are used by family support services as a prevention and early intervention tool to provide temporary support for families going through periods of difficulty, such as post-natal depression or a family crisis.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

Quality of provision

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. Even the self-assessed baseline assessment carried out as part of the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) – which was only rolled out in a limited number of services of generally higher capacity – indicated significant variation in quality, with 23% of all quality components in the QAP pilot receiving a quality rating of just 1 or 2 on the 4-point scale used.⁵⁰

Given the central importance of the professional skills of early childhood educators in achieving high quality standards, the best proxy measure of quality is the professional qualifications of educators. According to 2011 returns to Pobal's Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire, 96.0% of early care and education services have at least one member of staff qualified to Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications, making it likely that they meet the minimum standard for compliance with the rules for the Free Pre-School Year. However, taking all staff into account,

⁴⁹ Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (2011) *Improving the Quality of Care in Scotland: An Overview of Care Commission Findings, 2002 to 2010*, pp.149 and 156.

⁵⁰ Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011) *Evaluation of Initial Implementation of Síolta – Final Report*, p.43.

only 76% of educators have achieved the basic FETAC 5 qualification or higher, with 24% unqualified or with lower-level qualifications.⁵¹ Some early childhood educators themselves have literacy difficulties,⁵² which raises questions about the role that early childhood educators can play in supporting the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy or in engaging with training in frameworks such as Síolta and Aistear, until quality standards rise.

The proportion of early care and education services that have one or more staff member with a graduate qualification (Level 7) is 34.1%.⁵³ 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% – well below the 60% benchmark recommended in the European CoRe report.⁵⁴

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. The average pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools is 16:1 (with an average class-size of 24.5),⁵⁵ and many classes have much higher ratios than this, compared with a maximum ratio in the Free Pre-School Year of 11:1 (a lowering of standards in 2012 from the previous 10:1 ratio) and a maximum ratio in full day-care services of 8:1 for this age-group. We know from research that the main determinant of quality in early years services is the relationship between the adult and children, and the larger the number of children per adult, the less attention each child can receive.⁵⁶

Professionalisation

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 qualified teachers with graduate qualifications. 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, reinforcing the over-3/under-3 divide in standards.

- There are no qualification requirements for early childhood educators other than for leaders in the Free Pre-School Year.
- The funding requirements for the Free Pre-School Year require that the lead educator for children in the Free Pre-School Year should have at least a FETAC level 5 qualification in early childhood care and education. This is a much lower level of qualification than the 3-year graduate qualification recommended in the EC CoRe study and other research. In addition, it only applies within the Free Pre-School Year and not to younger children – indeed there is a real risk that services are now incentivised to put their least qualified staff with children aged under 3.
- It is very positive that a higher capitation grant is given to services where the Free Pre-School Year is delivered by an educator with a graduate qualification in early care and education and all other staff delivering the scheme have FETAC 5, in order to incentivise upskilling of the workforce. Nevertheless, there are no funding schemes

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

52 M. Share, L. Kerrins & S. Greene (2011) *Developing Early Years Professionalism*, NCI Early Learning Initiative and TCD, pp.77-78.

53 Pobal (2012) op. cit.

54 Previous Irish studies have also estimated the proportion of graduates to be in the 6 – 12 % range. Department of Education and Skills (2009) *Developing the Workforce in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector – Background Discussion Paper*, Dublin: DES, p.21.

55 Department of Education and Skills (2012) *Key Statistics 2011/2012*, Dublin: DES.

56 Start Strong (2011) *Budget 2012 Analysis*, Dublin: Start Strong.

dedicated to support the continuing professional development of staff or to support staff to engage in training for higher qualifications.

- The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Children and Young People commits to 'Increase the minimum qualification requirements for ECCE practitioners involved in the delivery of state funded ECCE programmes,' although it gives no timeline for this.⁵⁷
- Many community childcare services remain dependent on Community Employment schemes for meeting minimum adult:child ratios. There are currently 2,200 CE places ringfenced for childcare work, i.e. approximately 10% of all centre-based early childhood educators and over 27% of all staff working in community childcare facilities.⁵⁸
- The variability of standards across the sector partly reflects the low wages and lack of career development pathways. While some educators do choose to progress to higher levels of qualifications, the rewards for doing so tend to be minimal. Services have little scope to raise wages for those with higher qualifications, and there are few specialist roles in the sector. A recent 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 wage for graduate educators (Level 7) is just €11.24, implying a minimal incentive for upskilling.⁵⁹
- Many of those who are now obtaining graduate qualifications in early childhood care and education are doing so as a stepping stone on the road to becoming a primary school teacher, not with a view to remaining in early care and education.

- There is no non-contact time provided for staff delivering publicly funded schemes such as the Free Pre-School Year. This is a particular problem as without non-contact hours and structured CPD, for example, staff of early years services will have little opportunity to undertake the training and critical reflection on their own practice that is required for *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

At root, 'childcare' is a low-status occupation that is seen as appropriate employment for unskilled and unqualified workers, in spite of the importance of early childhood in children's development.

The Workforce Development Plan published in 2010, is modest in scope, given the lack of resources allocated for its implementation by the Government.⁶⁰ It aims to standardise training for early childhood educators, and to promote flexible delivery of training, with part-time options, distance learning and the recognition of prior learning. However, there is nothing in the plan about raising qualification levels through raising minimum standards, or through easing the financial burden of training for workers or employers, or incentivising higher qualifications.

Roll-out of *Síolta* quality framework

Six years on from the publication of the *Síolta* National Quality Framework, it is disappointing that there is still no plan for the full national roll-out of *Síolta*.

While there is growing awareness of *Síolta*, and in some settings its impact has been significant, it has only been effectively rolled out in a small proportion of services. Its roll-out has been at two levels: the formal QAP and informal engagement. The formal QAP involves a structured and intensive process, but it remains a pilot process and it has been limited to the small number of settings participating in the pilot. The informal engagement is very limited in scope.

⁵⁷ Department of Education and Skills (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People, 2011-2020*, Dublin: DES.

⁵⁸ Pobal (2012) op. cit., p.31.

⁵⁹ Early Childhood Ireland (2012) *Early Childhood Ireland Salary Survey 2012*, <http://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/policy-advocacy-and-research/salary-survey-2012/>

⁶⁰ Department of Education and Skills (2010) *A Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland*, DES: Dublin.

We welcome the fact that since September 2012 services delivering the Free Pre-School Year have been required to 'use' *Síolta*, rather than simply 'adhere to its principles' as previously. However, this requirement only relates to delivery of the Free Pre-School Year itself, even though *Síolta* was specifically designed to be of relevance right through the 0-6 age-range. Furthermore, the very limited roll-out of supports for *Síolta* means that the contractual requirement will in practice be ineffective.

Goodbody's evaluation of the pilot QAP identified a number of challenges in ensuring consistency in the implementation of the QAP, and made recommendations on ways to address these.⁶¹ A greater concern, however, is that *Síolta* and the QAP are not yet impacting on the large majority of early years settings and appear unlikely to do so on current plans. In particular, the evaluation suggests the QAP is geared towards services with high capacity – and therefore typically at the higher end of the quality spectrum. But those at the lower end of the quality spectrum are of equal if not greater concern if we want to ensure that early years services deliver positive outcomes for all children.

The Goodbody's evaluation identifies a number of challenges that services of lower capacity face if they are to engage with the QAP:

- The amount of work required of services participating in the QAP implies that only services at the higher end of the quality spectrum may currently be up to the QAP process.
- While a great deal of valuable work went into the development of *Síolta* and the QAP, the evaluation suggests that their complexity may be too much for many services to cope with. The evaluation raises

concerns about the complexity not just of the QAP (the number of components and stages, and the overlap of components) but also *Síolta* itself (the language it uses), and the links between *Síolta*, the Aistear curriculum framework and the Pre-School Regulations.

- While the evaluation concludes that the mentoring aspect of the QAP is important and is more effective than a checklist approach to quality supports, it notes, however, that mentoring is labour-intensive. The intensity of mentoring needs is likely to be even greater for services that are struggling to meet quality standards. Unless the Government can significantly increase funding for quality mentoring, mentoring will only be available for a fraction of the approximately 4,500 early years services.

Roll-out of Aistear curriculum framework

The *Síolta* quality framework and Aistear curriculum framework 'complement and support each other'⁶² and should be implemented jointly. To roll out *Síolta* without rolling out Aistear at the same time is a significant limitation on the quality of early years services.

We were pleased to see revised wording in the contracts that commenced in September 2012 for delivery of the Free Pre-School Year. In particular, the contract now refers not just to *Síolta*, but also to the Aistear curriculum framework. Also, as noted above, rather than simply asking services to 'adhere to the principles of *Síolta*', the new contract requires services actually to 'use' *Síolta* and Aistear.

However, the roll-out of Aistear has been even more limited than that of *Síolta*. Only within the infant classes of primary schools has there been an attempt to put resources into its roll-out, through the regional Education Centres and through work begun by the NCCA on the incorporation of

⁶¹ Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011) *Evaluation of Initial Implementation of Síolta – Final Report*. p.43.

⁶² NCCA (2009) *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education – Audit: Similarities and Differences*. NCCA: Dublin.

Aistear into the infant curriculum. Also, like *Síolta*, Aistear was designed to apply to the full age-range 0-6 but the new contractual requirement relates only to the Free Pre-School Year, not to children under-3.

Regulation and inspection framework

Many of the Pre-School Regulations are concerned with minimum standards and with 'structural' dimensions of quality (such as ratios, and health and safety requirements). In addition, Regulation 5 encompasses the ways in which the curriculum and the relationships around children contribute to child development. While the Pre-School Regulations have long been required of early years settings, the inspection of Regulation 5 has also moved forward recently with the implementation since September 2011 of the new National Assessment Guide for Regulation 5. The subject matter of Regulation 5 is therefore closely connected with both *Síolta* and Aistear.⁶³ As the Regulations are required of all early years services – with the significant exception of the many childminders who are exempt from regulation – they are of critical importance in ensuring quality standards are met.

However, the moratorium on public service recruitment is limiting the effective coverage of the inspectorate. Furthermore, a major question remains as to the capacity of the pre-school inspectorate to assess services for their implementation of *Síolta* and Aistear, given the lack of qualifications and training of some pre-school inspectors in these areas.

In this respect, recent pilot joint inspections with Department of Education inspectors are a very positive initiative, and the learning from these will be important.

Childminding

There is little data on the extent of childminding in Ireland – which reflects childminders' position at the margins of the early years sector – but we know the numbers are large. Recent estimates suggest nearly 50,000 young children in Ireland have a childminder.⁶⁴ That means that approximately 19,000 paid, non-relative childminders care for young children every day. As the majority are exempt from notifying the HSE, the figure is just an estimate. What's certain is that very few are regulated:

- At the end of 2011, there were 257 childminders notified to the HSE and therefore subject to the Pre-School Regulations and to the HSE inspection process.⁶⁵ That's just over 1% of all paid, non-relative childminders in Ireland.
- In addition, 1,250 childminders – about 6% of the total – were 'voluntarily notified' to the City / County Childcare Committees at the end of 2011. The conditions of voluntary notification vary, but in no case do they involve inspection.⁶⁶

Few childminders have relevant formal qualifications.⁶⁷ About 6,500 childminders have completed the Quality Awareness Programme (QAP) training course since it was launched in 2004.⁶⁸ Though a significant number, this is still a minority, and some no longer work as childminders. Furthermore, the QAP is only a 10-hour, introductory course.

The Child Care Act 1991 (s. 58) exempts three categories of carer of pre-school children from regulation: (a) a relative of the child or the spouse of a relative; (b) anybody who is caring only for children from one family, in addition to their own children; and (c) anybody caring for 3 or fewer pre-school children of different families.

⁶³ Early Childhood Ireland (2011) *Regulation 5: Assessing Early Childhood Services*. Dublin: Early Childhood Ireland.

⁶⁴ Estimates by Goodbody Economic Consultants (*Children 2020: Cost-Benefit Analysis*, 2011, p.50), prepared on behalf of Start Strong, using CSO data for paid, non-relative childminders (CSO, 2009, *Quarterly National Household Survey: Special Module, Childcare*, Quarter 4, 2007, p.4).

⁶⁵ Data on notifications and voluntary notifications supplied by Pobal.

⁶⁶ As a result of HSE cuts at the end of 2012 and early 2013, most (county-level) Childminding Advisory Officers have now been made redundant, so it is not clear that the status of voluntary notification will remain in operation.

⁶⁷ In Childminding Ireland's latest members' survey, 20% of members said they were qualified to FETAC level 5. The national figure is likely to be less, as qualified childminders are more likely to join a professional body such as Childminding Ireland.

⁶⁸ Data supplied by Pobal.

These exemptions cover the majority of paid childminders. In relation to exemption (c) alone, 53% of members of Childminding Ireland care for 3 or fewer children.⁶⁹ In addition, a significant proportion of childminders care for both pre-school and school-age children, and the care of school-age children is not regulated at all.

A large proportion of childminders work outside the formal economy. Reasons may include fear of the financial barriers to entering the formal economy, in spite of the Childcare Services Relief tax exemption for childminders who earn less than €15,000 p.a.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

No child in a low quality setting

We welcome the fact that the announcement by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs of the forthcoming NEYS made clear that quality will be a central theme. As the many benefits of early care and education only arise when services are of high quality, quality is critical. The NEYS must aim to raise the quality of all services and supports for young children and their families. In particular, the NEYS should aim to ensure that no child is still in an early care and education setting of low quality.

- Extend quality requirements and supports for quality equally to early childhood educators working with children of all ages, overcoming the difference that currently applies to standards for under-3s and for over-3s.
- 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 child should be in a low quality early childhood setting.

- Carry out an initial audit of quality in order to assess the levels of quality across settings and to provide a baseline for the monitoring of progress in raising quality over the course of the NEYS.
- Participate actively in the development – and later the implementation – of the European Quality Framework in early childhood education and care, which is building on the European Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care.

While we already have a number of national quality supports and frameworks (the Siolta quality framework, the Aistear curriculum framework, the Diversity and Equality Guidelines, and the Workforce Development Plan), new policies are needed to ensure their effective roll-out to all early years services, and to every room within each of those services (so that all children benefit, not only children in the Free Pre-School Year).

We recommend that the Government should:

Professionalise the workforce

- Extend minimum qualification requirements to all early years settings - not just the Free Pre-School Year.
- In particular, no room in any early care and education service – for young children of any age – should be led by unqualified staff.
- Incrementally increase qualification requirements over time. Make substantial progress towards a fully professional workforce, with graduate-led early care and education services by the end of the Strategy (for both under-3s and over-3s equally), reflecting the benchmark set in the EU CoRe report of a 60% graduate workforce. Graduate leaders should be staff working directly with children, not managers of services. Build on the higher

⁶⁹ Childminding Ireland (2012) *Report on Survey of Registered Members in 2011*, p.7

capitation grant to further incentivise services to employ graduates and to reward higher qualifications.

- Provide financial support for training and for the provision of CPD, including funding non-contact time. CPD should aim to support staff to gain higher qualifications and support training in specific skills, including:
 - Diversity and equality training.
 - Training on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early care and education settings.
 - Training to support cooperative engagement with parents, with the aim of making a partnership approach between early childhood educators and parents the norm.
- Develop the role of early childhood educator as a profession, with the introduction of a register of early childhood educators, a minimum qualification requirement for all staff (FETAC 5), a CPD requirement, career progression routes, and recognition of a professional association.
- Central to the achievement of a professional status for early childhood educators – to ensure the recruitment and retention of skilled workers – will be increasing the level of wages for staff, with the aim of achieving wages comparable to those in primary school settings.
- Given the need to build a ‘competent system’, also introduce qualification and CPD requirements for other actors involved within the early care and education system, including staff in training institutions, those in advisory roles, and the inspectorate.
- Workers on Community Employment schemes should not count towards meeting minimum adult/child ratios.

Roll out Síolta and Aistear – together – to all early years settings

While the revised contract wording introduced in September 2012 is an important call for higher quality standards, it makes it even more important that resources are put in to rolling out Síolta and Aistear to all services, with adequate training and mentoring. Until this roll-out happens, there will be services that are not in a position to fulfil this term of their contract. Furthermore, Síolta and Aistear should be rolled out and supported for all children aged 0-6 – in all settings – not just in the Free Pre-School Year.

- An implementation plan is required for the full national roll-out of both Síolta and Aistear.
- Síolta and Aistear will only have a significant impact if they are rolled out to all services, and that requires them being stitched in to the regulations, the inspection regime and funding requirements, to incentivise all services to engage with the two frameworks.
- The roll-out of Síolta should include not just the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme in higher-capacity services, but also mechanisms for rolling out the Síolta quality framework 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. Given the (appropriately) high standards set by the Síolta and Aistear frameworks, and the variable quality of early care and education services, a very substantial programme of training will be required, drawing upon the resources of a wide range of organisations.

Support transitions

To support children's transitions from pre-school settings to primary schools, to strengthen quality in the infant classes of primary schools, and to ensure the focus of reform is on making schools ready for children, rather than children ready for school:

- Develop and roll out tools for early care and education services and primary schools to use together in supporting transitions.
- Revise the primary school infant curriculum in line with Aistear.
- Reduce pupil-teacher ratios in the infant classes of primary schools. As the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy notes, 'Lower adult-child ratios in junior and senior infant classes would help to facilitate the sort of learning that is envisaged in Aistear. If this is to be achieved over time, then it will be necessary to prioritise infant classes in the allocation of available teachers in schools.'⁷⁰

Enhance the system of regulation and inspection

If the inspection process is reformed, it could be a significant tool in the development of services and raising of quality levels. In addition, the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year has shown the potential for raising quality standards across centre-based services through imposing contractual requirements (e.g. minimum qualifications) as a condition of funding. To help raise quality levels, we recommend the Government tie public funding more closely to the outcome of inspections or other quality standards.

The inspection system itself should be enhanced, including provision of appropriate training for inspectors, broadening

the composition of inspection teams, and review of the inspection process to ensure the inspection system rests on a broader understanding of quality that encompasses *Síolta* and *Aistear*:

- The inspection team should be qualified and trained to support quality in early care and education.
- While the contract for participation in the Free Pre-School Year already refers to the need for a 'satisfactory level of compliance' with the Regulations, mechanisms should be developed to ensure that low quality standards – including in relation to Regulation 5 – result in a credible threat to withdraw funding (and where necessary the withdrawal of funding if services do not raise quality standards within a given time-frame).
- As the Regulations are the only legal requirement for all early years services, and as Regulation 5 creates the opportunity to examine broad measures of quality and the curriculum, mechanisms must be developed to ensure that *Síolta* and *Aistear* are adequately taken into account in the inspection process for all settings.
- Given the importance for young children of outdoor play and access to natural environments, and the strong desire expressed by many of the young children we consulted in our consultation process to be outdoors for long periods each day,⁷¹ we recommend the Government revise the Pre-School Regulations to ensure that all children in early care and education services have access to – and make regular use of – outdoor spaces.
- The 1:11 adult/child ratio introduced in 2012 for the Free Pre-School Year should be returned to the previous 1:10 ratio, and there should be no further worsening in minimum adult/child ratios.

⁷⁰ Department of Education and Skills (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People, 2011-2020*, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.48.

⁷¹ Start Strong (2011) *If I Had a Magic Wand: Young Children's Visions and Ideas for Early Care and Education Services*, Dublin: Start Strong, p.7.

- We also recommend that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs ensure that all inspection reports are published. This could be done at minimal cost by requiring the Pre-School Inspectorate to publish inspection reports online.
- Protect all young children, regardless of their age and the setting they are in, through Garda vetting requirements, child protection measures and regulatory requirements.
- We hope that learning from the pilot joint inspections will result in a reconfiguration of the inspection system to create inspection / evaluation teams that are adequately qualified to look at all aspects of quality. It will be essential that an educational perspective is not added solely in relation to the regulation and inspection of services for over-3s or the Free Pre-School Year.

Regulate and support all paid childminders

Child protection concerns alone suggest it is unacceptable that most paid childminders are exempt from regulation. It is also a missed opportunity to engage with childminders to help them support children's early learning and development. Where childminders are unregulated, there is no assurance of the quality of care and education they provide, and no mechanism to enhance quality.

The actions below aim to ensure that, within the first 5 years of a National Early Years Strategy, the level of protection and quality requirements are as high in childminding as in centre-based services. To achieve this, regulation must be accompanied by positive supports and by public awareness-raising so that childminders and parents expect regulation as the norm.

Given the scale of change involved, we recommend a transition phase before the removal of exemptions in the Child Care Act 1991, to encourage and support childminders to take part in the new regulatory system.

Full, proportionate regulation

- 1 Amend the Child Care Act 1991, s. 58, to ensure that all paid childminders are subject to regulation and inspection.
- 2 Move from the current notification system to a registration system for all early years services, including childminders, involving: explicit approval before a service can operate; clear requirements in advance of registration; and a deregistration process in the event of failure to meet standards.
- 3 Make registration requirements for childminders equivalent to those for centre-based services, while reflecting the fact that childminders are self-employed individuals working in the home. Requirements for childminders should include:
 - Garda vetting for the childminder and for every adult in their household.
 - An initial home visit to anybody wishing to become a childminder.
 - First Aid training, child protection training, and the Quality Awareness Programme.
 - Public liability insurance.
 - Registration with the Revenue Commissioners as self-employed.
 - Participation in regular Continuing Professional Development following registration.

- 4 Review the Pre-School Regulations and the inspection process to ensure they are proportionate and appropriate to the home environment that childminders work in.
- 5 Amend child protection legislation (both Children First legislation and the National Vetting Bureau bill) to include paid childminders.⁷²

Recognition and support

- 6 For registration requirements to be achievable, ensure relevant supports and training are not only widely available, but accessible for childminders given their working hours, and affordable to them. Support Continuing Professional Development through participation in childminder networks.⁷³
- 7 Open funding schemes such as CETS to childminders who meet contractual and quality requirements equivalent to those for centre-based services. Retain financial supports such as the Childminder Development Grant but make them conditional on registration.
- 8 Carry out public information initiatives to encourage childminders to register, and to encourage parents to use registered childminders.

Key recommendations

- a *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.
- b *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.
- c *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.
- d *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.

⁷² Start Strong (2012) *Submission on Heads and General Scheme, Children First Bill*.

⁷³ Research in England points to significant benefits in terms of training, professionalism and retention when childminders participate in quality improvement networks that are supported by experienced coordinators. National Children's Bureau (2005) *Children Come First: The Role of Approved Childminding Networks in Changing Practice*.

- e *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.*
- f *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.
- g *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.
- h *Protect adult/child ratios.* Return the 1:11 adult/child ratio introduced in 2012 for the Free Pre-School Year to 10:1, as before, and avoid any further worsening in minimum ratios. Ensure that Community Employment schemes do not count towards meeting minimum adult/child ratios.
- i *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

Children's primary educators are their families – their parents, guardians, grandparents and other family members. 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. For families to fulfil that role, they need supports: financial, legal and in their parenting role. The role of families must be a central feature of the NEYS as families exert a powerful influence on child development:

Family resources

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.

Research shows that growing up in poverty has a particularly negative impact on child outcomes. Children who grow up in poverty have the odds stacked against them right from the start. Research in the UK has found that by the age of 5, children from the poorest fifth of homes are already nearly a year behind children from middle-income households in developmental outcomes.

A wide range of services and supports can help families and children in the early years: early care and education services, Public Health Nurses, specialist health services, parenting supports, primary schools. To be effective, they need to be affordable (see Objective 3 on improving access, e.g. page 48) and they need to work together so that families can access the right supports at the right time.

Eliminating child poverty, in particular, requires an integrated strategy involving a range of policy areas. High quality, affordable early childhood services and supports can help families and children to escape from poverty – improving children's life-chances and at the same time enabling families to access employment and training – but other social policies are also required to reduce the level of child poverty in the first place. As the OECD's *Starting Strong II* synthesis report concluded:

*'Although providing care and education to children from 'at-risk' backgrounds, early childhood programmes cannot substantially address issues of structural poverty and institutional discrimination (Zigler et al., 1996; Dearing et al., 2006). The challenge of reducing child poverty needs also to be tackled upstream by governments through energetic social, housing and labour policies, including income transfers to low-income groups, comprehensive social and family policies, and supportive employment schemes and work training. Preventive, anti-poverty measures can significantly reduce the numbers of children arriving at early childhood centres with additional learning needs.'*⁷⁴

Parental leave entitlements and family-friendly work policies

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. According to the Marmot Review, which was commissioned by the UK Government to examine solutions to health inequalities in England:

⁷⁴ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Paris: OECD. p.213.

‘Sensitive and responsive parent–child relationships are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children and enhanced social competence and work skills later in school. It is therefore important that we create the conditions to enable parents to develop this relationship during the child’s critical first year... Paid parental leave is associated with better maternal and child health with studies finding an association with lower rates of maternal depression, lower rates of infant mortality, fewer low birth-weight babies, more breast-feeding and more use of preventive health care.’⁷⁵

The Marmot Review goes on to recommend ‘paid parental leave for the whole of the first year’. One of UNICEF’s 10 minimum standards for early childhood services is also the provision of at least 1 year of paid parental leave at 50% of salary or more.⁷⁶

Critically, parents should not experience a gap between the ending of their entitlement to paid parental leave and the availability of high quality, genuinely affordable services for their children. In 10 European countries, there is no gap at all.⁷⁷ This is necessary to minimise the likelihood of parents using unregulated services in a child’s second year, to ensure that children do not have to move from one service to another within a year, and to make the return to employment affordable for parents. Above all, parents should not have to resort to services of lower or unknown quality.

Where parents work outside the home, they should have family-friendly work environments which support them to meet the needs of their young children. Strong work-life balance policies are a help to parents, but above all they are good for children. Throughout their early years and beyond, whether their parents are working or not, positive

outcomes for children continue to depend crucially on their relationships and experiences in their home. In addition to entitlements to parental leave and force majeure leave, workers’ ability to combine employment with family life is supported by flexible work arrangements such as job-sharing, flexitime, term-time working, and working from home.⁷⁸ Such arrangements are particularly important for very young children (such as those under two years old, and especially under one year old), as there is evidence to suggest that long hours in centre-based services can have a negative impact on some very young children.⁷⁹

Parenting and the home learning environment

The ways in which parents, guardians, grandparents and other family members 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 self-esteem, behaviour, emotional self-regulation and long-term development.

Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland study and from other research indicates children do best with a parenting style that is warm and responsive but that also demands appropriate behaviour from children.⁸⁰

In addition, the way adults talk with children when very young, how much they read to them, and the learning opportunities they create in everyday home life, all shape children’s development and later learning. The first 3 years are an especially important period.⁸¹ The latest PISA study of educational attainment in OECD countries found that 15 year olds whose parents had often read books with them in early childhood have markedly higher PISA scores than

⁷⁵ Marmot Review (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post-2010*, p.98.

⁷⁶ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2008) *The Child Care Transition: Report Card 8*,

⁷⁷ P. Moss (ed.) (2012) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research: 2011*, pp.32-33.

⁷⁸ For examples of work-life balance policies and arrangements, see www.worklifebalance.ie, the website of the National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance Policies.

⁷⁹ D. Lowe Vandell et al. (2010) ‘Do Effects of Early Child Care Extend to Age 15 Years? Results From the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development’, in *Child Development*, vol.81, no.3;

Edward Melhuish (2010) ‘Why children, parents and home learning are important’, in Kathy Sylva et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge, pp.54-55.

⁸⁰ E. Nixon (2012) *Growing Up in Ireland: How Families Matter for Social and Emotional Outcomes of 9 Year-Old Children*

⁸¹ Start Strong (2012) *Policy Brief: Early Learning – Policies for Children’s First 3 Years*.

parents who had read with them little. This finding held true regardless of the family's socio-economic background.⁸²

According to Prof. Melhuish, co-author of the EPPE study:

*'The Home Learning Environment in the pre-school period has association with all aspects of children's cognitive and social development and for much of a child's life is one of the most powerful influences upon development.'*⁸³

Parenting supports are especially valuable in children's early years – a critical time in a child's development and a time when families often look for and are open to support. Supports in the early years include information and advice on children's learning, health and development, family literacy supports, as well as advice on how to promote positive behaviour. Supports may include, for example, tips on how to play with young children interactively, and advice on the value of talking with and reading to even the youngest children. There is a growing body of research evidence on what types of support work:⁸⁴

- *Diverse supports for diverse families*
- Parenting supports include public information campaigns, group-based parenting courses, and programmes of home visits to families.
- They are not just for parents and guardians – they can be for grandparents and other family members too. Supports should be flexible to fit with families' lives, and should be relevant to all families in all their diversity – social, ethnic, cultural and family structure.
- *Universal and targeted supports*
- There should be a continuum of parenting supports, from universal to targeted, to meet different levels of need. A universal approach benefits all children – as all

families can benefit from clear and reliable information and advice on parenting – and it reduces the need for more intensive support. In addition, though, some families go through times when they need additional support, which should be available promptly.

- Parenting supports are most effective when trusted, non-stigmatising and accessible. Basing supports in mainstream services can help achieve this and be cost-effective.
- *Linking parents with services for children*
- High quality early care and education services can both support children directly and at the same time support their parents or other family members, through high levels of parental engagement in their children's services, parent education and family support measures.⁸⁵
- Some of the early childhood interventions that have been rated most highly in evaluations have been combination approaches, combining high quality early care and education services with home visiting supports and parent education.⁸⁶
- In our consultation with children, many children expressed a wish to break down boundaries between home/family and out-of-home settings, for example through saying they wanted family members to be regularly present in early care and education services.⁸⁷

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

Family resources

Child Benefit remains the main financial support for families, in spite of substantial cuts in recent years (from a peak of €166 - €203 per month per child to the current rate

82 OECD (2011) *PISA in Focus 10: What Can Parents Do to Help their Children Succeed in School?* Paris: OECD.

83 E. Melhuish (2010) 'Why children, parents and home learning are important', in K. Sylva et al., *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*, Abingdon: Routledge, p.67.

84 Two recent reviews are: I. Siraj-Blatchford and J. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) *Improving Children's Attainment through a Better Quality of Family-based Support for Early Learning*, London: C4EO; and M. Furlong et al. (2012) 'Behavioural and cognitive-behavioural group-based parenting programmes for early-onset conduct problems in children aged 3 to 12 years (Review)', *The Cochrane Library* (2012/2).

85 M. Kernan (2012) *Parental Involvement in Early Learning: A Review of Research, Policy and Good Practice*, Leiden: International Child Development Initiatives and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation.

86 For example, the programme that has shown the highest rate of return in cost-benefit analysis has been the High/Scope Perry Pre-School Study in Michigan, USA, which involved both a high quality pre-school programme and weekly home visits to participating families. Lawrence J. Schweinhart et al. (2005) op. cit.

87 Start Strong (2011) *If I Had a Magic Wand: Young Children's Visions and Ideas for Early Care and Education Services*, Dublin: Start Strong, p.7.

of €130 - €140). The payment has been justified on a range of grounds, including support for childcare costs, as well as to help cover the cost of bringing up children. Other cash benefits are targeted at specific groups, such as the One Parent Family Payment and the Qualified Child Increase for families in receipt of social welfare payments.

Given the very limited subsidisation of childcare costs (see section on affordability on page 47), the cost of childcare remains a major barrier for many families seeking to move off social welfare payments and into employment. This, in turn, is a major factor explaining the high level of child poverty in Ireland, as parental employment is one of the most effective means of protecting children against poverty.

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, the most recent year for which data is available. Individuals in households with children were almost three times as likely to be in debt arising from ordinary living expenses compared with those living in households without children.

A Budget 2013 commitment of €2.5m (increasing to €4.75m by 2015) for extending the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) is named as the 'Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative', indicating that the Government views this funding as delivering on its commitment to such an approach in the Programme for Government. While the funding is positive, it is only one step on the road. The initiative should continue to be treated as a pilot, with the aim of drawing out learning to inform the integration of services in *all* areas of the

country – as most disadvantaged children do not live in disadvantaged areas. We welcome the statement by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs that it is 'important that we mainstream the learning from these pilot projects so that proven and effective supports for children and families could be delivered right through the country'.⁸⁸

Parental leave entitlements and family-friendly work policies

Leave entitlements in Ireland are very limited in comparison with the leading countries, in spite of improvements in maternity leave over the last decade:

- Maternity leave is only paid for 26 weeks. Leave after that point is unpaid – with 16 weeks' unpaid maternity leave, and 14 weeks' (soon to be 18 weeks') unpaid parental leave. Both international and national experience indicates that it is only paid leave that impacts on most parents' ability to remain at home with a child during the first year, especially for families with low incomes or who experience job insecurity,⁸⁹ so Ireland falls well short of the one year of paid leave recommended by UNICEF.
- There is no statutory paternity leave.
- The gap from the end of parents' leave entitlement to a subsidised place in an early care and education service is between 2 and 3.5 years, depending on the age at which a child starts the Free Pre-School Year.
- Financial pressures in the recession have pushed more women to return to work early. Recent Irish research shows that fewer than half of mothers use any of their entitlements to unpaid leave, and that the take-up of unpaid leave is related to the mother's ability to afford it. In addition, while the large majority (92%) take some

⁸⁸ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, press release, 5 December 2012: 'Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Announces New Supports for Children and Families.'

⁸⁹ H. Russell et al. (2011) *Pregnancy at Work: A National Survey*, Equality Authority and HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme; P. Moss et al. (2012) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research*, p.41.

paid maternity leave, 1 in 8 women take less than the 6 months' full entitlement to paid maternity leave, particularly those reporting financial constraints or job insecurity.⁹⁰

- Family-friendly work policies are limited to some employers, with the result that many families face an on-going struggle to balance work and caring responsibilities. There is no right for parents to request flexible working arrangements.

Supports for parenting and the home learning environment

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 a 'normal' support for families.

There are many parenting courses and supports in Ireland today, offered by wide range of organisations, but they operate on a pilot basis or as local initiatives rather than as a mainstream public service. Availability varies around the country, and there is no national strategy for parenting supports.

- In some areas, parenting supports are available on a universal basis, e.g. linked to Public Health Nurses (PHNs). In some areas, supports are targeted at disadvantaged communities. In general, there is no coordination to ensure availability to all families who want or need parenting supports.
- While some parenting programmes have a strong evidence base, some do not. A series of initiatives are under way in Ireland evaluating different parenting programmes and models of delivery. When the learning from all these is brought together, we will know a lot about what works for families in Ireland. But we will still need political decisions to translate the learning from

these initiatives into mainstream supports.

- Public Health Nurses and early care and education services are both widely available and trusted – both could provide infrastructure for the mainstream provision of parenting supports. But both services face barriers:
 - The role of Public Health Nurses is wide-ranging,⁹¹ and their numbers are limited.
 - In early care and education services the level of professional development is varied, as is parents' understanding of the role of early care and education services. Both these factors limit the ability of early care and education services to fulfil their potential role of supporting parents and the home learning environment at the same time as directly supporting children.⁹²
 - While some pilot initiatives are under way exploring the scope for combination approaches, combining early care and education services with parenting supports and parent education – such as the NEYAI initiative in Fingal, as well as the recently evaluated Tallaght West CDI project⁹³ – such approaches are still at an early stage in Ireland.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

In order for the NEYS to support the role of families as children's primary educators, the NEYS must involve actions that increase the resources available to families, especially families living in poverty, that enable families to balance work and caring responsibilities more easily, and that increase access to parenting supports:

Family resources

- Child income supports, which include Child Benefit, should retain a strong universal component, as part of the State's investment in all children and in recognition

90 H. Russell et al. (2011) *op. cit.*, p.98.

91 C. A. Nic Philibin et al. (2010) 'The role of the public health nurse in a changing society', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 66(4).

92 M. Share, L. Kerrins & S. Greene (2011) *Developing Early Years Professionalism*, NCI Early Learning Initiative and TCD.

93 N. Hayes et al. (2013) *Evaluation of the Early Years Programme of the Childhood Development Initiative*, Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative.

of the additional costs that all families with children face.

- The NEYS should link early years policies to other areas of social policy, with a coordinated, cross-departmental approach aimed at eliminating child poverty. Measures should include making high quality early care and education services affordable, with the aim of ensuring that the cost to parents is not for any child's participation in early care and education nor to parental employment, which is a crucial factor in reducing child poverty. (See Section 3 below for more detailed recommendations.)
- The Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative should be further developed but, as most disadvantaged children do not live in disadvantaged areas, it should continue to be used as a pilot to inform mainstream services and supports.
- For further recommendations on the affordability of services for young children, see page 54.

Parental leave entitlements and family-friendly work policies

- The NEYS should move Ireland towards the target of achieving paid leave right through a child's first year, with all parents able to access this, not just employees, but also the self-employed and unemployed. Paid parental leave should be introduced to follow on at the end of paid maternity leave. Paid parental leave should be incrementally extended until it is available for 6 months, thus achieving a full 12 months' paid leave.
- Parental leave policies should be linked to policies on affordable, high quality early care and education services (see page 54), to ensure there is no gap between the end of paid leave and the beginning of an entitlement to a subsidised place in a high quality early care and education service.
- The Government should introduce a statutory entitlement to 2 weeks' paid paternity leave.
- To help parents balance work and care responsibilities, work-life balance policies should be strengthened. Measures should include extending the right to request changes in working hours/patterns (which is being introduced in 2013 for parents returning from parental leave, as a result of the new EU Directive on parental leave⁹⁴) to *all* families with young children.

Supports for parenting and the home learning environment

Our overarching recommendation is that the NEYS should involve – or commit to the development of – a national strategy or policy framework for parenting supports. This strategy should:

- Provide for a coordinated approach to ensure that parenting support services are available to all families who want or need them, through a combination of universal and targeted supports.
- Make high quality parenting supports available locally and free of charge for all families with young children, beginning in the antenatal period, and using the existing infrastructure of Public Health Nurses, early care and education services, and Family Resource Centres, to ensure they are universally accessible and non-stigmatising, so as to normalise parenting supports.
- Make additional, more intensive parenting supports – both home-visiting and group-based – available for families going through periods of additional need.
- Review the structure of the Public Health Nursing service to ensure a proportion of PHNs have a dedicated role

⁹⁴ Council Directive 2010/18/EU, which must be turned into law in Ireland by March 2013.

in supporting families with young children, and ensure the PHN service has sufficient staff and resources to provide both home-visiting and clinic-based services to all families with young children.

- Raise quality standards in early care and education settings, including enhancing the capacity of services to support parental engagement and parent education at the same as directly supporting children.
- Expand the use of early care and education settings in health promotion initiatives and as sites for families with young children to access information about health, family supports and parenting.
- Ensure that publicly supported parenting programmes are evidence-based or evidence-informed.
- Support public information campaigns on the importance of early learning and on practical ways in which families can support young children's development.

Key recommendations

- 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.
- 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.
- 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

The implications of research and international standards are addressed here under 3 headings:

- The importance of universal services and supports.
- The need for high-quality services and supports to be affordable to all.
- The need for services and supports to be fully inclusive if universal access is to be meaningful.

Universal services and supports

The European Commission's recent Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care summarises the evidence on access by concluding that:

*'Access to universally available, high-quality inclusive ECEC services is beneficial for all... There is clear evidence that universal access to quality ECEC is more beneficial than interventions targeted exclusively at vulnerable groups.'*⁹⁵

The European Commission notes that many Member States [such as Ireland] have adopted market-based approaches to the provision of childcare services, but the Commission argues that:

'Market-based services have the potential to limit public expenditure and allow greater choice and control for parents; however this should not be allowed to restrict the availability of high quality services for all.'

The OECD's *Starting Strong II* report concluded that:

'Research suggests that inclusion in universal programmes may be the most effective approach to these children and their families, and that successful inclusion requires enhanced funding, low child-staff ratios, specialist staff and well-planned pedagogies.'

*Targeted programmes segregate, may stigmatise and generally fail to provide for many of the children eligible for special programmes.'*⁹⁶

The research evidence shows that, while the benefits are greatest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, all children benefit from high quality care and education in early childhood.⁹⁷ From a children's rights perspective, therefore, high quality services and supports should be affordable and accessible to *all* children. Additional benefits of universal provision are that:

- It is an effective means of reaching those who experience disadvantage, given the difficulty of identifying and reaching all disadvantaged children through targeted approaches.
- It helps to ensure quality for all, avoiding the risk of a two-tier system.⁹⁸
- The evidence shows that young children do best when they are in services with a mix of children from different social backgrounds, which universal provision helps to achieve.⁹⁹

Of course, there is a need for additional supports for children with additional needs – in line with the principle of progressive universalism – but additional supports are most effectively provided on a base of universal services. Additional supports may take a range of forms, including:

- Lower fee levels for services (where fees are charged) for those with lower incomes.
- Additional, targeted supports within universal services. For example, children from migrant backgrounds may need additional language support, and some children with disabilities require Pre-School Special Needs Assistants within mainstream services.

⁹⁵ 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, pp.3-5

⁹⁶ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Paris: OECD.

⁹⁷ Pam Sammons (2010) 'Does pre-school make a difference?' in Kathy Sylva et al., *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge.

⁹⁸ Steven Barnett et al. (2004) *The Universal Vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Pre-School for All?* Pre-School Policy Matters, Issue 6. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

⁹⁹ Pam Sammons (2010) *op. cit.*, p.105.

- Outreach to enable disadvantaged families to access services.
- Specialist supports such as speech and language therapists on a referral basis.

Parenting supports, similarly, should be available on a universal basis, with additional parenting supports available for children or families with additional needs. Parenting supports have spread rapidly in recent years, but are still often seen as valuable only for 'problem families' or where children have behavioural or learning difficulties. As a recent Council of Europe report on parenting argued:

*'[P]arenting is an activity that needs support. All parents experience known times and situations of high need such as adjustment in the early years of partnership and parenthood, childbirth, etc. Above and beyond this, there are parents with additional need of support, perhaps because they are parenting alone, because they are raising their children on a low income, or because the family is having to cope with a health-related or other difficulty.'*¹⁰⁰

Given the benefits of parenting supports, there should be no stigma attached to receiving a parenting support or home visit. Universal provision is an effective means of reducing stigma.¹⁰¹ Parenting supports should build on the work of universal services such as public health nurses.

After-school services – which in Ireland are relevant to 4 and 5 year olds as well as older children – should also be available on a universal basis, with affordability and high quality as guiding principles. High quality after-school services can meet the dual purpose of enabling parents to stay in or re-enter the labour market while at the same time being directly beneficial to the child. The benefits for children can be significant, including modifying the

impact of poverty, acting as a protective factor against early school leaving, fostering social skills, and social support for positive mental health. These services can be particularly effective in acting as a bridge for children who are finding the transition from primary school into secondary school difficult. Diversity of activities and approaches helps to meet children's varied interests and needs, helping children develop life-skills and improving their social and emotional capabilities. In turn, they can indirectly support children's academic achievements, including reducing the risk of early school leaving.¹⁰²

Affordable services and supports

For all young children to benefit, high quality services and supports for young children and their families need to be genuinely affordable – cost should not be a barrier to children's opportunity to benefit from such services.

While the cost to parents of participation in early care and education services matters for young children of all ages, the argument for free provision is strongest for children from the age of 2 onwards. 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. The large-scale EPPE study in the UK concluded that:

*'The duration of attendance is important with every month of pre-school experience after age 2 years linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability.'*¹⁰³

Even at a younger age than 2, subsidies should be available to ensure that there is no gap between the ending of their entitlement to paid parental leave and the availability of high quality, genuinely affordable services for their children. This is necessary to minimise the likelihood of

¹⁰⁰ Council of Europe – Committee of Experts on Children and Families (2007) *Parenting in Contemporary Europe: a Positive Approach*, Mary Daly ed., Strasbourg: Council of Europe, p.9.

¹⁰¹ A recently published randomised control trial in the US has shown the universal provision of parenting supports on a whole-population basis (with professional training of the existing workforce and universal media and communication strategies) to be very effective in reducing child maltreatment. Ronald Prinz et al. (2009) 'Population-based prevention of child maltreatment: the US Triple P System population trial', in *Prevention Science*, vol.10, no.1.

¹⁰² Start Strong and Barnardos (2012) *Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0-12 Year Olds in Ireland?*

¹⁰³ Kathy Sylva et al. (2008), *EPPE 3-11: Final Report from the Primary Phase*, London: Institute of Education, p.2.

parents using unregulated services in a child's second year, to ensure that children do not have to move from one service to another within a year, and to make the return to employment affordable for parents. Above all, parents should not have to resort to services of lower or unknown quality.

The principle that there should be no gap between the ending of paid parental leave and the beginning of an entitlement to a subsidised, quality service is common to the Nordic countries, which combine an emphasis on high quality services to benefit children with the facilitation of parental employment.¹⁰⁴

Parental supports must also be affordable to all, especially given the social barriers that already stand in the way of many families taking up opportunities to receive parental supports.

Inclusive services and supports

Genuinely universal access has implications not just for the availability and affordability of places, but also for practices within services. In catering for the needs of all young children within their local community, mainstream services need to be inclusive, welcoming and supportive for children of all abilities and all backgrounds – ethnic, cultural, social, linguistic and family structure. The full integration of all children in the local community into mainstream services has profound implications for the character of services and for the training of practitioners.

'Diversity is about all the ways in which people differ and in how they live their lives. It is about appreciating that differences are a natural part of life. No two people are the same and this means that many different elements make up the community you belong to, work and live in. Diversity is something which should be recognised,

*accepted and respected and many elements can be celebrated. There is a 'shadow side' to diversity: stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and racism, sexism, classism etc.'*¹⁰⁵

Inclusive practice requires the professional development of early childhood educators as well as specific training on diversity and equality. It requires that all practitioners have respect for diversity and know how to provide for the meaningful integration of all children and how to promote equality within services. It also requires training that challenges educators to be aware of discrimination and learn how to tackle it.

Inclusion requires data and monitoring of attendance of children from marginalised groups. It also requires diversity in the background of early childhood educators, who should include Traveller and Roma educators, educators from other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, educators with disabilities, as well as male educators, so that children of all abilities and backgrounds feel welcome within services and see role-models around them.¹⁰⁶

When we say that early childhood services should be inclusive services, we are talking about diversity in all its forms. Examples of diversity and of how we might respond to it include:

- **Social diversity.** The universal provision of services for all young children in the community should aim to foster a mix of children from different social backgrounds, given the evidence on the benefits for young children of a social mix within early childhood services.¹⁰⁷ While it is hard to achieve social diversity in practice, given social segregation in housing, it is important to design policies that help contribute to it.

¹⁰⁴ Barnardos and Start Strong (2012) *Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0-12 Year Olds in Ireland?*

¹⁰⁵ DECET and ISSA (2012) *Diversity and Social Inclusion – Exploring Competences for Professional Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care*, p.28, <http://www.decet.org/fileadmin/decet-media/publications/Diversity-and-Social-Inclusion.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, OMCYA (2006) *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers*, Dublin: OMCYA

¹⁰⁷ Pam Sammons (2010) *op. cit.*, p.105

- *Ethnic and cultural diversity.* Traveller and Roma children, children from other ethnic and religious minorities, children from migrant backgrounds and asylum seekers should be integrated in local mainstream services for young children. Integration implies that services should model respect for diversity and non-discrimination in their practice, ensuring for example that children's diverse backgrounds are fully reflected in the materials they use and in their daily activities.
- *Linguistic diversity.* Early childhood services should give additional language support to young children who speak a different language at home, and services should be available for families who speak Irish at home or want their children to attend Irish-language services.
- *Diversity of family structures.* Diversity of family structure should be acknowledged and respected in settings through policies, practice, imagery and materials. The fact that children come from a variety of family structures, including same-sex parents and parents parenting alone, should be clearly visible in settings.
- *Diversity of abilities.* Young children with disabilities should as far as possible participate in local, mainstream services. The challenge here lies not in helping children with disabilities to fit in, but in changing services for young children so that they can meet the needs of every child. In some cases, the changes to services require physical access or additional equipment or extra staff, but often the central change required is in the professional training of early years practitioners, to ensure that all practitioners have the know-how and confidence to work with children with disabilities and the knowledge of where to turn for specialist support when it is needed.

Of course there are limits to the ambition of fully inclusive services. There are, for example, some children with disabilities who need specialist supports that cannot always be provided within mainstream services in the local community in a way that meets the best interests of the child.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the general aim should be that 'All children should as far as possible receive their pre-school education in mainstream early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings'.¹⁰⁹

Parenting supports too must accommodate and respect the diversity of families. They should be relevant to all parents in all their diversity – social, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and family structure.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

Universal services and supports

The Free Pre-School Year was a milestone in the development of Ireland's early care and education services, in particular the fact that it marked the first time that our early care and education services (other than the infant classes of primary schools) have been funded on a universal basis. The Free Pre-School Year was a very welcome measure, and its very high uptake (95%) indicates the widespread for it, as well as the potential for the further development of early care and education services on a universal basis.

However, the Free Pre-School Year is only available from – at the very earliest – the age of 3 years and 2 months.

A significant proportion of children do not begin the scheme until they are 4 years old, well above the 2 year old threshold noted in the EPPE study for when the clear benefits of early care and education services for children begin.

¹⁰⁸ The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004*, states that: 'A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with – (a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or (b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.'

¹⁰⁹ National Disability Authority (2011) *Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Early Childhood Care and Education: The Lessons from Research and International Practice*, Dublin: NDA, p.2.

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has on a number of occasions indicated her wish to introduce a second Free Pre-School Year.¹¹⁰ Currently, however, Government supports for early care and education services outside the Free Pre-School Year remain targeted on families with low incomes or in receipt of welfare payments. Furthermore, the primary funding scheme for affordability – the Community Childcare Subvention scheme – is only available in community childcare services.

Parenting supports in Ireland are largely targeted at disadvantaged families and disadvantaged children. Some local programmes, however, are implemented on a universal basis. For example, the Longford-Westmeath Parenting Partnership, launched in 2010 and currently being extended to Laois and Offaly, provides parenting supports on a universal basis through a combination of public health nurses and community and voluntary organisations, with all relevant staff trained in the Triple P approach to the provision of parenting supports.¹¹¹ Similarly, in Donegal, Lifestart works in conjunction with the HSE to offer the Lifestart ‘Growing Child’ programme and home visitation service on a universal basis to all first-time parents in the county, in addition to targeted roll-out to parents of vulnerable, at-risk children. In Donegal, all Lifestart referrals are directly from Public Health Nurses. The scheme has already proved very popular: in the first year of operation less than 4% of first-time parents failed to take up the service when it was offered to them by the Public Health Nurses.¹¹²

After-school services – which include services for 4 and 5 year olds who are already at primary school – have been historically underdeveloped in Ireland.¹¹³ There is no national policy, or legislative framework, and service provision is ad hoc, expensive, unregulated and varying in

quality standards. The level of training and qualifications varies significantly among staff and there is a heavy reliance on volunteers and fundraising. While a large proportion of children are engaged in some sort of after-school activities, these activities often do not fit with parents’ working hours, and holiday care is a major problem for many families with school-age children. Furthermore, given the array of services on offer and the number of children availing of them, issues of affordability, availability, regulation and staff qualifications need to be addressed to ensure high quality services are achieved.¹¹⁴

Affordable services and supports

The degree to which the Free Pre-School Year makes early care and education services affordable is limited:

- It is only available for one year immediately prior to school entry.
- It is only available for 38 weeks of the year.
- It is only available for 3 hours per day.

The limitation on hours per day and weeks per year means that parents in employment must complement the scheme with additional childcare provision at full-cost during the course of the Free Pre-School Year.

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. OECD figures indicate that childcare costs for a family with two children aged 2-3 amount to between 29% and 35% of the net income of a typical dual-earner family and more than 50% of the net income of a lone-parent family with below-average income. In contrast, the average cost of childcare in OECD countries for comparable families is just 12-14% - for both dual-earner and lone parent families.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Frances Fitzgerald, TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Parliamentary Questions: Written Answers [32548/12], 4 July 2012.

¹¹¹ <http://longford-westmeath.triplep-staypositive.net/>

¹¹² Lifestart Foundation (2012) *Lifestart ‘Growing Child’ Programme and Home-Visitation Service – Family Support Model*, Newtowncunningham, Co. Donegal: Lifestart.

¹¹³ Report of a Working Group of the National Childcare Coordinating Committee (2005) *Developing School-Age Childcare*, Dublin: Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

¹¹⁴ Start Strong and Barnardos (2012) *Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0-12 Year Olds in Ireland?*

¹¹⁵ OECD (2007) *Benefits and Wages 2007: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD, P.129-130.

A proportion of low-income families receive some assistance with costs associated with childcare though the Community Childcare Subvention scheme (if they live close to a service participating in the scheme ¹¹⁶). The Childcare Employment and Training Support scheme (CETS), provides free childcare places where the main carer of a child in unemployed and joins a FÁS or VEC training programmes. Nevertheless, affordability remains a major problem for a large proportion of families.

The barrier created by the high cost of early care and education services is a barrier not only to children's participation in quality services, but it is also a barrier to parental employment, which in turn is a major factor determining the level of child poverty.

Inclusive services and supports

Ensuring that services are inclusive is a core aspect of high quality provision, and it is a key element within both the Síolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework, as well as the Diversity and Equality Guidelines, which were published in 2006 but are yet to be rolled out, ¹¹⁷ and the Intercultural Education Strategy. ¹¹⁸ The importance of inclusion has been further increased with the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year - which rests on a Government commitment to universal pre-school provision - as well as the requirements of the Equal Status Acts.

It is Government policy to support universal early care and education services with, for example, the ending of Traveller Pre-Schools and a policy of including Traveller children in mainstream early care and education settings. ¹¹⁹

However, there is limited data on the extent of Traveller or Roma participation, groups which are 'intensely marginalised in Irish society'. ¹²⁰ According to Pobal's annual beneficiary questionnaire, 444 services report

having one or more Traveller children, with 2,051 Traveller children attending. Pobal note that "Figures are not currently available on the percentage uptake of the free preschool year among Traveller children but it is likely that it is significantly below that of the wider population". ¹²¹

No data is available on Roma children.

The Government has also supported initiatives to promote inclusion and equality in early care and education settings. For example, the Government has recently funded a national Diversity and Equality pre-school education initiative for children from minority groups, working with 160 local services, delivered through the City and County Childcare Committees, building on the work of the éist diversity and equality training programme and the EDENN Network. ¹²²

A recent OECD review of migrant education in Ireland noted the lack of training in relation to the Diversity and Equality Guidelines. The OECD recommended that "The production of guidelines should be supported by capacity building activities for the guidelines to be successfully implemented. ¹²³ The OECD urged that the specific needs of immigrant children should be addressed "through the language and socio-cultural development of the child through pedagogy and curriculum, training of teachers, and parental and community involvement". ¹²⁴ It also recommended the recruitment of pre-school teachers from diverse backgrounds.

¹¹⁶ In some areas of the county, there are no community providers and therefore no financial support for families receiving social welfare payments who wish to use childcare services. For example, there are no community providers in Swords, which has a population of more than 30,000.

¹¹⁷ Office of the Minister for Children (2006) *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers*, Dublin: OMC.

¹¹⁸ Department of Education and Skills, and the Office of the Minister for Integration (2010) *Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010-2015*.

¹¹⁹ Department of Education and Skills (2006) *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*.

¹²⁰ C. Murray (2012) 'A minority within a minority? Social justice for Traveller and Roma children in ECEC', in *European Journal of Education*, vol.47, no.4, p.570.

¹²¹ Pobal (2012) *Pobal Annual Survey of the Early Years Sector 2011*, Dublin: Pobal, p.24.

¹²² C. Murray and M. Urban (2012) *Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood: An Irish Perspective*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

¹²³ Miho Taguma et al. (2009) *OECD Reviews of Migrant Education: Ireland*, Paris: OECD, p.35.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.36.

McGough et al.'s 2006 research on early years provision for children with special needs in two regions of Ireland concluded that:

*The findings from this study suggest that provision for young children with disabilities and for children at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage is seriously lacking in quality along a range of dimensions, including the provision of appropriate curriculum and teaching.*¹²⁵

Specifically in relation to children with disabilities, Moloney and McCarthy's 2010 research, which involved detailed observation of early care and education services, found the quality of practice in relation to inclusion often to be poor:

*Children with SEN were predominantly expected to adapt to the setting rather than the setting adapting to accommodate their diverse learning needs. Thus, while practitioners attempted to support inclusion, their efforts were restricted in many cases by a range of factors including, poor understanding of inclusion, ineffective communication at multiple levels, inappropriate environments, limited assessment and planning, absence of curriculum and weak professional development.*¹²⁶

In some cases, children with disabilities are not even accepted into early years services. In research carried out by DESSA as part of its Childcare Inclusion Programme, 21% of services taking part in the research had previously turned away a disabled child from their service. Reasons given included accessibility, inability to meet the child's needs, and lack of training.¹²⁷

As Moloney and McCarthy's report stresses, the problem is not a lack of concern. On the contrary, their research found a 'hunger for knowledge and skills' as to how to include young children with disabilities in early care and education.¹²⁸ But many early years educators lack

confidence or awareness of how to do this, and a range of barriers stand in their way, including:

- Insufficient training and professional development, both at an overall level and specifically in relation to inclusive practice.
- Lack of qualification or training requirements for Pre-School Special Needs Assistants (PSNAs), variation in the availability of PSNAs across the country, and lack of guidance on the role of PSNAs.¹²⁹ In the audit carried out in the Moloney / McCarthy research, less than 17% of children diagnosed with a special educational need had a PSNA in counties Clare and North Tipperary, while 71% of such children in County Limerick had a PSNA.¹³⁰

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

Ensure that quality and access go hand-in-hand for all children, right through the age-range 0-6, so that all families can afford and access high quality services and supports for young children, including both health services and early care and education services. Public funding of services must be linked to the achievement of quality standards.

Universal services and supports

- Base the NEYS on the principle of 'progressive universalism' – the principle that services and supports should be provided for all, with additional services and supports for those with additional needs.
- Extend the Free Pre-School Year to a second, earlier, universal Free Pre-School Year. However, as early care and education services only benefit children when they are of high quality, steps must be taken to raise quality levels and public funding should be tied to the achievement of quality standards.

¹²⁵ McGough, Carey and Ware (2006) *Early Years Provision for Children from Birth to Six Years with Special Needs in Two Geographical Areas in Ireland*. CECDE Research Series.

¹²⁶ M. Moloney and E. McCarthy (2010) *Development of a Framework of Action for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education Settings*. DES / Mary Immaculate College, p.81.

¹²⁷ DESSA (2007) *Profile of Inclusion: A Study of the Inclusion of Disabled Children in Childcare and Play Settings*, p.10.

¹²⁸ M. Moloney and E. McCarthy (2010), *op. cit.*, p.40.

¹²⁹ According to Moloney and McCarthy's study, 'Primarily because of uncertainty with regard to the role of the PSNA, early years practitioners often abdicated responsibility for the child's care and education to the PSNA. ... [T]he study yielded evidence that in some instances, the PSNA was left to his/her own devices in a corner of the main activity area to work with the child away from the other children.' (pp.141-2).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.145.

- Provide parenting supports locally and free of charge for all parents and guardians of young children, as well as for others who provide informal care for young children, such as grandparents and other relatives.
- For children in primary schools, develop a national after-schools policy that would aim to achieve universal after-school provision, including: regulation of after-school services; greater professionalisation of the after-school sector; introducing a subsidy for after-school services that meet quality standards; and increasing the scale of after-school provision. As many 4 year olds and most 5 year olds are at primary school, this recommendation applies both to the National Early Years Strategy and to strategies for older children.

Affordable services and supports

- Introduce a subsidy – available in all settings where quality standards are met – for hours of early care and education outside the free provision, with a tiered fee-structure that reflects parents' ability-to-pay. Such a scheme should be available in all services – not just services targeted at disadvantaged areas – and would replace the current Community Childcare Subvention scheme. Again, the quality of services is critical, as children only benefit when early care and education services are of high quality. Initial steps should be taken to raise quality, and public funding should be tied to the achievement of quality standards.
- Extend the Free Pre-School Year to at least 48 weeks of the year, and to at least 3.5 hours per day, in line with the recommendations made by the NESF.¹³¹

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:

- Provide comprehensive diversity and equality training for all early childhood educators, to help ensure that all early care and education settings support the full inclusion of children of all abilities and from all backgrounds – social, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and family structure.
- Roll out the Diversity and Equality Guidelines.
- Issue national guidelines on inclusion, diversity and equality. These should include a national policy framework on the inclusion of young children with disabilities in early care and education services.
- Provide additional supports for children with disabilities in – or make them available through – universal, mainstream settings. Ensure that supports are coordinated, linking early care and education services with Primary Care Teams and with multi-disciplinary Early Intervention Teams.
- Develop national guidelines on the provision of Pre-School Special Needs Assistants (PSNAs), to be applied consistently across the country. The role of PSNAs should reflect the conclusions of the NDA international literature review that one-to-one support for the individual child with a disability 'should be an atypical form of support for the small minority of children who will need this intensity of support' – in general supports 'should be directed at the whole ECCE setting.'¹³² (p.2).

¹³¹ National Economic and Social Forum (2005) *Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: NESF, pp.78-80.

¹³² National Disability Authority (2011) *Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Early Childhood Care and Education: The Lessons from Research and International Practice*, Dublin: NDA.

Key recommendations

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.

- a *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.
- b *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.
- c *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. Investment in children's early years in Ireland is low by international standards. According to the OECD Family Database, Ireland invests only 0.4% of GDP annually in childcare and early education services, compared to the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP.

International studies 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 childhood services:

- One of UNICEF's 10 'minimum standards' for early childhood services is expenditure on early childhood education and care to be at least 1% of GDP.¹³³
- The EC Childcare Network's 40 quality targets included as a target that expenditure on early childhood education and care services should be at least 1% of GDP in order to meet the other targets it set for services. Given that total expenditure on the education system accounts for on average 6% GDP in EU countries,¹³⁴ the EC Childcare Network described the 1% figure as 'a modest and minimum share of public resources for an age group which accounts for one third of the child population'.¹³⁵

In all the Scandinavian countries, which are widely recognised as international best practice in early childhood services, investment exceeds the 1% GDP target.¹³⁶

Of course, it will be argued that Ireland simply cannot afford a large increase in expenditure on early care and education in the current economic climate. But if this expenditure is recognised as an investment that pays large economic returns, especially in the long-term, we can see that it is an investment that is even more important in a period of recession, as a means of laying the foundations for a stronger economy and a healthier society in the future.

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.¹³⁷

Similarly, a wide range of prevention and early intervention initiatives, including parenting initiatives, have received very positive cost-benefit analyses, including a recent Irish cost-benefit analysis of the Incredible Years parenting programme.¹³⁸

Reviewing the findings of international research on human capital, 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.

The reason for this, according to Professor Heckman, is that the development of a child's skills builds on skills they developed previously.¹³⁹ In children's very earliest years, children develop essential skills or dispositions, such as self-control, curiosity and perseverance – skills that are both important in themselves and that help children make the most of their later education.

¹³³ UNICEF (2008) *Report Card No. 8: A League Table Of Early Childhood Education And Care In Economically Advanced Countries*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre: Florence.

¹³⁴ OECD (2012) *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators*, Indicator B2.2.

¹³⁵ European Commission Network on Childcare and other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women (1996) *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children: Proposals for a Ten-Year Action Programme*.

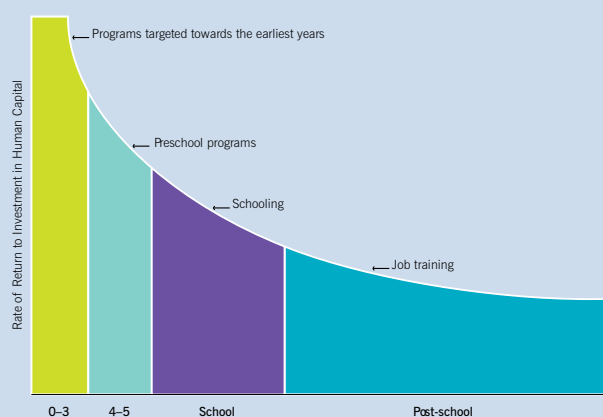
¹³⁶ Start Strong and Barnardos (2012) *Towards a Scandinavian Childcare System for 0-12 Year Olds in Ireland?*

¹³⁷ Start Strong (2011) *The Economics of Children's Early Years – Early Care and Education in Ireland: Costs and Benefits*, p.14. http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Economics_of_Childrens_Early_Years.pdf

¹³⁸ S. McGilloway et al. (2009) *Proving The Power Of Positive Parenting: A Randomised Control Trial To Investigate The Effectiveness Of The Incredible Years Basic Parent Training Programme In An Irish Context (Short-Term Outcomes)*, Archways and NUI Maynooth.

¹³⁹ James Heckman (2006) *The Economics of Investing in Children*, Dublin: UCD Geary Institute, Policy Briefing No.1.

The following chart summarises Professor Heckman's research, showing the rate of return to investment in educational and developmental resources to be much higher for children aged 0-5 than at a later stage:



Source: www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/heckman-equation-brochure

Of course, public expenditure at all stages of the education system is important. What the research on early childhood development indicates is simply that services and supports for children's early years should be one of the Government's foremost priorities – and that they merit a much higher level of investment than is currently made.

Start Strong's report, *The Economics of Children's Early Years*,¹⁴⁰ summarises research evidence on the returns to investment in children's early care and education. It examines 5 types of benefit that arise from increasing investment in high quality care and education:

1 Raising educational outcomes

The educational benefits of quality early care and education are seen both in the short-term – in greater school readiness – and in the long-term, right through the education system and beyond. According to the OECD's PISA study, 'PISA 2009 finds that the relationship between attending pre-primary school and better student performance at age 15 is strongest in school systems that offer pre-primary education to a larger proportion of the student population, that do so over a longer period of time, that have smaller pupil-to-teacher ratios in pre-primary school and that invest more per child at the pre-primary level of education.'¹⁴¹

2 Enhancing employability and competitiveness

Longitudinal studies have shown that the educational developmental benefits of quality early care and education lead to further long-term benefits in the employment and earnings prospects of the children who take part. A foundation of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills provides a firm basis for employability and productivity in adulthood, which in turn drive the competitiveness of the economy. The NESC has argued that early care and education should be a policy priority in the recession as it is a 'good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy'.¹⁴²

3 Reducing child poverty

While some of the greatest benefits are long-term (and are especially strong for children from disadvantaged backgrounds), making quality services and supports accessible and affordable can help families break out of poverty in the short term too. The cost of childcare, for example, is a large barrier to employment for many

¹⁴⁰ Available at http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Economics_of_Childrens_Early_Years.pdf

¹⁴¹ OECD (2011) *PISA in Focus 1: Does Participation in Pre-Primary Education Translate into Better Learning Outcomes at School?* Paris: OECD.

¹⁴² National Economic and Social Council (2009) *Well-Being Matters: A Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESC, vol.1, p.160.

parents, particularly lone parents. The cost of childcare for families in Ireland remains among the highest in EU and OECD countries – amounting to more than 50% of the net income of some families¹⁴³ – and is one of the central reasons for Ireland's high child poverty rate.

4 Improving health

The Marmot Review, which was commissioned by the UK Government, points to a striking 'social gradient' in health – 'people in different social circumstances experience avoidable differences in health, well-being and length of life' – and identifies six evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities, the first of which is to 'give every child the best start in life'.¹⁴⁴ Improving health outcomes through investing in early childhood requires high quality early care and education services for all, and it also requires effective health and parenting supports for young children and their families – including Public Health Nurses and parenting programmes – as well as mechanisms to ensure effective connections between care, education and health services

5 Preventing social problems

We know from research that it is more effective and more cost-effective to try to prevent social problems and to intervene early, rather than wait until problems are full-blown. This is particularly true of interventions in very early childhood, given what we now know about brain development in children's earliest years.¹⁴⁵ 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.'¹⁴⁶

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

The most recent data from the OECD Family Database (see chart) indicates that public investment in 'childcare and early education services' in Ireland amounted to 0.4% of GDP in 2009, compared to the OECD average of 0.7% GDP.¹⁴⁷ By contrast, expenditure in New Zealand was just over 1.0% GDP and expenditure in the Nordic countries ranged from 1.1% GDP in Finland to 1.7% GDP in Iceland.

These OECD figures cover expenditure on services (both direct subsidies and indirect expenditure, e.g. through tax benefits for use of early care and education services) for children aged from 0 to 5 inclusive. To make the figures comparable, the OECD attempts to take into account the different ages at which children start school in different countries (from 4 or 5 in Ireland up to 7 in some of the Nordic countries) by including a proportion of expenditure on primary schools where appropriate.

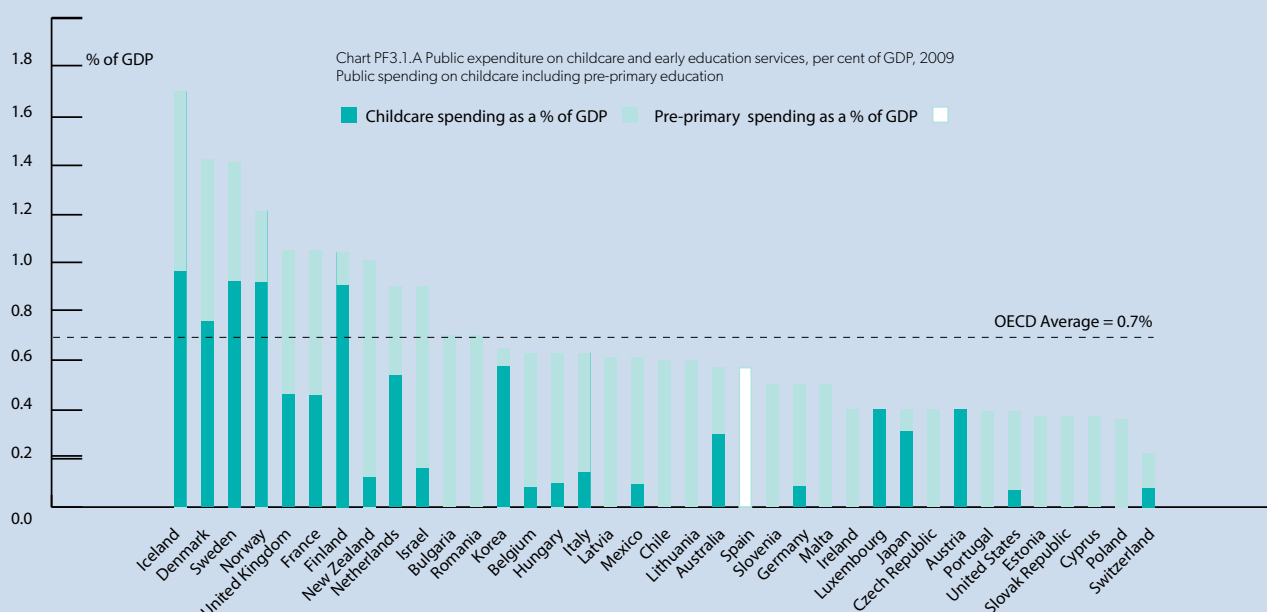
¹⁴³ OECD (2007) *Benefits and Wages 2007: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD, pp.129-130.

¹⁴⁴ Marmot Review (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post-2010*, p.94.

¹⁴⁵ 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*.

¹⁴⁶ Scottish Parliament Finance Committee (2011) *Report on Preventative Spending*, SP Paper 555.

¹⁴⁷ The EU average, according to the same data source, is 0.65% GDP.



Source: OECD (2013) OECD Family Database, <http://www.oecd.org/els/familiesandchildren/oecdfamilydatabase.htm>, accessed 31 January 2013.

To get a more up-to-date picture of the investment level in Ireland, reflecting the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, we examined Government expenditure data from 2012. Expenditure on early care and education services for children prior to school entry amounted to €300m, or less than 0.2% GDP. This expenditure included the Free Pre-School Year (€175m), childcare supports for low-income families – i.e. CETS and CCSS (€80.9m) and funding for childcare workers through the Community Employment Scheme (€22.4m¹⁴⁸). Other items include County and City Childcare Committees (€11.3m); Voluntary Childcare Organisations (€2.8m) and the Early Intervention Programme (€1.6m). The National Childcare Investment Programme provided €6.5m. The total figure does not include some related expenditure by other Departments (e.g. the Early Start programme).

For international comparisons, following the OECD convention, we can add to this a proportion of expenditure on primary schools that corresponds to the number of 4 and 5 year olds enrolled in primary schools. In 2012, there were 92,000 children aged 4 and 5 in primary schools, out of a total primary school enrolment of 509,000. With total expenditure on primary schools of €3.1 billion (including salaries and superannuation of both teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as capitation grants), we estimate that annual primary school expenditure on 4 and 5 year olds is approximately €560 million or 0.35% of GDP.

In total then, expenditure on childcare and early education

services may now amount to over 0.5% of GDP. It must be stressed that this figure, which is still well below the OECD average of 0.7% GDP, is heavily skewed towards 4 and 5 year olds in primary school, with only one-third (35%) of this sum invested in services for pre-school children.

A comprehensive assessment of all spending on young children must be even wider than this, to take into account health spending (both directly on children and maternal), maternity benefit (and parental leave in countries where this is paid), as well as cash payments such as Child Benefit. The OECD publishes data on the proportion of total social expenditure on children and families that goes to early childhood (children aged 0-5 inclusive).¹⁴⁹ The latest OECD figures (from 2007, see chart) indicate 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.

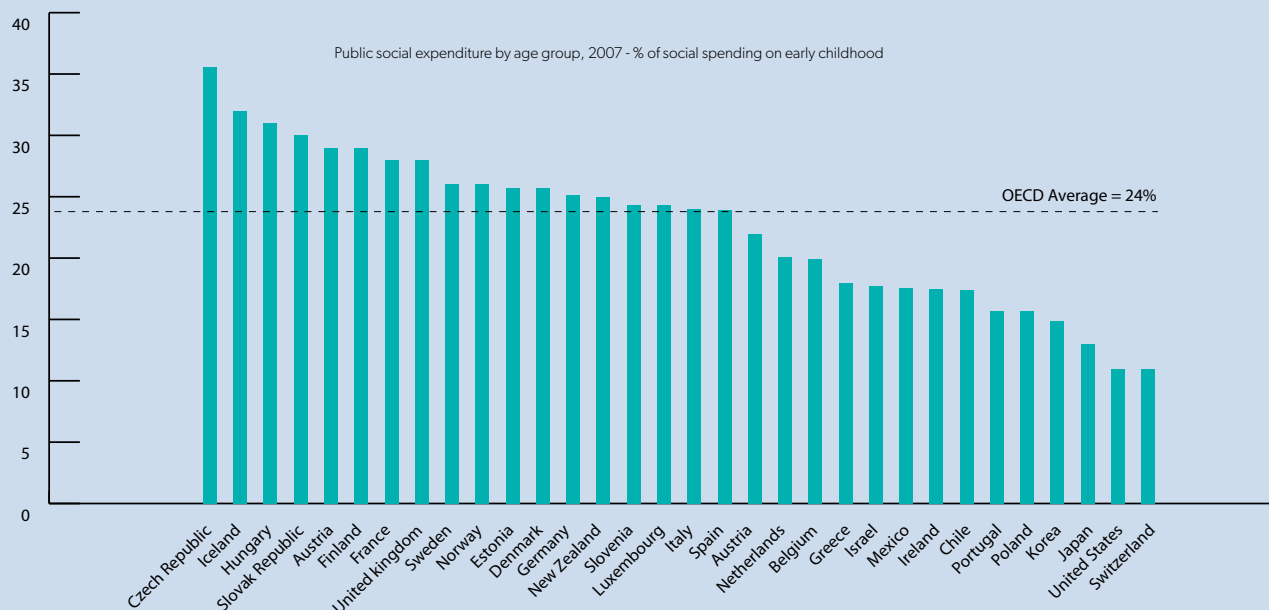
c) Recommendations for the NEYS

Total investment level

We recommend the Government make a commitment in the NEYS to increase the level of investment in early care and education services to 1% of GDP over the next 10 years.

¹⁴⁸ Minister for Social Protection, written answer in the Dáil 4985/13, 31st January 2013.

¹⁴⁹ The OECD figures do not include health spending as the OECD argues that these cannot readily be broken down by child age. OECD (2009) *Doing Better for Children*, Paris: OECD, p.73.



Source: OECD (2013) OECD Family Database, <http://www.oecd.org/els/familiesandchildren/oecdfamilydatabase.htm>, accessed 31 January 2013.

This significant increase in investment will be necessary both to provide financial backing for an ambitious NEYS and to develop the high quality services and supports that will generate significant returns – benefiting children, the economy and society, through prevention and early intervention.

Notwithstanding the positive economic returns to investment in early years services and supports, the movement to increase investment levels to 1% of GDP will take several years to achieve. Not only does the Government still face severe Budgetary constraints, but many of the areas in which investment will need to rise – e.g. in building a fully professional workforce in early care and education services – will inevitably take time to bring to fruition.

For this reason, the objective of raising the overall investment level must be a phased objective:

- In the immediate term, we urge the Government to make no cuts to early years services and supports in Budget 2014. It will be essential not to jeopardise the progress that has already been made.
- We recommend a year-on-year increase in investment levels in early care and education services from the current level of 0.5% GDP (0.2% GDP at pre-school level) to:
 - The OECD average of 0.7% within 5 years.
 - The UNICEF benchmark of 1% of GDP within 10 years.

Prevention and early intervention

Prioritising prevention and early intervention in public expenditure decisions will require the Government to make difficult decisions. We believe, however, that the NEYS provides an ideal opportunity for the Government to push forward this shift in priorities.

- Pre-school has always been the least resourced stage of the education system, but what happens later in the education system is dependent on what happens at this first stage. This was recognised in the 2010 Oireachtas Committee report on early school leaving, which concluded:

*'Solutions to the problem of early school leaving and associated issues should prioritise a preventative approach that begins early in the child's life and will often involve his or her family.'*¹⁵⁰

- There is evidence that levels of criminal activity can be reduced through prevention and early intervention measures that help reduce problem behaviours, including through early childhood interventions.¹⁵¹
- The legislation that establishes the new Child and Family Support Agency should explicitly state that the functions of the new Agency include fostering the achievement of positive outcomes for all children in Ireland. Only if the stated functions of the Agency refer to all children will the Agency be able to act effectively through preventative services that are provided on a universal basis to foster positive outcomes and reduce risks for all children.

¹⁵⁰ 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.256. According to the report: '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 and crime.' p.138

¹⁵¹ Candy Murphy (2010) *From Justice to Welfare: The Case for Investment in Prevention and Early Intervention*, Dublin: Irish Penal Reform Trust, Barnardos and the Irish Association of Young People in Care.

Of course the functions of the Agency must include early intervention, targeted supports for children and families with additional needs, and the well-being of children taken into care, but it is essential that such supports are delivered on a base of universal, preventative services, which need to have expression in the Agency's founding legislation.

Of course, the returns to investment in prevention and early intervention strategies take time. Public investment now in quality services and supports for young children will transform the life-chances of those children as they grow older and become adults. But expenditure in those areas will not fall in the short-term. It is because the benefits of prevention and early intervention last a lifetime that much of the return to this investment is not realised for some years.¹⁵² Nevertheless, the case for prevention and early intervention remains convincing and relevant.

In announcing the formation of the new Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Minister stated that prevention and early intervention will be one of the 'core principles' underpinning the new Department, and that the Department's work will include driving coordinated action across sectors, including health and education.¹⁵³

Start Strong urges the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to act on these principles through the commitments made in the NEYS.

Evidence-based policies

The NEYS should involve evidence-based policies that drawn on the findings of national and international research. This is essential both to ensure positive outcomes for children, and to ensure value for money in public investment.

In identifying policies that have evidence of effectiveness and impact, it will be important for the NEYS to focus on a *broad* range of outcomes for young children – 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, including: social and emotional outcomes and positive dispositions, such as better mental health, resilience, sociability, persistence and creativity.

While the recommendations in this submission are themselves based on research findings, there will be also be an on-going need during the course of the NEYS to keep looking at research findings – such as the emerging evidence from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme, which will continue to generate research findings until 2015 – and to adjust policy accordingly.

Key recommendations

- a 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.
- b We urge the Government to use the NEYS to prioritise prevention and early intervention measures, including universal early childhood services and supports.
- c 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.

¹⁵² Given the large economic returns, and the timescale involved in achieving them, a recent UK report called for additional investment in early childhood services to be funded through annual bond issues with 10-year maturities. Action for Children and the New Economics Foundation (2009) *Backing the Future: Why Investing in Children is Good for us All*.

¹⁵³ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011), press release, 3 June 2011.

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

Three aspects of governance are addressed here:

- The need for a wide range of policies that impact on children and families – health, education, childcare, family supports, etc. – to be coordinated, at both national and local levels.
- The specific question of how to integrate ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ policies.
- Data, monitoring, research and evaluation.

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

As discussed earlier in this submission, 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 the different policy areas that impact on young children, it is essential to coordinate policy-making at national level, and also to coordinate the delivery of services and supports at local level.

At national level, the development of a national strategy that draws together policy objectives and planning across different policy areas and different Government Departments can be an effective way of increasing coordination. When it examined children’s rights in early childhood, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called for ‘rights-based, multisectoral strategies’:

‘States parties are urged to develop rights-based, coordinated, multisectoral strategies in order to ensure that children’s best interests are always the starting

point for service planning and provision. These should be based around a systematic and integrated approach to law and policy development in relation to all children up to 8 years old. A comprehensive framework for early childhood services, provisions and facilities is required, backed up by information and monitoring systems.’¹⁵⁴

The need for services and supports for young children to be coordinated – to work together effectively – extends also to the local level. In our Children 2020 report, we proposed the development of ‘early childhood hubs’ that would link supports for the child’s care, learning, health and development, and would link services outside the home with supports for families in the home. An early childhood hub would involve both close working relationships between providers of services and supports, with effective referral systems, and accessible points of contact, information and referral for families.

Different local models are possible. In one model, the hub would be at a very local level – a type of community centre with early care and education services at its core and other services provided on-site or radiating out like the spokes of a wheel. In another model, the hub would be at a county or sub-county level, planning local provision, coordinating referral pathways, providing information on services to families, and providing resources and training to local services. Both these and other models have value. Indeed, different models might be appropriate in different areas, depending for example on whether urban or rural, or it may be that different models are needed simultaneously.

Whatever the model, early childhood hubs would link together a wide range of services, including:

- Public Health Nurses
- Care and education services for young children.

¹⁵⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*, General Comment No.7, p.11.

- Advice and information for parents.
- Parenting programmes and parenting supports.
- Supported parent-and-toddler groups.
- Resources such as toy libraries.
- Support-and-training networks for childminders.
- In-service training for early years practitioners.
- Specialist supports on a referral basis, such as speech and language therapists and specialist disability services.
- Outreach to facilitate access to services.
- Wider supports for adults, including employment supports, adult education and personal development courses.

Previous reports have also pointed to the importance of an integrated model of service provision for young children and their families. The OECD's 2004 country report on early care and education in Ireland, for example, proposed the establishment of purpose-built Child and Family Centres. The 2005 NESF report explicitly endorsed the OECD's proposal and also advocated the developing model of 'Children's Centres' in the UK.

Integration of 'childcare' and 'early education' policies

In building an integrated approach to policy-making for young children and their families, international research indicates that it is especially important to draw together 'childcare' and 'early education' policies into an integrated approach to children's early care and education. Right through early childhood, care and learning are inseparable, and there should be no divide between childcare policy and early education policy – 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 and happiness.

According to international research recently published by UNESCO on the governance of early childhood services, countries where childcare policy and early education policy have been fully integrated within a Ministry of Education have seen significant progress on many indicators of success.¹⁵⁵ According to the UNESCO research, policy integration requires not just coordination across Government Departments, but integration within a single Department – 'Coordination mechanisms ... have proved less successful in promoting a coherent overall policy and administrative framework across sectors' (pp.7-8). The benefits of integration in a single Government Department are significant:

'Potential advantages of integration have been documented. For example, it may promote more coherent policy and greater quality and consistency across sectors in terms of social objectives, regulation, funding and staffing regimes, curriculum and assessment, costs to parents, and opening hours. It may also facilitate greater and more effective investment in the youngest children, enhanced continuity of children's experiences, and improved public management of services.' (p.8)

For example, New Zealand, which began a major integration process in the late 1980s, bringing care and education policies together within the Ministry of Education saw significant improvements in participation rates (including for disadvantaged groups), in qualification levels in the workforce, in curriculum development and in resources for the sector. Other countries that are cited as good examples of integration within education include

¹⁵⁵ 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.

Sweden and Slovenia where, again, marked improvements for children, parents and staff have been noted.¹⁵⁶

The report notes that integration can be effective in other Departments, but it argues that the best example of this – Finland, which integrated all early childhood services within its ministry of social welfare – is characterised by a distinctive welfare system that is based on a universal model with strong entitlements for children and parents. The report cautions that simply bringing services within one Government department is not sufficient – ‘integration’ requires a new understanding of early care and education, with full integration involving wide-ranging reforms.

Data and monitoring

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.

In relation to early care and education services, data and monitoring is required on both the quality of and access to services. The OECD’s Starting Strong II report points to a range of issues on which annual data should be gathered, including:¹⁵⁷

- The demand, supply and utilisation of ECEC places.
- The volume and allocation of public financing.
- The socio-economic status of the children in and outside services.
- The recruitment and training levels of staff.
- The quality standards in place.

On quality, the OECD’s ‘Quality Toolbox’ for early care and education systems, which draws on a compilation of international experiences, identifies seven areas that are key for the monitoring of early care and education:¹⁵⁸

1. Child development.
2. Staff performance.
3. Quality of services.
4. Regulation compliance.
5. Curriculum implementation.
6. Parent satisfaction.
7. Workforce supply and working conditions.

b) Analysis of the current policy situation in Ireland

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

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 creation of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 was very welcome, and it has given impetus to the development of the NEYS as well as other children’s strategies, in addition to the Children’s Referendum. Yet it remains the case that several key policy areas impacting on young children are outside the DCYA, most notably: Public Health Nurses (who are scheduled to join the Child and Family Support Agency but at an unspecified time in the future) and primary schools.

The imminent creation of the Child and Family Support Agency will draw together a range of services, under the aegis of the DCYA. Bringing together a wide range of services and supports for children and families within a

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.80-85.

¹⁵⁷ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*, Paris: OECD, p.15.

¹⁵⁸ OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD, p.13.

single organisation will create an opportunity to strengthen co-ordination between different services at both national and local levels. 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.¹⁵⁹

At county level, Children's Services Committees have been established on a pilot basis, as a mechanism to promote the local coordination of services and supports for children and families, and it is Government policy to roll them out more widely. Currently, however, they are only established in 10 counties, with 6 others in the process of being established, and their remit is still not clear.¹⁶⁰ It also remains unclear how they will interact with the City and County Childcare Committees, whose role, following the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, has come to focus less on the development of local services and supports and more on the administration of funding schemes.

At service level, there are examples of integrated initiatives for young children and families in some local areas, including some of the Family Resource Centres, as well as some of the sites involved in the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme. But such initiatives remain few in number.

The *Programme for Government 2011* stated that an 'area based approach to child poverty' will be adopted, drawing on international best practice. The Programme for Government envisaged that such an approach would be rolled out in up to 10 areas. The Budget commitment of €2.5m (increasing to €4.75m by 2015) for extending

the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) is described in Budget 2013 as the 'Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative', indicating that the Government views this funding as delivering on its commitment in the Programme for Government.

Integration of 'childcare' and 'early education' policies

As noted elsewhere in this submission, 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 across Government Departments and agencies:

- Both Siolta and the Workforce Development Plan are under the aegis of the EYEP, which is co-located in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills.
- Aistear is the responsibility of the NCCA, under the Department of Education and Skills.
- The Pre-School Regulations are the responsibility of the Pre-School Inspectorate, which has been located within the HSE and is now moving into the Child and Family Support Agency.
- Responsibility for childcare funding schemes and the Free Pre-School Year – all of which offer scope for the embedding of quality requirements as a condition of public funding as well as addressing affordability – lies with the Childcare Directorate within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
- Some 'early education' services are the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills, including the Early Start programme as well as the infant classes within primary schools.

¹⁵⁹ Prevention and Early Intervention Network (2012) *Submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on the Establishment of the Child and Family Support Agency*.

¹⁶⁰ Centre for Effective Services (2010) *Learning from Experience to Inform the Future: Findings Emerging from the Initial Phase of the Children's Services Committees in Ireland*, Dublin: CES.

- Some early care and education services and supports are part-funded through the HSE, including a number of services in disadvantaged areas, as well as parenting supports, and the Childminding Advisory Officer service, which has been significantly reduced in size following recent HSE cuts.

This institutional fragmentation undoubtedly makes it difficult to ensure cooperation. The cross-departmental nature of the NEYS offers scope for reform, but the full integration of care and education policies may require the merging of policy areas within a single Government Department, as advocated by UNESCO.

Data and monitoring

There is a severe lack of data in Ireland on early care and education services. This partly reflects the fact that most early care and education services are privately run. With the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, the Government now has contracts with the large majority of services, and more data is now available. However, data remains largely limited to the schemes for which public funding is provided. In addition, the main source of data – Pobal's Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire – does not aim to be comprehensive in its coverage of services, and there are aspects of service provision for which no data is gathered.

There is a particular lack of data on the quality of services. Data on workforce qualifications, for example, is very limited, and there is very little research evidence at all on the 'process' indicators of the quality of daily practice within early care and education services.

There is also a lack of data that would indicate the extent of access to services, for example, through analysis of access to services by children's socio-economic background or levels of attendance among children from minority communities, such as Traveller or Roma children.

At primary school level, a national database of pupils is currently being introduced that will allow the monitoring of children's progress through the school system including, for example, giving data on the numbers of children who do not progress to second level. Child-level data at pre-school level could possibly be linked to the primary-level database, which could assist the development of strategies to support children's transitions to primary level.

c) Recommendations for the NEYS

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

In relation to delivery of the NEYS itself, it is essential that the NEYS involves cross-departmental mechanisms to ensure effective implementation. Ownership of the NEYS needs to lie somewhere, and with the current configuration of departments, the DCYA is the obvious place. But mechanisms are needed to ensure that other relevant Departments and agencies – especially the Department of Education and Skills, the Child and Family Support Agency, the Department of Health, the HSE, and the Department of Social Protection – not only have clearly identified responsibilities for implementing aspects of the NEYS, but that monitoring mechanisms allow for effective assessment of progress in implementing the NEYS across all relevant bodies.

- To oversee the implementation of the NEYS across all relevant Government departments and agencies, we recommend the appointment of a coordinator or special rapporteur with responsibility for the NEYS, who should be an individual with specialist expertise on early years policies and services. While this post could be housed within DCYA, its role should clearly extend to implementation across all relevant departments.

We urge the Government to ensure the new Child and Family Support Agency has a broad remit that focuses on prevention and on promoting positive outcomes for all children, providing coordinated supports and effective referral systems for families and children – linking universal and targeted services and supports, and linking preventative work with early intervention and more intensive supports. In particular:

- The legislation that establishes the new Agency should explicitly state that the functions of the new Agency include *fostering the achievement of positive outcomes for all children in Ireland*.
- Given the wide range of policy areas and services with which the Agency will interact, the Agency should regularly report to the DCYA on its contribution to children's outcomes, identifying where children's services are doing well and where there is room for improvement, and reporting on its coordination with other agencies in achieving outcomes for children.

To support the coordination of services and supports for young children and families at local level:

- We recommend the Government further develop county-level governance structures for the coordination of services for young children and families, linked to the implementation of the NEYS.
- Use the Area-Based Approach to Child Poverty Initiative to enhance the local integration of services for young children – building on the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (Tallaght West CDI, youngballymun, Preparing for Life), the work of Family Resource Centres and other initiatives – and ensure that learning from the initiative in relation to the integration of services is mainstreamed. The initiative should continue to be treated as a pilot, with the aim of drawing

out learning to inform the integration of services in *all* areas of the country – as most disadvantaged children do not live in disadvantaged areas. We welcome the statement by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs that it is 'important that we mainstream the learning from these pilot projects so that proven and effective supports for children and families could be delivered right through the country'.¹⁶¹

Integration of 'childcare' and 'early education' policies

We recommend that the Government should 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. While international experience suggests that the Department of Education would be the most supportive location for policy responsibility, DCYA is also a possible location. Whatever location is chosen, the UNESCO report makes clear that the key to effective integration is recognition of the inseparability of care and education.

Data and monitoring

We recommend that the NEYS should include:

- An initial audit of quality in early care and education services to provide a baseline for assessing subsequent progress in improving quality through the NEYS.
- A programme of research and regular data collection on all early care and education services, including a full range of both quality and access indicators, drawing on international best practice. In particular, comprehensive data is needed on the qualifications of the workforce, given the central importance of the workforce to the achievement of quality.

¹⁶¹ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, press release, 5 December 2012: 'Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Announces New Supports for Children and Families.'

- A commitment to carry out both a mid-term review and a final evaluation of the NEYS. The mid-term review could be timed to coincide with the completion of the Children and Young People's Policy Framework, if this has a 5-year timeframe.

Key recommendations

- a *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.
- b *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.
- c *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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