

Speaking Material
Minister James Reilly, T.D.
Start Strong Conference
3 December 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with you today for the Start Strong conference and I would like to thank Ciarín de Buis for her kind invitation. I would also like to welcome the speakers who will be making a contribution to the conference later on and all those who are participating in the conference here today.

At the outset, I would like to say that as a GP, and indeed as a parent, I am fully aware of the importance of the early years and of the role that families play in shaping the futures of their children.

It is an exciting opportunity for me to be involved in a sector that is of such vital importance in shaping the future generation, and I am anxious to really get to know the sector better and build on my own knowledge and understanding.

The development of Ireland's first ever national strategy for early years is an important milestone in the development of childcare services in this country. The Strategy brings together a significant amount of international and domestic research and will provide the blueprint for future quality childcare provision.

The Early Years Strategy is one of a number of detailed strategies being developed under the National Children and Young People's Policy Framework 2014-2018. This Framework, which was published earlier this year, sets out the overall principles, vision and outcomes for children and young people and will guide actions across Government over the period 2014 to 2018.

A lot of work has been done on the development of the Strategy and I would like to acknowledge the dedication and work of the Expert Advisory Group which produced its comprehensive report, entitled '*Right from the Start*'. This report provides a very strong foundation for a robust and meaningful Strategy. I would also like to thank all those throughout the sector for their input into this development.

The report provides for the first time a strategic approach to the development of Ireland's early years services. It sets out a comprehensive range of recommendations for consideration to support Ireland's youngest children and their families. This includes early childhood health and supporting parents to ensure quality in early years provision.

The final Strategy will be further informed by the growing body of international and domestic research on the importance of early years for child development, including findings from the "Growing Up in Ireland" study. It will also be informed by the evaluations from the Prevention and Early Intervention Projects which have been funded jointly by my Department and Atlantic Philanthropies.

My experience in relation to the consultations and discussions about the Mother and Baby Homes has in how important it is to listen to key stakeholders. So, while not wishing to waste any time in finalising the Strategy, I would very much like the opportunity over the coming months to discuss the draft with the sector in a series of focused small meetings. I will be in touch about how best to get that done. I am very anxious to get this right and to build the right structures to support better lives and futures of children in their earliest years.

The Strategy needs to recognise that young children have their own competence and capabilities. We need to help parents to understand that and be able to support children to make good choices. We need to ensure that services for children and families take this into account.

The theme of this conference, *Ensuring quality in Early Childhood Care and Education*, is a very appropriate topic at a time when there is considerable focus on improving the quality of early childhood provision. Investment in the early years is well-demonstrated to have the most profound impact on outcomes for children – but only where the services provided are of high quality.

Therefore, improving the quality of childcare services is something we as stakeholders should all be committed to - whether it is as members of Government, members of childcare organisations, as service providers, childcare professionals or as parents.

As part of the Early Years Quality Agenda, a number of key issues in the area of childcare provision were identified as requiring immediate attention and my Department has already made considerable progress in preparing for the implementation of some significant reforms.

The necessary legislative amendments to the Child Care Act 1991 have been made to underpin these reforms. This amended legislation will strengthen the current inspection regime and ensure greater compliance with Pre-School regulations. The new legislation provides a statutory basis for the registration of early years services.

This new registration system, which requires that anyone seeking to open an early years service must register prior to the facility being opened, will ensure that the service meets all the necessary criteria before registration is granted. On-going inspections of the childcare-related criteria will be carried out after the service has become operational and children are attending.

The drafting of the new regulations to provide for the reforms has required a root and branch re-examination of the existing childcare regulations. In recognition of the fact that the Regulations set out minimum standards that services must achieve, new National Standards are also being developed in co-operation with the childcare sector.

When the new Standards are introduced services will be inspected and reported upon against these Standards. Services will be supported in achieving compliance with the Standards and the intention is to support services to work towards higher standards of quality while providing clearer criteria against which to measure and report on their existing levels of compliance.

The new regulations will include the requirement for all staff working directly with children in the early years sector to hold a Level 5 qualification. These new qualification requirements, which also include higher levels for pre-school leaders delivering the free pre-school year programme, are based on international evidence that indicates that improving the qualification levels of staff in childcare services increases the quality of the service and therefore improves the outcomes for children. My Department has been actively progressing this issue and the necessary funding to support staff to obtain these qualifications has been provided.

A National Early Years Quality Support Service has also been introduced. This service has 30 graduates in early childhood care and education who will work directly with services to improve quality, including assisting services in the implementation of the Síolta Framework and the Aistear Curriculum. The new service will work closely with the City and County Childcare Committees and the Voluntary Childcare Organisations to support service providers in improving the quality of their services, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank these stakeholders for their co-operation in this.

To further address the issue of quality improvement, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has been asked to lead and organise education-focused inspections on the quality of educational provision in early childhood education settings participating in the Free Pre-school Year programme. Reports from these inspections will be published and will provide valuable information to parents and others, as well as advice for practitioners and those involved in the initial and continuing education of early years staff.

The involvement of Tusla Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education Inspectorate grows out of joint pilot evaluations of early years provision which the Government asked the Inspectorates to conduct as part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. Together, the work of both Inspectorates will provide robust quality assurance and will support the improvement of the quality of provision in early childhood settings.

Approximately €260 million is invested annually by the Government specifically to support the provision of early childhood care and education through a number of childcare support programmes. This targeted funding, which is provided directly to childcare providers, is a major source of support to the sector and I am pleased that despite the budgetary difficulties that have prevailed over recent years the Government succeeded in maintaining this level of support.

I know that the other speakers here today will be covering in greater detail many of the issues surrounding the provision of quality childcare and I am sure that these contributions will give further insight into many challenges facing the childcare sector. It just remains for me to emphasise how I am looking forward to engaging with the sector, and learning from it so that together we can all work to ensure that these challenges are met.

Thank you.