



## “Right from the Start” Key Messages

In October 2013, the Expert Advisory Group established by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs published its recommendations to the Minister on the content of the forthcoming National Early Years Strategy. *Right from the Start* is the report of the Expert Advisory Group.<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief, published by Start Strong, summarises key messages from *Right from the Start*, and includes an insert detailing its 54 recommendations. Start Strong fully supports the Expert Advisory Group's recommendations.

### Why we need an Early Years Strategy

The early years are a critical period. The foundations of our learning are laid in early childhood. It's in our early years that we begin to develop skills that we will rely on throughout life, skills such as early language and comprehension, social skills, resilience and self-regulation. Early experiences at home, with our families, in services and in our communities all impact on the development of those skills.

Ireland's services and supports for young children and their families 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”.<sup>2</sup>

While there has been some progress since 2008, especially the Free Pre-School Year, many deficits remain. In particular, the quality of early care and education services in Ireland is very variable. The recent Prime Time investigation, *A Breach of Trust*, highlighted many concerns in relation to quality standards, poor working conditions for staff, and weaknesses in the inspection system.

In *Right from the Start*, the Minister's Expert Advisory Group writes that “the development and implementation of an Early Years Strategy could be the single most effective action on behalf of young children in Ireland in our lifetime.”

Start Strong believes that Ireland needs an ambitious National Early Years Strategy – one that will not just address the deficiencies in our current supports and services for young children, but will place Ireland among the leading countries internationally.

### Transforming the life-chances of the next generation

In January 2012 the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs stated that she wanted the National Early Years Strategy to be “an innovative and exciting blueprint”. We believe that *Right from the Start* sets out just such a blueprint. It offers more than a vision – it includes detailed, practical actions for the next 5 years.

Its recommendations are challenging and ambitious, especially in the current economic situation, but the report makes clear that the additional investment it calls for is a sound economic investment that will more than repay itself over the years ahead. If fully implemented, the Expert Advisory Group's recommendations have the potential to transform the life-chances of the next generation.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013) *Right from the Start: Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*, Dublin: DCYA. Available at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/policy/RightFromTheStart.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> 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

## Calls for a national strategy

Over recent years there have been many calls for Ireland to develop a national strategy to drive the development of early childhood services and supports, and help us to reach international standards. Calls for a national strategy have been made by the OECD, the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality.<sup>3</sup> It is also a key recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Since Start Strong's establishment in 2009,<sup>4</sup> our primary focus has been campaigning for a national plan for children's early care and education.

In January 2012, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced that she intended to develop Ireland's first National Early Years Strategy. Start Strong warmly welcomed the announcement.<sup>5</sup>

Start Strong was pleased to be invited to be a member of the Minister's Expert Advisory Group on the Strategy. In parallel with our participation in the Expert Advisory Group, in April 2013 Start Strong made a submission to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on the National Early Years Strategy. Our submission, *Shaping the Future*, contained our recommendations both on the content of the Strategy, with supporting evidence, and on its structure, including the need for targets and timelines.

## From recommendations to action

The Expert Advisory Group was established by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in June 2012. It was chaired by Dr Éilis Hennessy of UCD, and had 15 members, including academic experts, representatives of Government Departments and Agencies, and from organisations involved in early years services and supports. *Right from the Start*, the report of the Expert Advisory Group, was published in October 2013.

Start Strong commends the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs for establishing the Expert Advisory Group, for actively supporting its work, and for publishing its recommendations.

While the Expert Advisory Group's report is in itself important, it is not yet Government policy. It is advice. The national strategy is still to be written. The value of the Expert Group's report will only be seen when its 54 recommendations are:

- Adopted by Government as firm **policy commitments** in the National Early Years Strategy,
- Supported by detailed **plans for implementation** over the timeframe of the Strategy,
- Backed by a **rising level of investment** in early years services and supports.

The level of public investment in our young children remains very low. OECD figures indicate that Ireland spends 0.4% of GDP on early care and education services, well below the OECD average (0.7% GDP) and a fraction of the 1% GDP used as an international benchmark for high quality early childhood services. And two-thirds of Ireland's spending on early care and education services goes into the infant classes in primary schools. Investment in pre-school services is less than 0.2% GDP.

It is with good reason that the Expert Advisory Group's first recommendation is to raise significantly the amount of public investment in young children and their families.

<sup>3</sup> 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](http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Planning_for_the_Early_Years.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Start Strong was initially established in 2004 as the Irish Childcare Policy Network, and became Start Strong in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Start Strong, 26 January 2012, press release, 'Start Strong welcomes announcement of preparation of Ireland's first National Early Years Strategy.'



## 5 Peaks over 5 Years

The Expert Advisory Group's report contains 54 recommendations that cover the full range of issues to be included in the Early Years Strategy. While some of the recommendations relate to a 5-10 year time-frame, many are short-term practical actions. The recommendations link to each other and are intended to be implemented as a package.

While calling for implementation of all 54 recommendations, the Expert Advisory Group also highlighted 5 central challenges as 'peaks' that must be scaled within the next 5 years:

- **Increasing investment.** In relation specifically to early care and education services, the report calls for public investment to rise incrementally each year from the current 0.4% GDP to reach the OECD average of 0.7% GDP within 5 years, and the international benchmark of 1% GDP within 10 years.
- **Extending paid parental leave.** To support children and families in the critical first year, the report recommends within 5 years to (a) achieve one year's paid leave after the birth of each child, and (b) introduce 2 weeks' paid paternity leave around the birth of a child.
- **Strengthening child and family supports.** The report calls for reorganisation of the Public Health Nursing service, to create a dedicated service – led by 'child and family' Public Health Nurses – to provide integrated supports for children and families from the ante-natal period right through children's early years.
- **Insisting on good governance, accountability and quality in all services.** The report calls on the Government to make a commitment that by the end of the Early Years Strategy, no child should be in a low quality early care and education service, and no public money should go to services that fail to achieve quality standards.
- **Enhancing and extending quality early childhood care and education services.** Subject to achieving higher quality standards, the report calls for extension of free pre-school provision, so that every child is entitled to a free part-time place from their 3rd birthday until such time as they enter primary school – allowing many children to benefit from around 2 years' free pre-school provision before entering the Junior Infant class.

## Key principles

The Expert Advisory Group's report identifies two broad values that underpinned both its recommendations and the values and principles it proposes for the Early Years Strategy:

**Children's rights**, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Committee's General Comment No.7, *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*. The rights of young children are woven through the vision and principles that the Expert Group argues should underpin the National Early Years Strategy.

**Progressive universalism** – the principle of 'help to all and extra help to those who need it most'. The Expert Advisory Group repeatedly calls for high quality services and supports for *all young children*. At the same time, the Group calls for additional, targeted services and supports for those with additional needs, built on a base of universal services to help ensure effective access routes to the targeted services.



## Targets and timelines

It is essential that the National Early Years Strategy includes not just all 54 recommendations made by the Expert Advisory Group, but also plans for how these recommendations will be implemented. As Start Strong argued in our submission *Shaping the Future*, the Strategy should include:

- **Indicators and targets** to allow for the measurement of progress.
- Clear allocation of **responsibility** for every action identified in the strategy. While overall responsibility will lie with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Strategy must clearly identify the responsibilities of other Departments and Agencies, including the Department of Education and Skills.
- **Timelines** for every action.
- A plan for regular **monitoring** of the Strategy, as well as a **mid-point review** and a **final evaluation**.

## Public investment

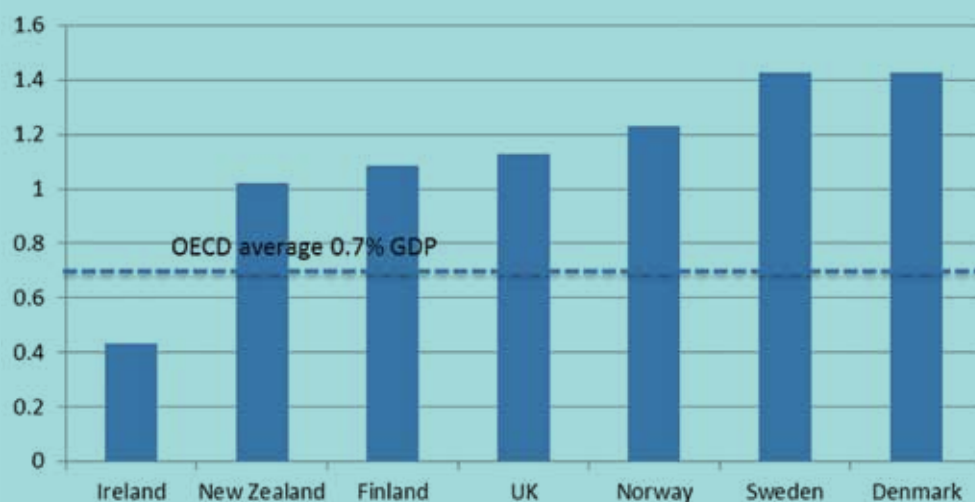
The National Early Years Strategy must also be backed by public investment, if it is to have any impact. The Expert Advisory Group has called on the Government to commit in the Strategy to increase the level of investment in early care and education services to 1% of GDP over the next 10 years.

This significant increase in investment will be necessary both to provide financial backing for an ambitious strategy 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.

The investment must be *public* investment. The cost of higher quality standards in early care and education must not fall directly on parents, who already face among the highest childcare costs in Europe.

The chart shows how low public investment is in Ireland in early care and education services, relative to other OECD countries. Of course, it will take time for the level of investment in Ireland to reach international standards. That is why the Expert Advisory Group is calling for an *incremental* increase, with investment rising year on year. It is disappointing that, with the exception of free GP care for under-6s, so little was done for young children in Budget 2014. We hope that Budget 2015 – which will be the first Budget in the lifetime of the National Early Years Strategy – will mark the beginning of an ambitious programme of rising investment in our young children.

Public spending on childcare and early education services, % of GDP



Source: OECD Family Database (accessed 22 October 2013).



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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.

Start Strong is supported by the Community Foundation for Ireland, the Katharine Howard Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies

