

“Right from the Start”

Recommendations of the Expert Advisory Group

Right from the Start is the report of the Expert Advisory Group on the National Early Years Strategy, established by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.¹ The full report was published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in October 2013. This summary document, published by Start Strong, contains extracts from the Expert Advisory Group’s report, as well as the full listing of its 54 recommendations, which are quoted here in full.

Theme 1: Economic rationale for increased investment

“There is a large and growing body of evidence – in Ireland and internationally – around the human, social and economic benefits of investing in children’s early years. There is also an imperative to invest in the early years because childhood is an important time of life in its own right. Government spending in Ireland today is well below internationally accepted targets for the level of spending necessary to achieve a high-quality early care and education system. There is also evidence that spending on health services is below acceptable levels on services for young children. While we are conscious of current financial pressures, we believe that investing in young children’s health and education will ultimately save money for the country and result in a healthier and better educated workforce in years to come.” (p.6)

1. **Raise significantly the amount of public investment in young children and their families.** There is a very strong economic rationale for such investment. Even – or especially – in a time of austerity, it is an investment that makes economic sense, strengthening the foundations for the future of our economy and society.

2. **Increase investment in early care and education services, with investment rising incrementally each year to achieve the international benchmark of 1% of GDP by the end of the Strategy.** Over the next five years, the Strategy should ensure investment reaches the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP.
3. **Require that baselines for measuring investment levels should themselves rise over time** to reflect the increasing population of young children. Investment must rise each year *both* to compensate for population increases *and* to achieve real expenditure rises over and above the population-based increases.
4. **Achieve investment increases in services for young children through a higher total level of public investment, rather than through redirecting expenditure from child income supports.** While there is a case for the reform of child income supports, the universal principle should be maintained, as recommended in the Mangan Report, and the level of payments should be protected, to ensure no negative impact on child poverty rates.

¹ 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>

Theme 2: Supporting families

"Parents and guardians have the primary responsibility for children's upbringing. They also have a profound influence on children's development. Parents, in this context, refers to mothers and fathers – but parental responsibility can also fall on foster parents and members of the extended family. Many families in Ireland are parented by one person on their own. All parents, without exception, need some support at some time in their child's life. At present, primary health care services are not working as effectively as they might be; parents often do not have sufficient time at home in their child's first year; they do not always have access to parenting programmes when they need them; and families in crisis are not always given the support they need. The Expert Advisory Group believes that a National Parenting Action Plan is needed to coordinate the planning and supports that are available to parents." (p.8)

5. **Introduce a significantly longer period of paid leave for parents**, introduced by each year incrementally extending paid parental leave at the end of the present period of paid maternity leave. The aim should be within five years to (a) achieve one year's paid leave after the birth of each child, and (b) introduce 2 week's paid paternity leave around the birth of a child.
6. **Provide intensive additional support for children under 3 living in consistent poverty** through existing early years services to ensure they meet developmental milestones.
7. **Reorganise the public health nursing service, through increased investment** to constitute the core of a dedicated child health workforce, capable of focusing broadly on child health and development, and integrated into the Child and Family Agency on that basis. Their core work must include home visits to every child in the first year of life.
8. **Develop a national parenting action plan**, under the aegis of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. This action plan would bring together existing models of best practice, and would aim to make a range of universal and

targeted supports available to parents. These supports would enhance parents' capacity to contribute to children's early learning, social, emotional and cognitive development.

Theme 3: Health and well-being

"The publication of Healthy Ireland (Department of Health, 2013) identifies health as a personal, social and economic good. The health and well-being of individuals, and of the population as a whole, is Ireland's most valuable resource. Ensuring the good health and well-being of all young children in Ireland must be a central goal of the Early Years Strategy. In order to do this, we need to begin by improving the kinds of supports offered during pregnancy and by increasing the proportion of mothers who breastfeed their babies. Ireland has the lowest rate of breastfeeding of any country in the European Union (OECD, 2009). Ensuring that more babies are breastfed will improve infant health and reduce the risk of obesity later in childhood. Furthermore, young children in Ireland do not all have access to free GP care when they are ill and the provision of basic vaccinations and developmental screening is variable around the country. These deficits must all be addressed if we are to improve young children's health and well-being." (p.11)

9. **Ensure that that the timing and content of the core screening and vaccination programmes are consistent** across the country. This will ensure that all children receive the five core visits by public health nurses at 48 hours, 3 months, 7 months, 12 to 18 months, and 39 to 42 months.
10. **Improve breast feeding rates** by building on the progress already achieved as a result of the Breastfeeding Strategic Action Plan 2005-2010, through a combination of hospital and community based antenatal education, supportive health service policies, consistency of approaches by healthcare workers, provision of high quality support, progressive maternity leave policies, and education and/or regulation of employers to provide facilities for nursing mothers.

11. **Introduce universal evidence-based approaches to prevent obesity** through work with parents as part of the Best Health for Children programme.
12. **Review guidelines on the Preschool Regulations** to ensure that all children in early care and education services have access to and make regular use of outdoor spaces, either on site or in the local community.
13. **Develop a comprehensive child injury prevention strategy.**

Theme 4: Access to services and inclusion

“Young children and their families need access to a range of services that are coordinated and integrated, informed by what is already known to be effective, that offer support when needed and that fit to local needs. The Expert Advisory Group believes that children in Ireland do not currently have equitable access to a range of essential services, including primary health care (e.g. vaccination), GP services and quality early care and education. In addition, we have concerns about the extent to which some services are inclusive, i.e. the extent to which they are successful at meeting the needs of all children that access them.” (p.14)

14. **Give access to free GP care to all children under the age of six.**
15. **Improve access routes to specialist support services for children**, such as speech and language therapy, to ensure effective access for all children who need such services. As far as possible, additional supports should be brought into local settings that families use daily such as early care and education services, rather than requiring young children to travel to clinical settings.
16. **Carry out a detailed assessment of access to the Free Pre-School Year**, to identify disadvantaged groups with lower-than-normal access rates, and take steps to raise access rates among those groups.

17. **Ensure that income-related subsidies for early care and education services reduce the cost-barrier facing families**, particularly those with low incomes or experiencing poverty. Reform of the existing subsidy schemes (Community Childcare Subvention and CETS) should ensure that subsidised places are equally accessible in all areas of the country.
18. **Introduce a national policy on access to pre-school special needs assistants**, including guidelines on entitlements to such supports and on their role in early years and primary school provision.
19. **Deliver training to all staff in services for young children in meeting the needs of children who have additional needs by virtue of their disability, family background, ethnicity, physical or mental health.**
20. **Roll out the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* nationally**, along with mandatory training and support for diversity and equality practice.

Theme 5: Quality in services and supports

“The quality of services for young children is critical to their effectiveness. The evidence on early care and education services demonstrates that such services only benefit children when they are of high quality. When they are of low quality, they can do harm. The quality of early care and education services in Ireland today is very variable and the lack of quality assurance is unacceptable. Ensuring high quality is the foremost policy challenge in early care and education today. While the Expert Advisory Group supports the extension of free pre-school provision, it is essential that quality standards are raised first.” (p.16)

21. **Prioritise the raising of quality standards** across all early care and education services. It should include an explicit aim of ensuring that by the end of the Strategy no child is in a low quality early care and education service.

22. **Carry out a baseline audit of the quality of early care and education services** immediately.

This should involve assessment of quality in a representative sample of services, using internationally recognised tools for measuring quality. Its aims should be both to inform implementation priorities for the National Early Years Strategy, and also to provide a baseline for subsequent assessment of the impact of quality-raising measures adopted by the Strategy.

23. **Develop a national plan for the phased, supported and simultaneous implementation of the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks**, to achieve their roll-out at all levels of the early care and education system, including in all services and at the levels of inspectors and trainers themselves. Core elements of both frameworks should be extracted and prioritised for implementation. Development of the implementation plan should include a comprehensive review of all current quality assurance tools – including both *Síolta* and *Aistear* as well as the Pre-School Regulations and the new National Standards – to ensure that their implementation is coherent and integrated. The review should include an assessment of whether amendments are needed to any of these tools to ensure their mutual coherence and effective joint implementation.

24. **Put in place a national expert group to ensure that child health standards**, especially in regard to early screening, are updated in line with evidence and best practice.

25. **Directly align public funding for services to the achievement of quality standards in early care and education services.**

26. **Extend the entitlement to free pre-school provision, so that a free part-time place is available from every child's 3rd birthday until such time as they enter primary school.** Depending on the age at which a child begins school, many children should then benefit from

around two years' free pre-school provision before entering the junior infant class of primary school.

27. **Establish an ECCE Quality Support Service/ national early years mentoring service** based on the development of the role of the County Childcare Committees and using existing expertise within the NVCOs to enable services to reach high standards of excellence.

28. **Significantly increase public investment in early care and education services in order to meet the additional cost of higher quality standards**, including the cost of a professionalised workforce. Higher rates of capitation grant will be required in order to raise quality in the Free Pre-School Year, and public subsidy will be needed to meet the additional cost of higher quality outside the Free Pre-School Year. The additional costs should not be borne directly by parents through higher fees, which are already among the highest in the world.

Theme 6: Training and professional development

"The delivery of quality services depends, above all, on the skills and competencies of those working with young children and their families. The Expert Advisory Group has particular concerns around levels of staff training and professional development in the area of early care and education services. Levels of training in pre-school services are currently below those recommended at EU level. In addition, there are concerns about the quality of the training provided in some cases. Within the health services sector, staff training is controlled by legislation, thereby ensuring minimum standards of professional competence among doctors and nurses. However, there is a need to ensure that all health professionals working with young children have training in child development and in communicating respectfully with young children and their parents. There is also a need for graduate-level training in child development for those who wish to specialise in the area." (p.20)

29. **Implement the recommendations of the recent CoRE report**, in particular through moving to a situation in which at least 60% of those working in pre-school early care and education services are qualified to degree-level, including equally those working with under-3s and those working with over-3s.
30. **Introduce a training fund** to enable those working in early care and education services to gain additional training, and provide for regular, funded non-contact time to ensure staff can engage in continuing professional development.
31. **Undertake and follow through on a review of the extent to which Ireland has a “competent system” in early care and education**, including in relation to training requirements for service managers (leadership and management) and in relation to the qualifications and training of trainers themselves (teaching as well as early education qualifications), with a view to ensuring a systemic approach to achieving higher quality standards.
32. **Support professionalization through higher wages in early care and education services by requiring adherence to an agreed salary scale as a condition of public funding**, e.g. through reform of the higher capitation grant. The salary scale should encompass all levels of practitioner, with graduate salaries comparable to those for related professionals, including primary school teachers.
33. **Review graduate training options and requirements for all professionals working with young children and their families** (including nurses, doctors, all children’s inspectorates, early care and education workers, managers, and primary school teachers) to ensure that appropriate specialist training is available, including training that is specific to early childhood and to the management and supervision of staff working with young children.
34. **Ensure that all those working with young children and their families are required and supported to undertake regular** continuing professional development to ensure that their knowledge of international standards, best practice and current national policy changes are up to date. Ensure that funded support structures are in place so that all those working with young children and their families can take part in continuing professional development.

Theme 7: Regulation and support

“The regulation of services for young children – and the support required to enable services to meet regulations – is critical in ensuring minimum quality standards and safeguarding children. A process of re-organising the Pre-School Inspectorate has begun and further reform is required. In addition, the Government must move swiftly to begin the process of regulating both childminding and out-of-school services since the lack of regulation in these areas exposes children to unacceptable risk and severely limits the scope of supports for raising quality standards.” (p.22)

35. **Broaden the composition of inspection teams to other relevant disciplines in early childhood care and education services**, including staff who are qualified in early childhood care and education.
36. **Review the Pre-school Regulations and the new National Standards** (as part of the review of all quality assurance tools recommended in theme 6) to determine their fit with the *Síolta* quality framework and *Aistear* curriculum framework. Any changes made to the scope and content of the Pre-School Regulations must then be followed through in the qualifications and training required for members of the Pre-School Inspectorate.

37. **Introduce the regulation and support of all paid, non-relative childminders** with the amendment of the Child Care Act 1991, and the regulation of out-of-school childcare. A transition phase prior to the removal of the legal exemptions from regulation would allow for the provision of supports and awareness-raising of the benefits of regulation for children, parents and childminders. It would be essential also to review regulations and the inspection process to ensure they are proportionate and appropriate to childminders' home environment.
38. **Increase funding and resources provided for the Pre-School Inspectorate**, to ensure that all services receive regular inspections, that the reform programme is supported and to accommodate the increased demands that will arise from the regulation of paid childminding and out-of-school services.

Theme 8: Governance

"The Expert Advisory Group has set out an ambitious vision for the children of Ireland, highlighting key domains where action is currently needed. These actions will only be achieved if a system of governance is adopted which ensures that children under the age of 6 are given due attention as is consistent with their individual rights and with the holistic nature of the developmental process." (p.25)

39. **Have a champion** – and the obvious champion is the Minister and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
40. **Be supported by strong coordination mechanisms across Government departments**, with a lead role for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Government should appoint a Junior Minister for the Early Years, reporting to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, with specific responsibility for driving the implementation of the National Early Years Strategy and with policy responsibilities that cut across departments.

41. **Bring together in a single Government department all policy responsibility for early care and education services**, including their funding, quality assurance, curriculum development, training and workforce development.
42. **Give to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs overall responsibility for the "child-proofing" of Government decisions** and legislation. To that end the Department should be enabled to employ a small cohort of specialists in aspects of children's lives, to advise and guide both it and the work of other Government departments.
43. **Establish clearly the governance of child health and well-being services** within the context of new organisational structures such as the Child and Family Agency and reconfiguration of the HSE, to ensure linkages are maintained and improved with a focus on improving outcomes for children.

Theme 9: Information, research and data

"One of the core principles we recommend is that services and supports for children and their families should be high quality, affordable and accessible to all. A further core principle is that Government policies pertaining to children should be informed by evidence. The successful implementation of both principles requires Government to have appropriate mechanisms to gather data relating to young children in Ireland and the services that they are accessing. In addition, this report has outlined the importance of providing services on a cross-Government department basis, including, for example, health, education, social protection and justice. If this is to be achieved, then there is a need to develop information-sharing systems and the technology to support them." (p.27)

44. **Develop measurement tools** (or means of capturing data in relation to quality in services, access to services, and child outcomes) **to assess the quality and quantity of existing services** and to measure change as changes are introduced.

45. **Develop information sharing and integration systems and data collection sources** such as the National Childcare Information System to support cross-departmental working (e.g. health, education, justice), with appropriate technology supplied to services.
46. **Continue funding the follow-up of the current cohorts of children in the Growing up in Ireland study** and the periodic addition of new cohorts of infants whose development is tracked longitudinally to ensure high quality data on early childhood in Ireland.
47. **Provide support for the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives.**
48. **Ensure that the data collected by public health nurses related to early child development is used effectively to monitor the development of infants and toddlers** in Ireland by: i) insisting that it is in line with international evidence on developmental milestones; ii) standardised across all HSE areas; and iii) stored electronically.
51. **Establish an implementation team**, independently chaired and consisting of an equal number of public servants and people from outside the system, to prepare and publish an annual report outlining the degree of progress being made towards realisation of the goals and specific measures in the strategy.
52. **Support staff and professionals working in early years services** (in government departments, agencies and service providing organisations) to adopt the changes to practice and their organisations which will be needed to implement the Early Years Strategy
53. **Cost the recommendations outlined in this Report.**
54. **Conduct a baseline assessment of the outcomes** identified in the National Early Years Strategy, to enable annual comparisons to be measured against a detailed benchmark.

Theme 10: Implementation

"Implementing the Early Years Strategy will pose challenges for the State, service-providing organisations, communities and families. It will require changes in the way policy and services are planned and delivered. Yet, the best Early Years Strategy in the world is of no value without a broad and deep commitment to implementation." (p.29)

49. **Be led by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs**, senior officials within the Minister's Department and senior management in key government and voluntary agencies.
50. **Establish a Cabinet sub-committee**, charged with implementation of this strategy. That committee, led by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, should include the Departments of Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Education & Skills, Health, Social Protection, Justice Equality & Law Reform, and Environment Community & Local Government.



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