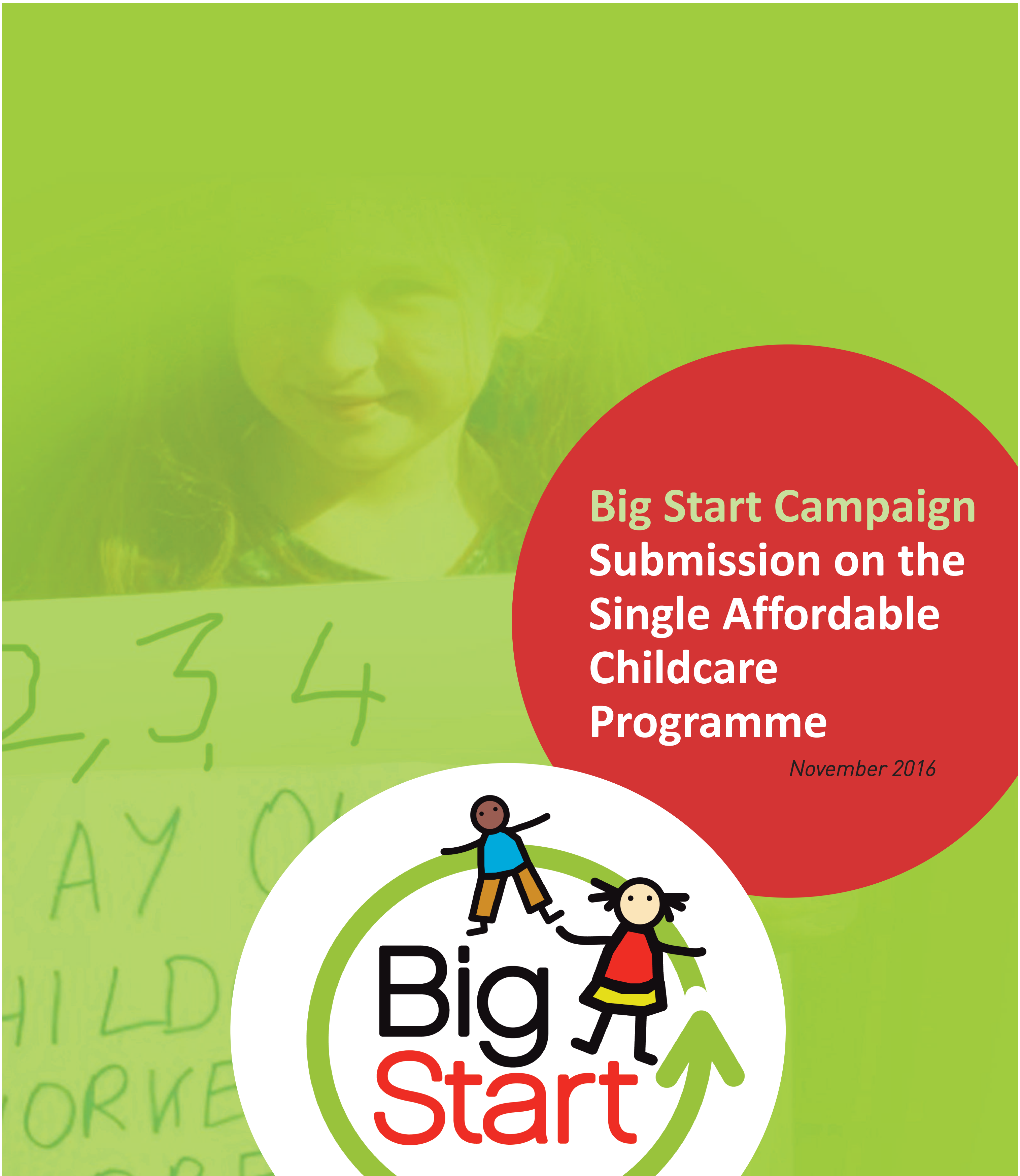

Big Start Campaign
Submission on the Single Affordable Childcare Programme

November 2016

Early Years Campaign

“The ‘Big Start’ campaign coalition aims to radically transform the Early Years Education and Care sector so that it is high quality, affordable accessible and delivery by qualified professionals paid a decent wage. The coalition is comprised of SIPTU, Barnados, The National Childhood Network, national organisations, academics and early years' professionals

Introduction

The existing targeted childcare programmes - the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme and the three Training and Employment (TEC) programmes, the Afterschool Childcare (ASCC), Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) and Community Employment Childcare (CEC) programmes) – are a major part of the lives of tens of thousands of young children in Ireland each day. Approximately 35,000 places were publicly funded under these programmes in 2015, while spending on these programmes accounted for 30 per cent of total public spending on childcare last year, according to data set out in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)'s May 2016 Briefing for Minister (pages 10 & 76). A further 68,000 availed of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, according to the July 2015 Report of the Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare – hereafter the 'IDWG report' (p.27).

The Big Start coalition welcomes the opportunity to outline its initial views on the planned introduction of a Single Affordable Childcare Programme (SACP) in 2017, in place of the existing targeted schemes. In view of the well-documented importance of quality childcare for children, particularly for children from a disadvantaged or with a migrant background, and for society at large, it is of vital importance that the new programme 'gets it right'.

This is all the more the case as the new programme is intended to be a "platform for further investment as funds become available", and, along with the extended Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, would "have the advantage that direct subventions to services ensure investment is spent on the Government's policy objectives and provide for a leveraging of the quality agenda", according to the IDWG report (pages 82 & 87). The Big Start coalition believes that the single programme should be developed and implemented on a phased basis, integrating both the SACP and ECCE programmes.

This paper sets out the Big Start coalition's initial views on the principles and high-level goals that the SACP or a future integrated SACP/ECCE programme should meet. We intend to produce more focused positions on specific aspects over the coming months. This paper does not directly cover the universal free pre-school year, called the 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) programme.

The first issues we wish to address are the children's rights framework within which the SACP is being developed, what is being considered and the timetable for implementation.

From replacing to reforming?

It appears to be the case that the initial emphasis on 'replacing' the existing targeted programmes is being superseded by an emphasis on 'reforming' these programmes.

The IDWG report stated:

> "...that the existing provision of CCS and TEC programmes are complex in terms of eligibility and inadequate in terms of accessibility. They were developed incrementally on an ad hoc basis and together do not provide a sound basis for incremental investment" (p.85).

It therefore proposed:

> "...a new initiative to provide for greater accessibility to a single targeted programme with a simplified eligibility based on income. All existing targeted schemes would cease" (p.95).

And said that the new initiative:

> "[should be]...simple to navigate for parents and would provide a platform for further investment as funds become available" (p.82). The then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. James Reilly TD, announced as part of Budget 2016 in October 2015 the development of a:

> "...single Affordable Childcare programme", to replace the existing targeted CCS and TEC programmes, with the stated aim of making "childcare more affordable for more families." (DCYA, 2015).

However, the Programme for a Partnership Government (May 2016) appears to reflect a change in intentions:

> "While recognising the need for additional childcare subsidisation as proposed above, we will seek to streamline the existing schemes to make them more accessible for both parents and providers (p.79).

This apparent change in emphasis is also reflected in the DCYA's Briefing for Minister (May 2016), which said that the IDWG had recommended:

"...that all targeted childcare programmes be merged into a single, statutory targeted childcare programme with eligibility for a childcare subsidy being determined by income only" (p.76)

And that:

"[A]...major implementation project [is] underway" to "reform" the "multiple and complex childcare schemes into a single new affordable childcare scheme" (p.13).

Start Strong stated earlier this year in its Early Years document for the general election that the (previous) Government had committed to "reforming subsidised childcare, but we don't know what that will look like" (p.2). While more is known now than then following the publication of initial details in Budget 2017, the Big Start coalition would welcome greater clarity as to the Government's thinking on the new programme.

The SACP should be an element of Ireland's first Early Years Strategy that is shortly to be published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which is to provide a roadmap for early years services. Irish policy for children is guided by 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures', the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). The SACP should align with its commitment to "remove barriers to employment through increasing the affordability of quality and accessible childcare and afterschool services, meeting EU childcare targets and encouraging flexible working arrangements".

Recommendation 1:
The new programme should clearly aim to achieve the 'double dividend' of childcare that is both affordable and of high quality.

Implementation timetable

The IDWG report acknowledged that the introduction of the single affordable childcare programme "will take time and will need to be phased" (p.87).

At the same time, the DCYA's Briefing for Minister stated that the aim is for the single affordable childcare programme to be developed by the design team in 2016/17 and to replace the four targeted childcare programmes in 2017. It describes the timeframe of delivery as "extremely ambitious, but the need is urgent" (p.76). The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone TD, told the Dáil that the intention is have the new scheme in place by September 2017 (reply to Dail written question 22964/16, 21 July 2016) ***while Budget 2017 documentation states that "it is intended that the new scheme will be available from September 2017" and that "it is intended that applications for the new scheme will be allowed from September 2017" (DYCA, 2016).***

While we acknowledge that this matter is still being considered, we would welcome greater clarity as to DCYA's current thinking on the roll-out of the new programme (i.e. will it be implemented in full in September 2017 or progressively from September 2017).

Recommendation 2:
The Big Start coalition believes that implementation of the new programme should begin no later than September 2017 and should be fully in place no later than April 2018.

Measures and issues being considered

The IDWG report sets out a number of "measures we will need to consider" in the move to a Single Affordable Childcare Programme:

- "Transitions from existing targeted schemes given the differing levels of support, subvention and construction currently available under them.
- Mechanisms for controlling demand and cost of the programme of investment. A subvented model, which prizes centre-based or regulated settings, might change current parental choice away from current reliance on parental, unpaid relative and regulated non-parental care.
- Having appropriate mechanisms to ensure the value of subventions cannot be capitalised into costs for core services over time" (p.82).

The DCYA's Briefing for Minister states under 'emerging issues' that:

> "[M]oving to one single affordable childcare programme, based on 'money follows the child' and offering a choice of any community or private services in contract with DCYA, is likely to have a financial impact on Community/Not-for-Profit services which currently manage their funding based on an annual allocation. This issue will be the subject of an in-depth policy analysis in 2016" (p.76).

These issues will be considered in the move to the new programme but given that the existing targeted programmes account for approximately 30 per cent of total public spending in 2015 and that the new programme is intended to provide the platform for future investment, it is imperative that key principles and high levels goals concerning ECCE are expressly considered in preparing the programme.

The following section sets out our views on the principles and high-level goals that we believe should underpin the new programme.

Children's Rights

The State as a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) since 1992 has an obligation to ensure that children have access to child-centred and child-friendly early education. The Convention is a key instrument to guide the development, implementation and evaluation of the SACP.

The development, implementation and monitoring of 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures', is guided by the children's rights principles enshrined in the UNCRC. The outcome sought by government is the development of laws, policies and services that take into account the needs, rights and best interests of children and young people. It follows that the development of SACP should be based on the children's rights principle.

More specifically relevant to the development of the SACP are four rights, known as general principles, identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

- the right to non-discrimination;
- the best interests of the child;
- the right to life, survival and development;
- the right of the child to be heard.

The UNCRC has developed guidance for Governments to clarify some of the broader implications of the UNCRC for young children: It urges Governments to develop rights-based, co-ordinated, multi-sectoral strategies in order to ensure that children's best interests are always the starting point for service planning and provision. More specifically, it recommends that:

- Governments must ensure that institutions, services and facilities responsible for early childhood conform to quality standards and that staff possess the appropriate psychosocial qualities and are suitable, sufficiently numerous and well-trained.
- Work with young children should be socially valued and properly paid in order to attract a high quality workforce.
- Early childhood professionals (statutory and non-statutory) should be provided with adequate remuneration, ongoing training and thorough preparation.
- There needs to be sufficient public investment in services, infrastructure, and overall resources specifically allotted to early childhood. States are encouraged to develop strong and equitable partnerships between the Government, public services, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and families to finance comprehensive services in support of young children's rights.
- Service providers in the private sector also have a clear role in implementing children's rights.

Approximately 70 per cent of centre-based early years providers are private, for-profit organisations, and childminders based in their own home are also private sector providers. Businesses are urged by the UN Committee (International Commission of Jurists, 2015) to meet their responsibility to respect children's rights and commit to supporting the rights of children. While it is the State that takes on obligations under the UNCRC, the task of implementation needs to engage all sectors of society including business and they need to be held accountable. A key principle of 'The Children's Rights and Business Principles' (International Commission of Jurists, 2015) is to ensure the protection and safety of children in all business activities and facilities.

Recommendation 3:
The SACP should be developed within the children's rights framework as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Recommendation 4:
All early years providers should meet their responsibilities to respect children's rights and commit to support children's rights.

Affordability

Parents in Ireland pay some of the highest childcare costs in the world. Average costs across the European Union (EU) are less than 50 per cent of Irish costs. OECD research found that on average, two-parent families, with both parents working outside the home and with two children below school-age, pay a quarter of their take-home pay on childcare. One-parent families pay even more.

As outlined above, the IDWG report stated that among the measures to be considered are …"transitions from existing targeted schemes given the differing levels of support, subvention and construction currently available under them". It is imperative that no families taking part in the existing targeted programmes, or families who would be entitled to take part in these programmes, should be worse off under the new programme.

The reference in the IDWG report to the need to consider "mechanisms for controlling demand and cost of the programme of investment" in the move to the new programme should be viewed in the context of long-standing under-investment by the state in childcare. While Public investment in early childhood education amounted to 0.1 per cent of GDP in 2013 (OECD, 2016). This compared to an OECD average of 0.8 per cent of GDP and UNICEF's international benchmark of 1 per cent of GDP. The new programme should therefore be considered in the context of the childcare commitments in the Programme for a Partnership Government, such as to:

"...support the introduction of a robust model for subsidised high quality childcare for children aged 9-36 months in order for children and families to truly reap the benefits of greater investment, in line with the OECD recommendation that the best way to achieve affordability and quality at the same time is through subsidised childcare places" (p.78).

Recommendation 5:
The Government should follow through and go beyond the IDWG proposals, including by applying price caps on fees for parents to childcare prices rising and by introducing a 100 per cent subsidies for families with high levels of need.

Recommendation 6:
The new programme should clearly follow through on the commitments to increase investment in childcare set out in the Programme for a Partnership Government.

Accessibility

Approximately 50,000 pre-school children in Ireland are being cared for by around 20,000 childminders. This does not include older children being cared for outside of school hours.

It is not acceptable that many childminders are exempt from inspection, child protection and Garda vetting. The introduction of appropriate regulation and quality standards would ensure that children being cared for by childminders would receive high quality care and would help ensure their protection and safety. It would also represent official recognition of the crucial work carried out by those working in the sector.

As outlined above, the IDWG report stated that:

> "A subvented model, which prizes centre-based or regulated settings, might change current parental choice away from current reliance on parental, unpaid relative and regulated non-parental care.

In order to promote accessibility, participation in the new programme should be open to registered childminders who meet quality standards and regulations. Such participation would also, as the IDWG report stated:

> "...have the advantage that direct subventions to services ensure investment is spent on the Government's policy objectives and provide for a leveraging of the quality agenda".

Funding should also be available for children with additional needs, e.g. for children with special needs, in accordance with Article 23 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, or for children with a Traveller, Roma or migrant background etc. Such funding should be at a level to pay for good practice responses. Care must also be taken to ensure that children who have additional needs and their families are not stigmatised.

Recommendation 7:
Subsidised places should be made available through regulated childminders.

Recommendation 8:
Support should be provided for the inclusion of all children with special needs as well as children with a Traveller, Roma or migrant background. The Government should monitor the profile of children taking part (or not) in the new programme to establish whether certain groups face barriers in accessing services, and respond accordingly.

Quality

Investing in quality ECCE has been proven to help tackle child poverty as it enhances a child's social, emotional and physical development in the crucial early years. Participation in quality ECEC is particularly beneficial to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Child poverty rates are lower in countries that have subsidised early years and school age childcare systems, proving that investing in quality ECCE promotes a level playing field for all children and helps erode structural inequalities.

The IDWG report was explicit in its recognition of the importance of quality childcare:

> "Embedded in research and increasingly a focus of Government and international initiatives is the importance of quality" (p.9).

It also acknowledged that the gains from quality childcare are, citing recent international research:

> "...largest for low-income or immigrant households and those with less educated parents (p.19).

And it equally recognised the dangers posed by poor quality provision:

> "...there is strong evidence that poor quality pre-school care and education can be harmful to children" (p.78, and repeated on p.117).

Recommendation 9:
The new programme should clearly link funding to quality improvements, such as through the extension of higher capitation payments for higher quality services, and should entail (increasingly) regular quality audits of participating services.

Professionalisation – a proxy for quality

The IDWG report also acknowledged that:

> "Professionalisation of the workforce is a key proxy for quality in terms of the international evidence" (p.9).

We therefore welcome the commitment in the Programme for a Partnership Government to further professionalise this sector:

> "We will drive quality throughout the sector by investing in the professionalisation of the workforce, through continuous professional development within programmes of further and higher education" (p.79).

"Training cost a lot and after spending big money and studying for years it doesn't lead to higher income" Joan, Early Years Professional

And pay and conditions are central to quality

International research confirms that higher wages and better working conditions affect people's job satisfaction, work motivation and, indirectly, the quality of their teaching, caring and interactions with children. (Early Childhood Ireland, 2016). There is a deepening understanding and recognition that increasing levels of professionalisation and pay and conditions directly correlate to improved quality in this sector. The quality of early years services was significantly enhanced in New Zealand once it moved towards a graduate-led workforce, with increased pay and conditions and unionisation. Research carried out by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood for the Department of Education in the UK showed a direct and consistent association between the quality of pre-school staff training and qualifications and children's later school performance, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings.

Problems in relation to existing programmes include:

- **Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)**

The current system makes no provision for training or continuous professional development (CPD), a standard quality element of other care and educations roles. Conversely, the provision of CPD is reviewed as part of Tusla regulation visits and is required in order for services to introduce and maintain the standards required by Aistear and Síolta. Childcare workers are limited in their ability to take part in CPD, which is necessary for the delivery of quality childcare due to a number of factors, including costs, low wages and not being able to obtain time off-work. Furthermore, financial supports provided through the Learner Fund can only be accessed by one member of staff.

"This is the profession where you see children progress in life. The wage is so low and training is so expensive that there will be a major drop in people willing to take this role in life"
Janice, Early Years Professional

Recommendation 10:
The new programme should entail greater access to an expanded Leaner Fund.

- **Non-contact time**

Many professionals do not receive sufficient funding under existing programmes to meet legislative, quality and regulatory requirements (e.g. curriculum planning, Aistear and Síolta-related work, childcare planning, communicating with parents etc.) and often carry out this work unpaid or in their own homes.

"There is so much paper work which leave less time to spend with the children. There is no non-contact time and they keep insisting we upskill with no pay increases" Bernie, Early Years Professional

The announcement in Budget 2017 of an allocation of €14.5 million to ECCE providers to pay for 1.4 ECCE weeks of non-contact time is a start but is far from sufficient. DYCA states that the new programme, when introduced in September 2017 "will have recognition of non-contact time built into its base" (DYCA, 2016d).

Recommendation 11: The new programme should provide for paid, non-contact time, of at least one hour per four hours of contact per full-time equivalent initially.

• Pay

A number of recent surveys have confirmed the prevalence of poor pay in this sector. The January 2016 report from Early Childhood Ireland Pay Rates in the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education Sector found that the average rate of pay for an early years education was €10.27 and that having a third-level degree earns €1 extra. This report echoes the findings of the 2015 Dublin City Childcare Committee survey, cited in the March 2016 report by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) Who Cares? Report on Childcare Costs & Practices in Ireland, which pointed to an average base rate of up to €10 per hour for childcare workers, with a €2 plus payment for supervisors.

Start Strong's 2014 report 'Childcare: Business or Profession?' was unequivocal on the importance of addressing the issue of pay and conditions in this sector:

> "The evidence is very clear that in order to achieve quality ECEC provision, the initial and continuous training, pay and conditions of the workforce are a crucial factor. This is widely accepted in the education sector, but not yet in the ECEC sector (p.44).

It stated that a package of measures to address the challenges posed by the need to professionalise this sector, including for private providers, could include:

> …"financial regulation to put a ceiling on fees fixed at 15% of household income (the OECD average cost); grants for staff who want to qualify on an in-service basis with mandatory leave, and concomitant training opportunities (as in e.g. Denmark, Spain) and negotiated pay scales on completion; strengthening union representation in the sector (as in e.g. New Zealand, Denmark); developing more public provision, allied to teachers' pay and working conditions (New Zealand again). (p.43)

In the run-up to the general election, its Early Years document stated that:

> "The key to quality is the adults working with the children. Investment must focus on professionalism: higher qualifications, salary scales and better working conditions" (p.4).

However, there has been little evidence so far of a similar 'official' recognition of the need to improve pay and conditions in this sector.

For example, the IDWG report merely refers to Pobal surveys showing a high level of staff turnover in the sector (p.24), and to pay and conditions being raised in the 2015 consultations and merely acknowledges that "…that salaries are comparatively low for this sector" (p.91)).

Nor is there any acknowledgement in the statement in the DCYA's Brief for Minister - that the childcare sector "is mobilising and seeking improved pay and conditions which will in turn drive up the cost of childcare" (p.33) - that without improving pay and conditions, the quality agenda cannot be pursued. Start Strong (2015) points out that 2013 research suggests that qualified ECCE graduates in Ireland are deterred from remaining in this sector due to low wages and lack of recognition. A 2014 Eurofound study found that higher qualifications do not appear to influence salary levels for childcare workers in Ireland (except in the case of Montessori teachers and managerial posts). The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has said it is plausible to suggest that childcare professionals will leave poorly-paid positions in search of higher wages (ICTU 2016, p.14); it should be noted in this regard that 2015 Solas research found higher rates of turnover in this sector compared to others and stated that:

> "Given a large level of movement between employment, unemployment and economic inactivity, as well as within and between occupations, it is recognised that some employers may be experiencing difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified care and childcare workers" (p.12).

As the IDWG report acknowledged "...the current rates of subvention have limited margin for the majority of providers..." (p.91). The level of state funding effectively determines the rate of pay for many childcare workers. In the absence of increased state investment, rates of pay will remain abysmally low. Nationally-agreed pay scales which recognise and reward the commitment, qualifications and responsibility of childcare professionals are required.

We welcome Minister Zappone's acknowledgment that unless the issue of pay is addressed, "we will not have a sustainable childcare system" (Opening statement by Minister Katherine Zappone to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, Wednesday 5 October 2016).

This 'blind spot' on pay and conditions is out of line with Ireland's international commitments "to advancing the dual objectives of improved child outcomes and labour market participation", which the IDWG report said, "remain central in any plans for future development and investment." (p.48).

For example, the May 2011 conclusions on ECEC adopted by the EU Council of Ministers stated that measures to meet the:

> "dual challenges of providing generalised equitable access to early childhood education and care, while raising the quality of provisions, could include...supporting the professionalisation of ECEC staff, with an emphasis on the development of their competences, qualifications and working conditions, and enhancing the prestige of the profession." (p.4)

"As an employer I feel it is derisory to offer low pay rates to professional people for such an important job" Anne-Mare, Early Years Manager

Furthermore, the October 2014 report of the European working group on early childhood education and care - which involved DCYA and Department of Education officials - identified 'workforce' as one of five areas where change could lead to improved quality in ECEC. This report suggested 10 "broad action statements" (i.e. 'invitations') to EU member states to strengthen the quality of ECEC. These included:

- Statement 3, which referred to "well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role", and;
- Statement 4, which concerned "supportive working conditions".

The European working group report also referred to the conclusions of the EU-funded project Working for inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion (Bennett & Moss 2010), which had warned that a poorly educated and poorly paid early year workforce is not only detrimental of ECEC quality but is also unsustainable. The European working group report said this is evidenced by the rapid decrease in the supply of childcare workers in those countries where the profession is poorly remunerated and pointed out that a number of international studies, including from the OECD, have concluded that a series of criteria for structural quality need to be fulfilled to support quality provision, including:

> "...working conditions which ensure low turn-over rates (ideally the same status and pay as compulsory school teachers" (p.17).

Given the deepening international understanding of the link between pay and working conditions and quality ECEC (Eurofound, 2015), the delay in addressing these issues at national level may also adversely affect Ireland's ability to take part in or make best use of forthcoming EU initiatives in this field.

For example, the European Commission has stated that it intends to launch a work-life balance initiative before the end of 2016. Its August 2015 'roadmap' on this initiative stated that this initiative could include:

> "Developing ambitious EU level benchmarks, possibly in the format of proposals for Council Recommendations along the model of the Youth Guarantee, on conditions for women participation in the labour market, to be defined with Member States and the Social Partners. The benchmarks could build on existing objectives, such as the Barcelona targets on childcare. Further, it would encompass elements of a successful work-life reconciliation policy mix, in particular: child and other dependent persons care infrastructure, availability, accessibility and quality, incentives and disincentives in tax and benefit systems,
>
> [And]: "...a targeted use of the EU financial tools available to support Member States, such as the European Social Fund, to invest in projects and infrastructure necessary to encourage reconciliation of work-life balance or partners and carers (e.g. childcare/care facilities, introduction of flexible working arrangements etc.). (p.5)

In their joint 2013 paper Supporting Workers with Family Responsibilities, the International Labour Organization and UNICEF recommended that:

> "Governments must exercise their role in establishing a regulatory environments and standards in terms of...conditions of work of professionals focused on early childhood..." (p.20).

"Unfortunately the job I'm passionate about will not financially support me" Sarah, Early Years Professional

Recommendation 12: The new programme should ensure negotiated salary scales and working conditions that ensure the recruitment and retention of skilled ECEC staff in participating services.

Conclusion

The Big Start coalition does not underestimate the challenge in introducing a new Single Affordable Childcare Programme in place of the existing targeted programmes.

But simply 'reforming' the existing targeted programmes or ensuring affordability is not enough. Public funding can and should be used to get the best return for children in their own right and for society. Such an investment could pay off in a number of ways, including in narrow budgetary terms over the longer term.

As the intention is that the new programme would become the "platform" for future investment it is important that this initiative is the right one - for children and for society. We need a new combined system that will provide access, as a right, for all children to quality care and education services for an agreed number of hours for an agreed number of weeks per year, and access to additional hours of services for families who need them. All services including child-minding, should meet the relevant regulatory requirements and work towards achieving the Síolta and Aistear National Quality Frameworks. Ensuring that this happens depends on the workforce, and having the right workforce depends on a broad range of factors that need to be carefully considered on the basis of what we know works.

The Big Start coalition puts forward this paper as our initial submission on the new programme and we look forward to further engagement with the Government and other stakeholders on this initiative.

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