



Association of Childhood Professionals
The Professional Body Representing Practitioners in
Early Years and School Age Care & Education

Pre-budget Submission 2014

Introduction

The Association of Childhood Professionals welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in relation to the development of Budget 2014. We are mindful of the difficult economic context in which the Government is operating, and recognise that the Department faces extremely difficult choices in compiling this year's budget. However, we believe that this Government must prioritise the quality agenda in relation to early years and out-of-school care and education if we are to protect the children of today and the adults of tomorrow. Ireland has signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and now needs to fully commit to meeting these rights. Quality provision of care and education is central to these rights and there is international evidence that quality provision in these areas stems from a quality workforce. For such a workforce to exist this Government needs to invest in childhood professionals. This involves:

1. Fully developing and resourcing the Workforce Development Plan.
2. The establishment of a national qualification standard and salary scale and
3. A register of qualified professionals underpinned by legislation

Qualified practitioners must be motivated to engage in continuing professional development and we need to ensure that these qualified practitioners are not lost to the profession.

We ask this Government to review its investment infrastructure across all departments and identify whether it is hitting the targets in what is needed. Is there a cohesive plan? Is there balance in spending on the Workforce Development Plan, the various childcare schemes, the inspection process, the local and national support and monitoring structures for the sector (i.e. CCCs, VCOs, Pobal) and implementing the practice frameworks?

Key recommendations:

A budget should be ring fenced for the following actions:

1. Development and implementation of Workforce Development Plan. This must be central to the upcoming National Early Years Strategy as it facilitates the professionalisation of the early years sector.
2. Increased rate of capitation paid for the delivery of the ECCE scheme to facilitate the payment of salaries that are commensurate with all the duties of the childhood professional thus providing a stepping stone towards a more equitable position in relation to other professionals.
3. Provision of resources for the development of quality care and education in relation to early years services, childminding and out-of-school services e.g. subsidise provision, develop and resource regulation and training supports, etc
4. Development and resourcing of a mentoring and support system, within current services, that values and respects the childhood professional and can be accessed at local level e.g. through the local CCC structure.
5. Review of Workfare and Activation Policy to ensure that the schemes that are in place support quality and sustainability and are in the best interests of the early years profession e.g. CE Scheme, CCS and CETS 2. People being in work is separate from childcare issue
6. Exemption of care and education services from payment of rates as sustainability and quality are both being affected by this issue.

7. Resourcing of such investment through European Structural Funds and through the National Pension Fund or through reallocation of existing funds to where they are more effective e.g. money allocated to various schemes could be invested in enhancing and stabilising existing jobs within the sector.

Early years and school age care and education provision has been underfunded historically in Ireland. During the 'Celtic Tiger' there was an ad hoc approach to investment and in recent recessionary times, the improvements that had been made have begun to be eroded. The ECCE Scheme continues to impact negatively on quality and sustainability in many parts of the country. Childminders have lost their Advisory Officers in the majority of counties and continue to remain unregulated. The Subsidised After-School Child Care Scheme does not meet the needs of centres involved and without change will result in many of the same problems experienced as a result of the ECCE Scheme.

Development and implementation of Workforce Development Plan. This must be central to the upcoming National Early Years Strategy as it facilitates the professionalisation of the early years sector and results in increased quality of provision.

- A revised Workforce Development Plan must be matched by an appropriate budget to ensure full implementation
- The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has indicated that legislation is in place to implement minimum levels of qualifications in 2014 and 2015. Funding must be made available to facilitate existing childhood practitioners to gain these necessary qualifications. Wages of €10 will not allow existing practitioners to pay for expensive training without any hope of significantly increased wages in the future. This is an interim measure as in future childhood professionals will be required to gain minimum pre service qualifications.
- In order to provide quality care and education in early years and out-of-school services this Government needs to ensure that sufficient funding is available over the next ten years to incrementally improve the terms and conditions of childhood professionals.
- Without this increase, practitioners who are highly qualified and experienced will be lost to this profession as they are unable to earn a reasonable salary that is commensurate with their many responsibilities.
- Numerous surveys have indicated that childhood professionals are poorly paid when compared to those in other care and/or education positions e.g. teachers and nurses.
- If we are to aspire to a graduate led workforce, funding must be provided to retain these graduates and thus allow for the development of quality care and education.
- Funding is also needed to support childhood professionals in engaging in continuous professional development.

Increased rate of capitation paid for the delivery of the ECCE scheme to facilitate the payment of salaries that are commensurate with all the duties of the childhood professional thus providing a stepping stone towards a more equitable position in relation to other professionals.

- Current capitation rates are insufficient to meet the expenses of most services thus leading to serious sustainability issues.
- Employers are unable to pay staff salaries that are commensurate with all the duties that are required of them e.g. providing developmentally appropriate curriculum activities for all the children, maintaining mandatory records and observations, engaging with external agencies re the care and education of children with special education needs, engaging in partnership with

- parents, maintaining the environment, supporting transition to primary school, etc.
- Payment of capitation needs to be separate to the payment of wages. There is no other comparable profession where wages are dependent on the number of service users. Variable income is resulting in a reduction in working hours and redundancies.

Provision of resources for the development of quality care and education in relation to early years centres, childminding and out-of-school services e.g. subsidise provision, develop and resource regulation and training supports

- This Government has a responsibility to ensure that all children are provided with quality care and education. Comprehensive regulation is necessary to ensure that, at the very least, minimum standards of quality are adhered to at all times. Early Years provision in centres is regulated but there are no comparable regulations in place for home-based care and education or for out-of-school provision. This is unacceptable and is an abdication of the Governments duties in terms of the care and wellbeing of all children.
- This budget needs to provide sufficient resources to support the development and implementation of regulations and also for the resourcing of a collaborative inspection system to continually increase the quality of provision. Until there is a comprehensive overhaul of the regulation and inspection system, funds are required to ensure that there are a sufficient number of inspectors to inspect all services on an annual basis. An early year's expert must be included in the inspection team.
- Increase tax exemption for childminders and introduce tax credits for parents who avail of tax compliant childminders.
- Funding needs to be provided to finally roll out the practice frameworks, Síolta and Aistear. These frameworks provide the blueprint for the provision of quality early years care and education in Ireland. However, without sufficient funding to provide training and paid continuous professional development days for staff they will continue to languish on shelves.

Development and resourcing of a mentoring and support system, within current services, that values and respects the childhood professional and can be accessed at local level e.g. through the local CCC structure.

- This budget should provide funds to develop a comprehensive mentoring system to support quality provision.
- Current support services should be augmented to ensure that there is sufficient expertise to support services in developing quality practices in all aspects of their service. These support services also need to have adequate budgets to provide subsidised training as required by the childcare services to meet regulatory requirements.

Review of Workfare and Activation Policy to ensure that the schemes that are in place support quality and sustainability and are in the best interest of the early years profession e.g. CE Scheme, CCS and CETS 2. People being in work is separate from childcare issue

- When developing schemes to support adults in returning to work, the various departments need to ensure that provision of quality care and education is not compromised.
- Services need to be adequately remunerated for the delivery of childcare services to ensure sustainability, thus allowing for the maintenance and gradual increase of terms and conditions

for all staff.

- This budget needs to increase the subvention given for providing CCS and CETS as the current rates are unsustainable and do not allow the centres to meet their expenses. Increasing the charge to parents is not an option so staff hours and positions are compromised.

Exemption of care and education services from payment of rates as sustainability and quality are both being affected by this issue.

- Commercial rates are impacting on the viability of services across the country and in particular in Co. Waterford and Co. Dublin where commercial rates were recently reviewed.
- Early Years Care and Education services are being charged commercial rates despite not being able to operate within a traditional business model. Many services are unable to increase their fees as they are contracted to deliver the ECCE Scheme and they are unable to charge their customers VAT despite having to pay VAT themselves. Rates are calculated based on location and size of a premise, amongst other factors. However these services are unable to increase the capacity of provision as ratios are dictated by regulations. One service in Waterford recently had its rates bill increased from €15,000 to €30,000 without any way of increasing profits to cover this additional imposed cost.
- Jobs are at risk as a result of these rates reviews and these reviews are planned countrywide. This budget needs to address this situation.

Resourcing such investment through European Structural Funds and through the National Pension Fund or through reallocation of existing funds to where they are more effective e.g. money allocated to existing schemes could be invested in enhancing and stabilising existing jobs within the sector.

- This Government claims to have job creation as central to its recovery plan. There are over 22,500 people working in centres across Ireland. These people provide a service that supports the care and education of children while also facilitating parents to go out to work. Unless significant financial investment is made in this sector jobs will be lost, wages will be reduced to below minimum wage and there will be insufficient places available for children when the economy begins to recover and parents need childcare for their children.
- It has been indicated that the Pension Reserve Fund will be used to stimulate job creation. Investment in early years meets this criterion so a percentage of this fund should be ring fenced to provide quality care and education places for children of all ages.

Conclusion

Investment in Early Years and School Age care and education is an investment in the future. Research indicates that this investment will yield great returns in social capital and in saved future expenditure in intervention and prevention services. Due to the need for an austere budget major investment is not possible this year. However, this budget needs to begin the process of serious investment in our children and in the professionals who work with them. This budget should be the first of many steps taken to develop quality provision and thus demonstrate the priorities and values of this Government.

The Association of Childhood Professionals is a professional body representing practitioners in early years and school age care and education in Ireland. Our aims are to:

- Be the collective identity and represent the voice of childhood professionals
- Promote and engage active membership
- Advocate and seek support for the initial training and continuing professional development of childhood professionals
- Advocate and campaign for recognition of childhood professionals including their professional status and equitable pay and work conditions
- Raise awareness of the value and contribution made by the childhood professional to the lives of children, families and society as a whole