



**Agenda for ACP meeting with Minister Frances Fitzgerald 26th September 2013**

1. Regulation and Inspection
2. Qualifications, pay and conditions
3. Training and Mentoring
4. Capitation and subvention for early years and out of school care and education
5. Commercial rates
6. Consultation and collaboration with the Association of Childhood Professionals

**Regulation and inspection**

- The ACP acknowledges the need for increased regulation of early years and out-of-school care and education and is delighted that this is a priority issue for the Minister. However we do not agree with the punitive, minimum standards model that is being favoured by the Minister for the early years sector as this will create a technical workforce who strive to meet minimum quality standards as opposed to a professional workforce who engage in reflective practice to increase the quality of provision available.
- We are really concerned about the current inspection process and the composition of the inspection team. It is both counterproductive to the process and disrespectful of the childhood professional that this inspection team does not include a member who is fully qualified and experienced in early years care and education.
- Despite the streamlining of reports and the training received by inspection teams there are still inconsistencies in the interpretation of the regulations across inspection teams. These inconsistencies could be alleviated by using a collaborative inspection process as opposed to the current system of identifying and reporting breaches of regulation without any meaningful engagement with the childhood professionals in the service. A right of reply is simply not sufficient.
- What are the qualifications and early years experience of the recently recruited pre-school inspectors?
- The ACP agrees with the Minister about the need for regulations for out-of-school care and education services. We would seek clarity from the Minister in relation to the following issues:
  - How advanced is the development of these regulations?
  - Who is involved in developing the regulations?
  - What sort of meaningful engagement will be held with the childhood professional in the development of the regulations and the in the development of the policy re monitoring the adherence to these regulations?
  - What funding will be available to support the centres in meeting these regulatory requirements?
  - What timeframe does the Minister propose for the development and implementation of these regulations?

- Regulations for home-based care and education need to be increased e.g. Garda vetting, registration, qualifications, curriculum, etc.
- Where do matters stand regarding this?
- What meaningful engagement is there with childminders about this?

**Qualifications, pay and conditions:**

- The ACP is delighted with the proposed changes to legislation that will require minimum levels of qualifications for childhood professionals.
- However we are concerned about the timeframe as practitioners currently working in the profession have not been officially circulated with this information. This impacts availability of training and the ability of the individual to gain the qualification in the required time.
- A Transformation Fund is required to support Early Years Practitioners to access training. This is an interim requirement as in future staff will gain pre-service qualifications to meet requirements.
- What provision is in place for such a fund?
- Will it be available for all streams of training e.g. full-, part-time?
- What consultation has been done with the training institutes to ensure access to required training?
- In order to retain qualified staff and to encourage new entrants to the profession there needs to be an increase in the terms of employment available to practitioners. Recent reports from Pobal, Montessori Alliance, ECI, OECD, etc have all highlighted the poor pay and conditions within our profession. In order to ensure that the financial burden of improving these terms of employment is not passed on to the parent/guardian, it is necessary for the Government to increase capitation available to the services. Staff need to be paid for all aspects of their job description and not just for contact time with the children.
- Need for the development of national pay scales that are in line with comparable professions.
- It is not good enough that those who are supporting the child's care and education at foundation level are on little more than minimum wage and that some are on seasonal contracts due to the nature of the ECCE Scheme.
- The Government funds primary, secondary, and third level education while foundation level is all but neglected if one excludes the ECCE Scheme. This is despite national and international recognition of the importance of these years and the personal, societal and economic returns on money invested.

**Training and Mentoring:**

- Need for consistent standards of qualification in all training institutes.
- Need for practice frameworks to be embedded across all programmes.
- Need for all those delivering early years and out-of-school modules to be qualified and experienced in this area. It is not good enough that maths and science teachers are delivering these modules when they do not have relevant qualifications or experience.

- Mentoring systems to be put in place to improve quality of provision. This system is more effective than the current punitive system as it would be collaborative and respectful in nature. Use and enhance existing services to provide local support e.g. CCCs, NVOs, etc. This mentoring process could also form part of the regulatory process as services could be obliged to engage in the process.

### **Capitation and subvention for early years and out of school care and education**

- Payment of staff should be separate from the capitation payment which is subject to increase/decrease based on enrolments. The pay of teachers and nurses is not at the mercy of student/patient numbers so why should this be the case for childhood professionals.
- Current capitation and subvention rates are not sufficient to meet the needs of the majority of services across the country as not all have the same costs e.g. rent, rates, etc, but all receive the same rate of payment from the various schemes. As a result of this there are sustainability issues that affect the job security of childhood professionals and the quality of the programme delivered.
- The payment for delivery of the CETS 2 or Afterschool scheme is not sufficient for meeting the costs of the scheme and as a result most services will not be able to engage with the scheme or will struggle to maintain it. Increasing the rate of subvention would ensure its viability and delivery.

### **Commercial rates:**

- Early years and out-of-school care and education services must be made exempt from commercial rates as, in general, they are not able to operate on a business model due to restrictions put in place as a result of delivering the various government schemes (ECCE, CETS, etc). They are therefore unable to increase profits to meet commercial rates and this cost must be paid to the detriment of appropriate remuneration for staff and the provision of a quality service.
- Recent rate reviews in Waterford and Dublin have resulted in increases of 100+% in many instances. This results in sustainability issues that impact on job security and quality of provision.

### **Consultation and collaboration with the Association of Childhood Professionals:**

The Association of Childhood Professionals is the professional body representing practitioners in early years and school age care & education. Our key messages are:

- The Association of Childhood Professionals works to ensure that childhood professionals are an integral part of early years and after-school provision in Ireland and as such must be part of all processes where childcare and education is discussed, planned and decided.
- Childhood professionals through their knowledge, practice and values, in partnership with parents, provide for the foundation care and education of our youngest citizens.
- Professional development and equitable pay and conditions for childhood professionals must be

- supported by a formalised system
- Children benefit most from quality experiences supported by childhood professionals
- Society benefits directly from investment in quality early childhood care and education

As our sole focus is on the childhood practitioner we believe that it is essential that we are involved in all discussions that affect our profession. We are directly impacted by national policy and are aware of the ramifications of implementing these policies so we are well placed to collaborate on the development and implementation of realistic and comprehensive policies. We are an independent voice and we take our mandate from our members so we provide a real conduit to the childhood professionals of Ireland. We provide an invaluable source of information and insight and therefore we would encourage the Minister to engage with us on all topics that concern our profession.

The ACP commends the Minister on her commitment to developing a National Early Years Strategy. We hope that a draft document will be produced and that a meaningful round of consultations will follow, that will allow all stakeholders to contribute to the development of a world class strategy that we will all be delighted to take ownership of. A consultation process similar to that used when developing the Numeracy and Literacy Strategy would be very effective. Again the ACP looks forward to engaging with the Minister on this.

We would like to thank the Minister for meeting with us today and look forward to working with you in the future.