



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

Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children

8th February 2017

Marian Quinn, Chairperson

I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to discuss the new Single Affordable Childcare Scheme.

The ACP is a professional body representing practitioners in early years and school age care and education. We are a voluntary organisation and all our council members give freely of their time so that we can fight for the profession that we value so much but which is at the bottom of the pile when it comes to recognition, respect and remuneration.

We welcome the concept of a single affordable scheme. Such a scheme facilitates the streamlining of existing schemes and provides a platform for investing in early childhood education and care. Increased investment is vitally important if we are to provide high quality affordable services to the children and families that we work with.

Given the focus of our association we have reviewed the ACS from the perspective of the early childhood education and care workforce.

When childcare was first offered outside of the family it was generally provided by the woman who lived down the road and took in a few children to supplement the family income as she raised her own children. There were no requirements in terms of qualifications, regulations, inspections, observations, curriculum planning, continuous professional development, community involvement, etc. This woman kept the child happy, safe and fed and her job was done.

The vista of early childhood education and care is completely different in 2017. The practitioner is now a professional person whose role extends beyond their care work with the children. Professional responsibilities include supporting the child and family during this critical stage of development and as a result the early childhood professional is now an early childhood educator, administrator, curriculum planner, researcher, cleaner, counsellor, communicator, parent coach, nurse, facilitator... and the list goes on. *"ECEC is increasingly expected to fulfil societal expectations regarding active citizenship and democracy, offering a strong foundation for lifelong learning, contributing to reducing child poverty, realising equal opportunities, and strengthening creativity and innovation in young children."* (CoRe, 2011)

The amazing thing is that all these professional services and societal contributions are provided by very capable multi-taskers who earn little more than minimum wage!

The language in the draft ACS document reflects a serious disregard for staff working in the early

childhood education and care profession. At one point it states *“efficiency can be achieved through combining part time places (though parental preferences set limits on the ability to combine part time places) and through managing staff resources at different times of the day and different times of the year”*. In practice this would require the introduction of zero hour contracts, and further reduce the job security of an already underpaid, primarily female, workforce. The ACP views this as contrary to the governments stated objective of supporting the professionalization of the early years workforce and increasing quality provision.

It is well documented, both nationally and internationally, that staff working conditions and pay are central to providing high quality early childhood education and care. The quality of the relationships between the children and the workforce are a key indicator of high quality provision. Attracting and retaining a professional workforce are vital if these relationships are to flourish.

The draft ACS document sets a subsidy rate based on current schemes available in early years. This assumes that current subsidies cover the cost of delivering the schemes. As many recent reports have indicated there are serious sustainability issues in many services meaning existing subsidy levels are generally insufficient to meet current costs of provision. There is no allowance made for increasing wages that arise as a result of professionalising the early years workforce. Qualification requirements have been introduced into our profession yet subsidy rates remain at pre-qualification levels.

The wage-rate used in the draft ACS document is €10.79 for practitioners (though this rate is likely to reduce given the Minister’s announcement that the scheme would now employ a 52 week funding model instead of the original 48 week model, while remaining budget neutral). While this figure is slightly above the average rate currently being paid, it is still significantly below the living wage and will provide little incentive for attracting or retaining a qualified and motivated workforce. The most recent Pobal Early Years Sector Profile (2016) indicates that 18% of staff were working in their centre for under one year. Pobal believe that this is an indicator of significant staff turnover. This report also states that over half (58%) of the staff are aged 25-44years. This is the time when many will be hoping to buy a home and start a family. Current pay and conditions will not support these aspirations and so will result in a loss of professionals from the workforce or pushing these people/families into poverty.

Providing a high quality early years’ service requires significant planning, documentation and continuous professional learning. There is little provision for this in the costing provided for the ACS. If the DCYA is serious about high quality, there needs to be adequate provision for this in the ACS.

The DCYA is committed to providing an independent review of the cost of childcare. It makes no sense that this review would happen after the ACS begins. True costs need to be established before this new funding model is introduced. Unfortunately the ECCE Scheme has proven that if a scheme is not costed properly before its inception then conditions will continue to deteriorate as there is no government appetite to redress the difficulties imposed on providers and their staff.

The draft ACS document makes reference to the use of an hourly rate for childcare subsidies thus encouraging providers to charge an hourly rate for childcare. The use of an hourly rate is not consistent with sustainable provision and thus further endangers the security of the workforce.

The early childhood workforce is at breaking point and can no longer afford to deliver this level of service for the pay they receive. This and successive governments are taking advantage of good people who are committed to supporting the young children and families of this country. It is exploitation pure and simple and it has to stop. As one Early Childhood Professional stated

I wonder why I bother; I am often on the verge of tears with exhaustion and frustration. Then I think of how much I love my job and the incredible enjoyment and fulfilment I get from working with young children. The government, both past and present, are taking advantage of my commitment and of the commitment of hundreds of other early years workers. I feel a fool to keep going."

Many have to take on a second job and increasing numbers are making the difficult decision to leave the profession that they love but cannot afford to remain in.

Car loans, mortgages, pensions and medical insurance are unaffordable. Employers struggle to take a wage themselves after they pay all the costs that are associated with delivering high quality early childhood education and care. Wage bills account for 60-80% of these costs even though many are on little more than minimum wage.

The young children of this county have a right to high quality early childhood education and care. Their families have the right to societal support in rearing these children and the professionals providing this high quality early childhood education and care and support have the right to be recognised, respected and remunerated for their professional role.

In the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland (DES, 2010) the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Barry Andrews, said that *"The development of the ECCE workforce has been identified as a key 'pillar of quality' alongside ... sustained financial investment in service provision"*

He also stated that *"The challenges are undoubted but the rewards are also clear; a better prepared, skilled workforce in our early childhood care and education settings will improve the quality of centre based early childhood experiences of our children and impact positively on the lives of the children and their families."* The document highlighted that *"National and international research has established that the skills and qualifications of adults working with young children is a critical factor in determining the quality of young children's early childhood care and education experiences."* Unfortunately all this rhetoric was followed by *"While issues such as the status and the terms and conditions of employment of people working in the sector are very much to the fore, they are outside the scope of this policy document."* Yet another Irish policy document with no teeth and this in line with the assessment of Ireland in the CoRe Report (2011) *"In the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Malta, the history of early childhood provision and professionalisation reads like a collection of unfinished stories, of fragmented and un-coordinated initiatives."*

Impact of low pay and poor working conditions

- Low morale, increased stress, burnout.
 - *“Research points out that the ability of staff to attend to the needs of children is influenced not only by their level of education and training but also by external factors, such as their work environment, salary and work benefits.”* (OECD)
- Difficulty attracting, training and retaining suitably qualified workforce
- Pulling back – reduced interest/ability to engage in CPD and extracurricular activities.
 - *“What seems just as important [as the level of education] in ensuring quality care and positive outcomes is that practitioners stay up to date in their knowledge of pedagogical developments.”* (Eurofound, 2014);

Recommendations:

1. Complete an independent review of the true cost of early childhood education and care in advance of implementing the ACS.
2. Commit to costing the ACS at a wage rate that is commensurate with the role and responsibilities of the workforce. In the short term this rate should at least meet the living wage and in the medium term should increase to €15 per hour and in the longer term this should rise to parity with similar professions.
3. Remove all reference to efficiency and policies which would require the introduction of zero hour contracts and the worsening of the pay and conditions of early childhood education and care professionals.
4. ACS costings need to include significant provision for non-contact hours and continuing professional learning.
5. Index link ACS to increasing costs (pay, administration, insurance, resources, etc.) thus ensuring sustainability and job security for all in the early years workforce.

We hope that the Committee will work with us to prevent further exploitation of this very generous, caring and dedicated workforce. Thank you for listening.