



Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

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Childcare Committees Ireland

Opening Statement

Claire

Introduction

Good Morning Chairperson and Committee members, thank you for the invitation to address the Committee in my capacity as a Member of Childcare Committees Ireland. I am joined this morning by my colleague Eugene Waters. We are Representatives of our national network of 30 City & County Childcare Committees.

We welcome the opportunity to bring forward our views on the new single affordable Childcare Scheme to be introduced this year.

Benefits of ACS

CCI welcomes the introduction of this national Scheme that will provide much needed financial support towards the cost of childcare for parents.

The targeted supports to working parents will help remove the barrier to employment for many parents. Parents who qualify for these supports will have access to subsidised wrap around care on an annual basis. This will enable parents to choose and plan the best care for their children for up to a maximum of 40 hours per week over 52 weeks.

The universal supports whilst modest are a welcome intervention for parents who are not in employment; the new scheme recognises in particular the importance of childcare services for children under three.

The parental choice aspect of the scheme ensures that parents have freedom to choose the best care for their children whether that be a structured full day care service or a childminder in the home care setting.

The shift in the nature of eligibility will provide access to subsidised childcare for many working families with low income levels who do not qualify for support under the current programmes CCS and TEC.

The streamlining of eligibility criteria will benefit both Parents and Childcare Providers.

The benefit to parents either in work or education will be that it is one clear process to determine eligibility based on parental income. The real benefit to parents in work or education is that eligibility will be based on one clear process for one scheme instead of the current process which uses a set of complex criteria for each scheme e.g. CCS, CCSP, CETS. For example, CCS eligibility is based on the parent being in receipt of social welfare payments whereas CETS eligibility is based on whether the course the parent is attending is recognised by the ETBs as eligible for subsidy.

Under the current system, for example; two parents both returning to education availing of the same hours of childcare from the same childcare service; one parent will qualify for €145 weekly childcare support under the CETS as the course they are attending is deemed eligible for this type of support, whilst the other parent will qualify for €95 weekly childcare support under CCS based on the choice of course as opposed to family means.

This change to determining eligibility will greatly reduce the level of administration for the childcare providers as they will be required to have only one Fee Policy as opposed to one for each programme which is the current practice.

Impact on some Community Services

Early Intervention

Whilst the new scheme will cater for existing programme users and bring a new cohort of working parents into subsidy benefit there will be a small cohort of vulnerable children who will no longer qualify for subsidy support.

In particular children whose parents are unemployed and are currently availing of vital early intervention supports from community childcare provision. It is important that such cases are explored further to mitigate any possible negative impact on the welfare and outcomes for such children.

For example, for standalone community after school services, in areas of high disadvantage some with poverty deprivation scores of -20 plus. These services provide key intervention supports to primary school children helping meet their educational and social needs. Head 5 of the new scheme allows for Tusla to be able to support children on child welfare or child protection grounds. We understand that some of the children currently using these services will fall outside of Tusla's threshold but most definitely require support.

CCI suggest that the policy makers consider alternative supports for these childcare services providing supports to vulnerable families. Our UK neighbours operate targeted supports direct to early years services who are providing essential early intervention to vulnerable children.

This type of support is not new to Ireland; prior to the introduction of the current childcare programmes community services received block funding from the HSE to ensure childcare places were available to vulnerable families in need of support. These children were referred for support by the HSE team, e.g. social worker, community worker, PHN. Today we have the Meitheal programme within the Child and Family Agency that is committed to supporting families where there would be a child welfare or safety concern. This Service could be a vehicle in identifying the childcare needs of a family and making a referral to support the child's access to the Childcare Service.

Sustainability

CCI expect to provide an increased level of support to childcare services in the area of financial advice and support during the transition phase of this new scheme. This will be necessary to ensure that services can sustain themselves and remain open in light of the fluctuation in child enrolments as we move from a snap shot enrolment core funding model to the funding following the child based on parental income.

The CCCs have well established systems in place to provide this type of support.

For example our recent work with community services to address the issues of reliance on community employment staff, supports this. This work involved intensive one to one supports to those community services identified in need with our teams conducting in depth business analysis reviews to support the service to work towards sustainability without CE reliance based on the outcome of this work. DCYA are providing transitional funding to the groups in most need.

Supports for Parents and Providers

You will have heard from some sectoral groups the call for support for parents to be assisted with online applications to ACS, these supports are already in place through the CCC structure. My colleague Eugene will now elaborate further on the supports provided by CCCs.

Eugene

The CCCs act as an information hub for parents in relation to the current childcare programmes. We publish a parent guide to childcare programmes annually and there are regular updates on our websites and social media, as well as telephone support and a physical presence throughout each city and county in the country.

We provide hot desk supports to childcare providers who do not have access to the internet or reside in areas where broadband is poor.

CCCs have been increasingly dedicated to locally managing administrative processes associated with the various national funded programmes. CCCs exclusively have direct reach into all 4,500 early childhood services nationally, and county identity for parents.

The CCCs have remained focused on responding to the local need, but equally they have been very responsive to the implementation of a range national programmes on a consistent basis.

We have a proven track record in providing support to both parents and childcare providers.

Current Programmes

PIP

Since its introduction last year, Childcare Committees have supported over 4,500 early years services to access and administer their compliance requirements via the department's new online system (PIP), often with one to one support with requirements such as Fees Policies, contract renewal and child registration.

Access & Inclusion Model

The Access & Inclusion Model was launched in June 2015, offering a multi-level, inter-agency approach to increasing access, inclusion and supports for children with disabilities to the government's Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (ECCE).

During the development of the model (Phase I), CCCs were involved in the development of all seven tiers of the model via representation by CCI on behalf of its membership. On commencement of the model, all CCCs have undertaken delivery of actions aimed primarily at Levels 1-3 of the model whilst also providing general information and support across all seven levels.

CCC staff members have received Training of Trainers in preparation for the roll out of standardised Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training; which is already under way in many parts of the country with others due to commence shortly.

Child Protection

CCCs have assumed responsibility from Tusla for the roll out of the Always Children First child protection training programme in relation to early year's settings with a stated aim of ensuring that staff from every service throughout the country receive accredited child protection training. The roll out of this training is coordinated and delivered at city and county level by CCCs. To date 12, 663 Early Years Practitioners Trained¹ by the end of December 2016 .

Scheme Administration

We welcome the proposal that Pobal undertake the administration of the scheme in light of their existing and long standing relationships with the city and county childcare committees and the childcare providers nationally.

The value of a local delivery agent in the form of the CCCs working with the sector is an important building block for the sector and remains so. As mentioned it is a cost effective model for the local delivery of national policy. For example, the recent introduction of the expanded ECCE programme was supported by CCCs who are working closely with the department and local providers to confirm there remains sufficient capacity to cater for eligible children across the country.

This approach has been further strengthened through our national network Childcare Committees Ireland, which provides a coherent structure for various bodies in particular the Department of Children & Youth Affairs to plan and implements its policy brief. CCI as the national network works closely with a range of stakeholders to ensure we put in place strong, effective systems with our partners, including Pobal, National Early Years Quality Development Service, DCYA, DSP, DES and Tusla.

¹ Source: National Early Years Children's First Office

Conclusion

In conclusion, CCI welcome this new scheme and the additional supports that it brings, both targeted and universally, for Parents and Children. The CCCs will fully support childcare providers and parents with the transition process from existing programmes.

We recommend that alternative supports are considered for the small cohort of community services who currently provide essential early intervention to vulnerable children whose needs will not be met by the new scheme of Tusla exemptions.

The City and County Childcare Committee structure offers local response and national reach – have a proven track record in our ability to be flexible in responding to policy change and development and providing essential support to parents and childcare providers.

CCCs have a unique ability to monitor, collect and collate national data making us both an invaluable support, implementation and delivery mechanism.