



General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 Opening Statement

Introduction

Good afternoon, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting Early Childhood Ireland here today to discuss the pre-legislative scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023. My name is Teresa Heeney, I am the CEO of Early Childhood Ireland and accompanying me is my colleague, Frances Byrne, Director of Policy.

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation, working in partnership with 3,900 members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings. We advocate for an effective and inclusive early years and school age care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

We welcome the publication of this Bill and acknowledge that the Minister and the Department is putting children at the heart of this legislation by making the "best interests of the child" the overriding principle.

Child-Centred

Early Childhood Ireland holds an image of the competent child at the centre of all that we do. We work in partnership with our members, policy makers, academia, civil society, and other stakeholders to achieve consistently high-quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings, both centre-based and in childminders' homes.

Early Years and School Age Care has changed significantly over the last thirty years. The number of children attending such settings has significantly increased, and it is now the norm for many children and families in Ireland.

In 2020/21, almost 170,000 children participated in at least one of the Department of Children funding programmes¹. The total number of Early Years and School Age Care services contracted to deliver at least one Department funding programme was over 4,500².

Quality for Children

As both child participation rates and investment in this vital area increase, so must our attention to the quality of early years and school age care services. We acknowledge the work that has gone into the implementation of the Government's First 5 strategy, which aims to provide a robust, regulation, inspection and quality assurance in the EY and SAC sector.

The enhanced enforcement and regulatory powers assigned to Tusla under the Child Care Bill will ensure that Early Years and School Age Care services will operate in a more effective system, delivering child-centred leadership and consistently high-quality experiences for every child.

¹ *Annual Early Years Sector Profile 2020-2021*, Pobal 2022

² *ibid*

Early Years and SAC in one definition.

While we understand that there is a need for a single register for EY and SAC services for ease of regulation and administration, we would like to stress that these services are quite different and cater for children of different age groups and needs. This must be recognised by Tusla when inspecting each service type, which we fully expect that it will be.

Proposed regulations and Tusla powers

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes any legislation that improves the quality and experiences for children in EY and SAC settings. One size does not fit all, and currently, for example, regulations for full day services are not wholly appropriate for sessional or part-time services. We, therefore, ask the Committee and policy makers to ensure that any new regulations are streamlined and service-appropriate, to reduce the administrative burden for Early Years and School Age services.

We welcome the introduction of “fit person” regulations as it shows the seriousness and importance of the role of Early Years and School Age Care providers and educators. We suggest that the regulations, when published, would be similar to the HIQA regulations where fitness is not a once-off assessment but is considered on an ongoing basis.

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the strengthened powers for Tusla to immediately close an unregistered service and to suspend the registration of a setting where it has reason to believe that the service poses a risk to children, and to allow TUSLA to share information with parents.

By putting immediate action notices and improvement notices on a legislative basis, Tusla’s powers will be greatly enhanced, ensuring that all children will be safeguarded, and will benefit from child-centred and high-quality experiences in every Early Years and School Age Care setting in the country.

Childminding

To ensure quality experiences for all children in all settings, and to ensure that all parents can avail of public funding, we look forward to the publication of the childminding specific regulations as soon as possible, and to the completion of the National Action Plan for Childminding.

We welcome the three-year transition period for childminders to adjust to the proposed childminding specific regulations once they are commenced. These regulations should prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children who attend childminders and we welcome the Garda vetting proposals for childminders and for adults in the childminder’s household.

Conclusion

Early Childhood Ireland thanks the Committee for inviting us here today to discuss this landmark Bill and welcomes any questions that you may have.

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16 May 2023