

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on Issues Facing the Early Childhood Sector

7 November 2023



Founded in 1995, the Children’s Rights Alliance unites 150 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

Accompaniment Support Service for Children (A.S.S.C.)
Alcohol Action Ireland
Amnesty International Ireland
An Cosán
Anew
Anne Sullivan Foundation
Aoibhneas
Archways
AsIAM
Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI)
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)
ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd
Atheist Ireland
Barnardos
Barretstown Camp
Bedford Row Family Project
BeLonG To Youth Services
Bodywhys
Catholic Guides of Ireland
Child Law Project
Childhood Development Initiative
Children in Hospital Ireland
Children’s Books Ireland
Children’s Grief Centre
Citywise Education
Clarecare
COPE Galway
Cork Life Centre
Cork Migrant Centre
Crann Centre
Crosscare
CyberSafeKids
Cycle Against Suicide
Dalkey School Project National School
Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service
Dental Health Foundation of Ireland
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, UCC
Disability Federation of Ireland
Doras
Down Syndrome Ireland
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
Dyslexia Association of Ireland
Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland
Early Childhood Ireland
Early Learning Initiative (National College of Ireland)
Educate Together
EPIC
Equality for Children
Extern Ireland
FamiliBase
Féach
Focus Ireland
Foróige
Gaeloideachas
Galway Traveller Movement
Good Shepherd Cork
Grow It Yourself
Helium Arts
Immigrant Council of Ireland
Inclusion Ireland
Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Irish Aftercare Network
Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
Irish Association of Social Workers
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
Irish Foster Care Association
Irish Girl Guides
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
Irish Penal Reform Trust
Irish Primary Principals’ Network
Irish Refugee Council
Irish Second Level Students’ Union (ISSU)
Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Irish Traveller Movement
Irish Youth Foundation
iScoil
Jigsaw
Katharine Howard Foundation
Kerry Diocesan Youth Service (KDYS)
Kids’ Own Publishing Partnership
Kinship Care
Laois Domestic Abuse Services
Leap Ireland
Let’s Grow Together! Infant and Childhood Partnerships CLG.
LGBT Ireland
Meath Women’s Refuge & Support Services
Mecpaths
Mental Health Reform
Mercy Law Resource Centre
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
Mothers’ Union
Museum of Childhood Ireland
Music Generation
My Mind
My Project Minding You
National Childhood Network
National Council for the Blind of Ireland
National Forum of Family Resource Centres
National Parents Council Post Primary
National Parents Council Primary
National Youth Council of Ireland
New Directions
Novas
One Family
One in Four
Parents Plus
Pavee Point
Peter McVerry Trust
Prevention and Early Intervention Network
Psychological Society of Ireland
Rainbow Club Cork
Rainbows Ireland
Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
Realt Beag/Ballyfermot Star
Respond Housing
SAFE Ireland
Saoirse Domestic Violence Services
SAOL Beag Children’s Centre
School of Education UCD
Scouting Ireland
Sexual Violence Centre Cork
Simon Communities of Ireland
SIPTU
Social Care Ireland
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
SPHE Network
SpunOut.ie
St. Nicholas Montessori College
St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers’ Association
St. Patrick’s Mental Health Services
TASC
Teachers’ Union of Ireland
Terenure College Rugby Football Club
The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
The Irish Red Cross
The Jack and Jill Children’s Foundation
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
The Wheel
Transgender Equality Network Ireland
Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
Treoir
UNICEF Ireland
Variety – the Children’s Charity of Ireland
Women’s Aid
Young Ballymun
Young Social Innovators
Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
Youth Work Ireland

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Opening Statement

The Children’s Rights Alliance welcomes today’s opportunity to address the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Integration and Youth on issues facing the early childhood sector. The Alliance unites 150 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children by making sure their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services. We also provide legal information and advice to children, young people and their families through our legal information line and nationwide legal advice outreach clinics.

Introduction

The focus of today’s hearing is to discuss the current issues facing the early childhood sector in Ireland. Today’s discussion will no doubt bring to the fore a broad range of issues that workers, providers and other stakeholders face in the sector. It is critical that discussions on these issues are informed by a child-centred approach to the provision of early child education and care services.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) calls for an understanding that early childhood is not merely preparation for adulthood and requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected in their own right.¹ Within the Convention parents and carers are recognised as primary caregivers (Article 5), however, the Convention imposes a duty on States to provide assistance with regard to this, including quality childcare services (under Article 18).²

Under Ireland’s last examination by the Committee on the Rights of the Child earlier this year, the Committee’s Concluding Observations called for increased access to affordable childcare for parents engaged in the labour market, and especially those experiencing disadvantage.³ The Committee also recommended that the Irish government increase the level of funding allocated to childcare and move towards a publicly funded model of childcare and made specific reference to the Citizens Assembly recommendation in this regard.⁴ These two issues are of key concern to the Children’s Rights Alliance.

Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care for children experiencing disadvantage

Article 2 of UNCRC clearly requires that no child should experience discrimination in early childhood and that all children should be able to access the vital services that contribute to their survival and development, in line with Article 6.⁵ It is acknowledged that potential discrimination is a particular concern in cases ‘where health, education, welfare and other services are not universally available and are provided through a combination of State, private and charitable organisations’.⁶ High quality early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children, but it can be of particular value to more disadvantaged children by helping to redress inter-familial inequalities.⁷ There is robust evidence to show that children who are disadvantaged at age three are at increased risk of disadvantage across their life cycle.⁸

The whole of government strategy on children’s early years, *First 5*, committed to develop a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) type model for early childhood education and

¹ UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood’ (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 1.

² UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989).

³ UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 26

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989).

⁶ UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood’ (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 12.

⁷ A Pearce et al, ‘Pathways to inequalities in child health’ (2019) *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 104:998– 1003

⁸ A Caspi, RM Houts, DW Belsky, et al, Childhood forecasting of a small segment of the population with large economic burden, (2016) *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1.

care.⁹ The Report of the Expert Group on the Funding Model addresses this commitment by recommending the introduction of a new funding stream to tackle socio-economic disadvantage.¹⁰

In 2023, the Department undertook a significant amount of work in developing a new Equal Participation Model to meet this commitment. It is critical that this model includes wraparound services, food and parental support within early years settings. Traveller and Roma children are key cohorts in this model and would benefit greatly from this targeted strand approach that could be done through enhancements of existing programmes.

The importance of the provision of wrap-around support in early childhood, not only to safeguard children's rights in the present, but also to mitigate risk trajectories, yields a significant long-term economic and social return.

In both Budget 2023 and Budget 2024 the Government has committed to significant investment in early years. Budget 2023 achieved the goal of €1 billion in funding five years ahead of schedule¹¹ while Budget 2024 will see investment exceed €1 billion.¹² Included in this latter figure is dedicated funding to support an initial phase of the new Equal Participation Model. The rollout of the first phase of this model can help to break the cycle of disadvantage for many children and their families across Ireland.

Moving towards a public model of childcare

There is clear support for moving towards a 'publicly funded, accessible and regulated model of quality, affordable early years and out of hours childcare' as in June 2021, the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality recommended that this happen over the next decade.¹³

It is evident through the commitment of significant funding in the last two budgets that there is a strong political commitment to reform in early childhood education and care. Furthermore, behind this funding there is a significant engine in the Department driving the reform and change needed. Building on the publication of several key reports in 2021, the advancement of key recommendations contained within these has seen substantial action in the areas of quality outcomes, supporting staff retention and reducing costs for parents.

A child rights approach to establishing a public model of childcare would ensure that early childhood institutions, services and facilities conform to quality standards as outlined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.¹⁴ This means that:

- Staff possess the appropriate psychosocial qualities and are suitable, sufficiently numerous and well-trained;
- Services are appropriate to the circumstances, age and individuality of young children and all staff must be trained to work with this age group;
- Work with young children is socially valued and properly paid to attract a highly-qualified workforce and staff should have an up-to-date theoretical and practical understanding about children's rights and development; and
- Staff use child-centred care practices, curricula, and pedagogies, and have access to specialist professional resources and support, including a supervisory and monitoring system for public and private services.

⁹ Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018).

¹⁰ Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021)

¹¹ Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman secures €1 billion investment in early learning and childcare', Press Release 28 September 2022.

¹² Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes substantial investment under Budget 2024', Press Release 10 October 2023.

¹³ The Citizen's Assembly, *Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality*, (The Citizens' Assembly 2021) 13.

¹⁴ UNCRC 'General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/ GC/7/Rev.1 para 28.