



Early Childhood Ireland Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

7 November 2023

Good afternoon, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting Early Childhood Ireland here today to discuss the *Issues facing the Early Childhood Sector*.

My name is Teresa Heeney, I am the CEO of Early Childhood Ireland and with 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 over 4,000 members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) settings. We have a wide and diverse membership consisting of privately and publicly owned settings, educators, childminders, academics and students.

All of our work is informed by what is best for children.

There is no doubt that the Members of this Committee are aware of the huge importance of Early Years and School Age Care for infants and young children. Early childhood lasts a lifetime, and there is a large body of evidence to prove that quality early childhood education has a positive and long-lasting impact on children's outcomes, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage.

Today, we are asking policy makers to adequately respond to the issues facing our hugely significant sector.

Staffing

The recruitment and retention of staff is the number one challenge facing EY and SAC settings at present. By law, settings must ensure that a specific number of competent, Garda

vettted and qualified adults are working directly with children at all times. If a setting cannot fulfil the adult/child ratios, it may be forced to close one or more rooms, and delay any capacity expansion plans.

Staffing pressures are caused by factors such as pay and working conditions.

First, many Early Years and School Age Care educators feel that their pay does not reflect the value of their work or the level of training and education that they have obtained.

Secondly, while government policy, rightly, strives for a graduate-led workforce with quality-assured continuous professional development, pay rates are not matching this important policy goal.

The latest available data from the Pobal Early Years Sector Profile shows that approximately 25% of staff working directly with children have an NFQ level 5 qualification, 40% have a Level 6, while 33% have an NFQ Level 7 or higher¹.

It is vital that core funding addresses the terms and conditions of staff, and that the sector's 30,000-strong workforce is not left at the mercy of an annual wage negotiation process, which is moving at a frustratingly slow pace.

Investment and Better Data

While Early Childhood Ireland commends the Government for providing over €1bn for the Early Years and School Age Care sector, this investment was coming from a very low base. To bring us in line with our EU counterparts, Early Childhood Ireland proposes that the Government publish a 5-year plan for implementing additional investment in our children's Early Years and School Age Care, to reach €4 billion – approximately 1% of GDP - by early 2029.

Good planning requires good data. We are also calling for the implementation of the 'Better data' recommendations from [Partnership for the Public Good](#), and to initiate a system of national and local 2-year and 5-year planning cycles to ensure there are enough Early Years and School Age Care places in their own communities.

Administrative Burden

Our members are concerned about the amount of time they spend on administering the various funding programmes, as it is taking educators away from quality contact time with children. Many are particularly dismayed by the attendance requirements. These lead to a lack of flexibility for families and are not centred, as they should be, on the lives and needs of children.

Early Childhood Ireland proposes a unification of the existing funding programmes: National Childcare Scheme (NCS), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Core Funding, to allow settings to use capacity, not children's attendance, as a funding requirement, as is the case with one of the programmes now. This would offer improved flexibility with no financial consequences for providers or parents.

We can say more about this if the Committee would find that useful.

¹ Pobal Annual [Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021](#) (published 2022)

Setting closures

For various reasons, according to the reports to Tusla, Early Years or School Age Care settings must close. Early Childhood Ireland believes that not enough is being done by the relevant stakeholders at present to avoid or to manage these closures properly. We are proposing the establishment of a Stakeholder Response Team - whose purpose is to manage and respond to planned setting closures in a timely manner, and to examine a range of options, focussed on the best interests of children.

We have provided the Committee with a more extensive policy proposal document which goes into greater detail.

Conclusion

Significantly more investment is needed to provide an Early Years and School Age Care sector that is of high quality, adequate capacity, and that is inclusive of all children.

It is vital for the interim sustainability and certainty which families, providers, educators and communities need, that a new funding target and a coherent plan to achieve it is published. We have repeatedly called on the current Minister for Children and his Cabinet colleagues to do this. We hope that the Committee will consider supporting us in this call. It will require more than one government to agree and implement this plan, so political leadership from all sides is needed. And all children and families deserve nothing less.

We thank the Committee for inviting us here today and look forward to your questions.

Ends.