

Issues within the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector Oireachtas Committee 9th November 2023.

National Childhood Network (NCN) is a quality support organisation for the childhood services sector (preschool, crèche, school age and childminding services). A Voluntary/Community Organisation based in Co Monaghan, the organisation receives funding from the Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Innovation and Youth (DCEDIY) for the delivery of actions that support the provision of quality childhood services that support parents/families and that enhance children's health, wellbeing, learning and development.

National Childhood Network has a long history of cross border collaboration with Northern Ireland through numerous peace programmes and initiatives. The network was originally set up in 1997 as The Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN). The BCCN was a regional inter-agency, inter-regional, cross-sectoral group that drew together a broad range of individuals committed to promoting the delivery of quality Early Years and After School Services. The BCCN became a national organisation in 2015. National Childhood Network continues to work cross border in multiple ways with our Northern Ireland Partners.

Early Childhood is a key life stage for children and positive early childhood experiences are crucial for children wellbeing, learning and development. While there has been considerable recent investment in early years policy in Ireland there are several issues and concerns that need to be addressed immediately.

Early childhood Care and Education is more than a benefit to our immediate economic and geopolitical outcome; it's an investment in our shared future. For young children, access to quality childcare and education drives better outcomes across all areas of their development. National Childhood Network continues to advocate for children, families, and educators, for high quality, affordable, accessible provision with sustainable funding for all settings.

Concerns within the Early Childhood Sector

Affordability & Children's Rights: For years policy has been driven and underpinned by economic requirements and not by the rights of the children. Affordability cannot continue to be the main driver of policy in this area. Childcare costs are seen as a significant concern for many families. High fees make it difficult for parents to access quality services, and lack of services often a barrier to returning to work. While this is a serious issue, there is tension between policies that ensure affordability for parents and in policies that secure high-quality provision for children and families. It should not be either one or the other. There is a need to consider what is it we want best for

children in Ireland now and into the future. Developing a rights-based approach would move the provision and the profession towards an enhancement on the system that is currently there.

Access and Availability: In some areas, especially rural regions, there are issues regarding limited availability. This could be due to factors like population density and transportation. Increasingly in Ireland parents cannot access baby and toddler places. We know the birth rate every year, yet we have no planning system to provide for places for children. A solution to these issues would be the development of a national plan to ensure the planned development of new services across the country based on clearly identified needs. Forecasting would help to provide a clear and visible roadmap for the future. Consideration should be given to new ways of working together in rural/other areas such as developing a social enterprise model, linking services together via strong networks, including childminders.

Administration Burden: Settings administer the schemes on behalf of DCEDIY, this admin burden is crippling services and needs to be addressed asap. Parents need a lot of support to access the funding schemes which falls on providers to provide. All the forms are administered online which causes issues for those with literacy problems and whose first language is not English. NCN believe this is prohibiting children and families from Roma, Traveller/other backgrounds in the take up of available places. Settings are concerned that all their time is spent on administering the schemes and less time on pedagogical leadership which includes providing a high-quality setting. Settings also inform NCN that this is changing their relationship with their parents to one of regulation and not one in building relationships and forming a partnership approach to enhance their children's learning and development. A new central system for administration should be considered to remove this burden.

Regulation and Quality Assurance: There are debates about the level of regulation and oversight in the sector. Striking the right balance between ensuring high-quality care and education while not overburdening providers is a challenge. There has been much discussion on the development of a streamlined inspection process between TUSLA and Department of Education, this discussion and action should be brought to the fore quickly. A radical rethink is needed, one inspection process should be developed. All settings should be supported in their quality journey on a consistent and ongoing basis.

Training and Professional Development, Staffing Crisis: Recruiting and retaining qualified and motivated staff is challenging. Low pay for workers in the profession is inconsistent with the demand for a highly qualified workforce to deliver high quality ECEC. Insufficient funding for wages continues to be a huge issue. NCN welcomes the improvements made on remuneration that have supported the first ERO's. Settings have informed NCN that the funding allocated from DCEDIY in 2023 was needed for wages, for extending their provision, CPD, non-contact time, rent, rates, utilities, insurance, and other costs in relation to developing quality e.g., developing outdoor provision. Many settings (not all) have allocated their funding to the areas outlined but now find they have little left now to provide for another ERO in 2023, in particular smaller settings. All settings have a

very different financial context, some settings can afford to pay, and others cannot depend on their circumstances. A second ERO cannot be agreed because smaller settings cannot afford to pay for it.

The staffing crisis, which has impacted on both retaining and recruiting staff has forced us to review professionalisation in multiple ways. Current drivers towards the professionalisation of the workforce are proving to be inadequate as many are leaving the profession for SNA work or teaching. We also need alternative routes into academic achievement, and skills development given the plan for a graduate workforce by 2028. NCN are advocating for alternative models of professionalisation such as the inclusion of people with social care, teaching, nursing, expanding the qualification's allocation for the profession urgently as one measure. Another proposal is the development of an apprenticeship model in early childhood profession at QQI level 7. NCN have worked with a consortium of organisations, providers, and educational bodies to bring forward an apprenticeship model and need further assistance to make this a reality. We need to get alternative models moving forward quickly to address shortages. There is also a need to provide for more diversity in the workforce and a better gender balance.

Inclusion/Additional Needs Support & COVID-19 Impact: Providing adequate support for children with additional needs is an ongoing concern. There are large numbers of children transitioning into settings with high level needs resulting from the covid pandemic and those with international protection needs, therefore there is an urgency in ensuring as much additional support as possible is available for children, families, and educators now. While the expansion of AIM is very welcome, this will not be in place until later in 2024 and with a staffing crisis it is already very difficult for settings to get staff. Could the SNA qualification be accepted in a short-term measure? This is the requirement from the primary and post primary sector, it would provide relief and indeed free up qualified staff to work in the sector. Given these issues the ratios in settings should be reviewed. Other European countries have added more supports for children in international protection transitioning into early years settings/school, this should be a consideration in Ireland.

Equal Participation Model

The development of the Equal Participation Model is a very welcome development for the early childhood profession. The challenge is to ensure all those who are disadvantaged have access to additional wrap around supports needed such as additional staff, home-setting liaison, support with food poverty, quality play, learning and development, mental health, and addiction services. The supports within the model need to ensure that this is available to all children who are disadvantaged and to those who are disadvantaged and live in non DEIS areas.

Funding and Subsidies: The government's financial support for the sector continues to cause issues. The current model of funding for the early childhood and school age childcare sector favours larger providers. Smaller/medium services are in danger of closing as they cannot be sustainable. Many are working with their fees capped from 2016 levels, there is a huge imbalance in the system. This imbalance needs to be addressed asap. Funding should not be based on children's attendance, as there are many factors which impact on children's attendance which is totally outside of the

providers control, providers are required to maintain a certain staffing level at all times therefore costs remain the same. The retrospective clawing back of funding due to underattendance must also stop as it means that providers cannot budget confidently or forecast their spend.

Ringfence funding

Any funding brought forward in budget 2024 and onwards for salaries needs to be ringfenced. Providers need to know what their operational costs are and what is to be set aside for salaries and a roadmap for future spending should be available.

ECCE – The introduction of the ECCE Scheme in 2010 provided universal access to preschool and was a landmark policy in Ireland. The scheme continues to have a high participation rate of 95%. However, the capitation levels for ECCE have risen little over many years and payment continues to be only for 38 weeks of the year, leaving many continuing to sign on social welfare during the summer months. The capitation rate needs to be reviewed immediately and indexed year on year.

Sustainability Fund

As utility bills have gone up so sharply in relation to inflation this has had a huge effect on everyone. Providers are concerned they will have to remove themselves from Core Funding altogether to survive. DCEDIY have provided a sustainability fund to support settings who are in financial difficulty. Many settings do not want to access the sustainability fund as they are concerned this looks like a failure on their part and many would fear this would damage access to further loans if needed (guided by advice from accountants). In a short term measure the sustainability fund should be remodelled and renamed as a match fund or grant to support those in need and to support those whose fees have been capped since 2016.

Charter of Accounts

Services who are in receipt of funding are required this year to return a substantial financial return set out by DCEDIY, signed off by an accountant. All providers understand the importance of financial returns. However, providers feel there has been no lead in time to this requirement and that this will place an additional burden on an already heavy admin burden.

The financial requirement will be an added expense for settings who may already have paid an accountant to do their accounts for the year. Not all settings are operating with an accountancy package. NCN have requested that a grant be made available to support settings to engage in this process. We continue to have serious concerns about the smaller services disadvantaged by the current model and who may require additional financial assistance.

With inflation, cost of living and utility bills high, the financial situation in many settings remain challenging. Rates bills continue to be a burden on some settings and given legislation e.g., 1991 Childcare Act (part VII,) which clearly defines preschools including creches as educational facilities all



Supporting Development of Quality Childhood Services

settings should be relieved of their rates burden immediately, this contribution would be a considerable financial relief for all.

Towards a New Future: A new development of a public model of early childhood care and education has been put forward by several organisations recently. The development of a publicly funded model would require a serious level of funding- 1% of GDP (OECD) and given that 70% of the sector is managed by independently managed services this will include both community and private providers. NCN would welcome a national conversation on a new model and as an organisation that works closely cross-border with Northern Ireland, request that government would consider working across jurisdictions on one policy for Early Childhood Care and Education across the Island of Ireland.

The priority areas to be addressed quickly include addressing the fee imbalance for those whose fees have been capped since 2016, charter of accounts, uplift on ECCE capitation and the administration burden.

Addressing these challenges will require collaboration between providers, government agencies, educators, parents, and the broader community. Providers want and need to be part of the solution and have real and meaningful input into policy making and policy decisions.