

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 3 Bealtaine 2017

Wednesday, 3 May 2017

The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Kathleen Funchion,	Senator Máire Devine,
Deputy Tom Neville,	Senator Joan Freeman.
Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire,	
Deputy Jan O'Sullivan,	
Deputy Anne Rabbitte,	

DEPUTY JIM DALY IN THE CHAIR.

CITY AND COUNTY CHILD CARE COMMITTEES: DISCUSSION

The joint committee met in private session until 10.05 a.m.

City and County Child Care Committees: Discussion

Chairman: We are now in public session. I begin by welcoming Ms Oonagh Fleming, Childcare Committees Ireland, CCI, chair and manager of Kerry County Childcare Committee, Ms Karen McCarthy, CCI national representative and manager of Clare County Childcare Committee, and Ms Karen O’Sullivan, CCI representative and manager of the Cork County Childcare Committee and thank them for making themselves available this morning and appearing before the committee.

Before we commence, in accordance with procedure I am required to draw their attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(I) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode, as they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the meeting, as well as adversely affecting television and web streaming. I advise the witnesses that any submissions or opening statements made to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting. I understand the witnesses will make a short presentation, which will be followed by questions from members of the committee.

I invite Ms Fleming to make her opening statement. We will then take opening statements from her colleagues.

Ms Oonagh Fleming: I thank the committee for the invitation to address it in my capacity as chairperson of Childcare Committees Ireland, CCI. I am joined this morning by my colleagues, Karen McCarthy and Karen O’Sullivan. We are here to represent our national network of 30 city and county child care committees and we welcome the opportunity to discuss our work.

The city and county child care committees were assigned by the National Childcare Strategy in 2000 as the key local component in the development of a co-ordinated approach to quality child care.

The child care committees are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCYA, to act as its local agent in the delivery of the national early education and child care programmes and the implementation of Government policy at child care committee level. We are positioned as the first port of call for both parents and early years providers when trying to access many of today’s early years care and education initiatives. Having a local focus and

knowledge ensures that child care committees are well positioned to support the development and future sustainability of early years services that cater for the needs of local parents and children.

The functions and roles of the child care committees are aligned to support the implementation of national policy at local level. In addition, we play a key co-ordinating role and are still actively involved in various co-ordinating bodies which support the delivery of supports to children and families. As the established local delivery structure for the early years, child care committees play a crucial role in supporting the ongoing development of the early years sector in each child care committee area, identifying local needs, and developing and implementing plans to address these. This has been one of our core functions since our establishment in 2001.

Between 2000 to 2010, the Government, initially in partnership with the EU, invested €425 million capital funding to create child care places throughout Ireland. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, EOCP, and the National Childcare Investment Programme, NCIP, provided capital funding, staffing grants and quality programmes. The child care committees were key to the success of these programmes which led to the creation of over 65,000 child care places in the early years sector.

Our role has continued to expand and it is our national reach and our unique relationship with the early years providers that makes possible the effective and efficient implementation of national policy to more than 4,500 early years services. As well as the ongoing work of supporting the capacity of the sector, CCCs have been tasked with the local management of the processes required to deliver the various national funded programmes. The work of the CCCs has been independently evaluated and the last published report showed that 95% of services reported a high satisfaction rating from early years services regarding the supports provided to them by CCCs. As the local delivery agent and business partner of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the CCCs are a key component of the development of early years provision nationally. Local delivery by the CCCs is effective and provides value for money. Of the circa €260 million investment into the sector, the funding of the CCCs accounts for only 4% of this budget. This national delivery structure has been further strengthened through our national network, Childcare Committees Ireland, CCI, which provides a coherent structure for various bodies to plan and implement its policy brief. As the national network, CCI works closely with a range of other Government Departments, agencies and organisations to ensure our systems are strong and effective. Not only have the CCCs remained very focused on responding to local need, they have been equally responsive to the implementation of a range of national programmes and their work supports the realisation of the objectives and targets of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. This will be further enhanced in 2017 with additional supports being developed and delivered by CCCs to all early years services to support new initiatives and the new regulatory regime. I will now hand over to my colleague, Ms Karen McCarthy, who will outline the role of the CCCs in supporting the delivery of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the Government's national policy framework for children and young people. Our work is aligned with the five national outcomes.

Ms Karen McCarthy: Outcome one of the policy framework is that children are active and healthy. The CCCs support early years services to promote children's health and well-being using the national curriculum framework, Aistear. This is achieved through a partnership approach with the early years service providers and other stakeholders. CCCs also support early years services settings to deliver experiences to children that build on development protective factors, such as emotional resilience, a sense of self-esteem and good social networks. In ad-

dition the CCCs deliver the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, EDI, training courses under the Access and Inclusion model. These courses commenced in November 2016. The CCCs will have delivered 80 courses to nearly 1,000 providers in the first half of 2017.

Outcome two is about children achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development. CCCs work with early years services to ensure that the quality of the educational experience delivered supports very young children to achieve the best foundation in learning and development. This includes supporting the implementation of Síolta, the National Quality Framework, through our Síolta mentor supports and participation currently in an Aistear pilot which is running in many CCC areas. During 2016, 56 of our staff completed a Síolta Training of Trainers and are now actively implementing Síolta with early years services across the country. The introduction of the ECCE programme better known as the free preschool year in 2009 was a milestone and represented an important step in the provision of universal early childhood care and education to children aged between three and six years. We support the administration of this programme. In 2015-2016, 4,178 early years services were contracted to offer the ECCE programme nationally. Approximately 95% of eligible children participate in ECCE and have done so from the outset. 2016 saw the launch of the access and inclusion model which provides a range of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the ECCE programme. We play a crucial role in this model in respect of information and supports to both parents and early years services.

Outcome three is that children are safe and protected from harm. The Government commitment to Children First has been evidenced over recent years with focus on the implementation of sectoral plans. The CCCs have been at the forefront of this for the early years sector. We have responsibility for the roll-out of the Always Children First child protection and welfare training programme to early years settings with a stated aim of ensuring that relevant staff from every service throughout the country receive accredited child protection and welfare training. The roll-out of this training is co-ordinated and delivered by CCCs with over 14,000 early years practitioners have completed the training to date.

Outcome four is that children have economic security and opportunity. The CCCs work with early years services to support access for children whose emotional, social and intellectual development may be challenged through experiences of poverty and social exclusion. This is achieved through the implementation of the community child care subvention schemes in early years services who provide for our most vulnerable children and families. In addition, the CCCs promote and administer a suite of supports that enable parents to avail of subsidised child care to facilitate their labour market participation and education and training opportunities. The CCCs further support the community providers regarding sustainable service provision, including financial advice and individualised plans for their delivery of service. The CCCs have well-established systems in place to provide this type of support, for example, the ongoing work with community services to address the issues of reliance on community employment, CE, participants. This work involves intensive one-to-one supports for those services identified with this issue. This has involved CCC staff teams conducting indepth business analysis reviews to support the service to work towards sustainability and operation of their businesses without having to rely on CE participants to meet their regulatory requirements of staff-child ratios and qualification requirements. A total of €1 million in funding has been allocated by the Government to support these services and to date, 47 services have received funding under for recruitment and human resources supports and are now working with their CCCs to submit for once-off transitional funding.

Outcome five is about children being connected, respected and contributing. CCCs support this outcome through their work supporting equality, diversity and inclusion with the delivery of the access and inclusion model. The activities being delivered by CCCs under this model go a long way to support this national outcome and include the delivery of the EDI training noted earlier and supports to develop inclusion policies within each early years services.

The CCCs acknowledge the Government's continued investment in the early years sector and have welcomed the opportunity to be part of its fast and expanding evolution. It is also important to acknowledge cross-party support where party manifestos recognise the need for early years investment to support working parents and the positive effect that quality early years experiences can have on a child's development. Research has stated that the early years of a child's life has an impact on their lifelong learning and development. It is a time when rapid growth and development occur. This sector is the first rung on the education ladder and it is, therefore, critical that investment continues to grow in supporting children and their families. This investment provides quality foundations for children with the hope of reducing interventions in later years. With our success to date, we also welcome the opportunity to have a continued role as the local delivery mechanism for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the opportunity to maintain and build on the important relationships that we have established over the last 16 years. We thank members for their attention and welcome any questions you may have.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their presentation, which was very comprehensive.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I have tied in with our local CCC and was on its board years ago. I was the ICTU representative about ten years in Kilkenny so I know a lot about the work done by the CCCs. My first question is about resources and might be difficult to answer. Do the witnesses feel the CCCs are adequately resourced given that there have been so many new schemes like the ECCE scheme and CCS and that the CCCs will now be taking on the affordable child care scheme? The amount of assistance the CCCs must give providers will be huge. It will be a really significant increase. Do the witnesses feel that resources match that or are the CCCs expected to deliver the same service when more and more is added to it each year?

I also wonder about engagement with providers. My own experience is that most providers do engage very well but have the witnesses ever experienced a situation where some early years facilities do not engage as well as others? My other point concerns staff. I welcome the fact that €1 million has been provided for human resources. Many facilities are under pressure and find it difficult if someone is out sick or if there is a day when it does not meet the child to worker ratio. I realise this is a resource issue, but I am keen to hear the opinions of the city and county child care committee representatives. Is there any possibility of the committees drawing on a panel for relief staff? It could take a great deal of pressure off some facilities if those responsible knew that there was a panel of Garda-vetted and qualified staff. It might be looked at in future.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I wish to acknowledge the work of the child care committees. We all know our own committees best. The Limerick area committee is the committee I know best. Deputy Funchion made a point in respect of funding. She said only 4% of the total funding goes towards the child care committees. In that regard, the committees do a great job. We should acknowledge that.

I am keen to follow on with some questions that relate to the points Deputy Funchion has

raised. The first point relates to the transition from dependence on community employment. This was referenced by Ms McCarthy in her contribution. This has been raised with all of us in respect of community child care facilities in particular. Reference was made to 47 services receiving funding and to how the committees are working with others to receive the funding under strand B. Can the deputation elaborate on that as well as in respect of whether the committees are succeeding? This is an issue for community services in particular.

My next question relates to community services. I know Deputy Ó Laoghaire has raised issues around the new scheme and how it will affect community services. We have a delay now. The committees are probably under pressure when it comes to dealing with the interim arrangements. Can the deputation comment on that point and how it is affecting services?

Another question relates to the new programme and the whole issue of capacity. This has been raised with us by service providers. Obviously, the committees are in contact with parents and service providers on a regular basis. Will there be a capacity problem when it comes to dealing with extra demand in the new system because of the second free preschool year?

My final question is about the access and inclusion model programme. How well is it working for parents? The committees run the programmes. Approximately 1,000 providers have taken courses. My question is really around whether parents believe it is working for them, especially in cases of parents of children with special needs. Were they expecting something similar to what is in the primary schools in terms of one-to-one support? How is that working for parents? Are there issues that we need to raise in the context of the ongoing consideration of that scheme?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the ladies for their presentation this morning. I want to declare that I was a providers' representative on a city and county child care board. Therefore, I have a good understanding of how the committees work. I compliment all the good work done throughout the country.

My questions are somewhat along the lines of everything that has gone before. I am keen to know what contributions the city and county committees have made to national policy, as opposed to the committees being directed by national policy. What contributions have the committees made to government? When I refer to Government, I mean the Department of Finance and the question of private providers and commercial rates. I am keen to know what contributions the committees have made in respect of the new affordable child care scheme. It is now universal and it looks after private and community operations. What recommendations have the committees made to the Department? The committees represent the main voice for 95% of the people. What have the committees been hearing?

What do the committees see as the three biggest issues affecting child care providers?

What new policies have the committees implemented? Previously, myself and another child care provider wrote a policy for Government in respect of accidents and emergencies in 2011 and 2012. What new policies are the committees bringing along? Child care is so new in this country. At the same time the committees are providing policy support. Is there a standard throughout the country? Is one city and county child care committee similar to all others? Are the committees assessed? Is there a standard baseline in respect of what providers should expect? Are the committees metered or quality controlled? What way is it done? Is the committee in Dublin similar to the committee in Galway and Limerick? Is there standardisation of the services that the committees provide in order that there is no dip for providers, regardless

of where they set up?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank the committees for the work they are doing. They provide an important link between the Department and Government generally as well as a diverse range of services, large and small, urban and rural.

One element of the commentary at the start of the announcement of the affordable child care scheme made the point that this was the form of child care that was the most suitable for many families. It was the form that best meets their needs. However, there are only a small number of registered child minders. Deputy Funchion has regularly raised the issue. A child-minding advisory service was provided previously by the county and city child care committees. Should that be re-introduced? Are there other actions that need to be taken to ensure the number of registered child minders can increase and such that the capacity of that side of child care can be enhanced? Naturally, it is right and correct that any subsidy towards child care or child mind-ing has regard to regulation and standards. However, we would like to see as many as possible brought into the system such that they could avail of it.

Another question has been touched on by Deputy O'Sullivan, Deputy Funchion and Deputy Rabbitte. It relates to the sustainability of the community services. I have been raising this issue for some time. The Minister's statements in recent months have been about the sustainability. Several packages are going to be provided under phase 1 and phase 2. I understand phase 1. Ms O'Sullivan, who operates in Cork, will be aware that considerable attention was paid to this. That first stream of funding has now been received by the services. However, this is the first time that I have seen phase 2 referred to as a once-off. I have some concerns about this. Much of the discussion has referred to the transition from the previous situation. In my view, the cost base has increased. I believe the cost base is relevant. Even a second once-off intervention will not be adequate to ensure the ongoing sustainability of community facilities that, more than likely, are dealing with far more complex needs than many of the private providers. There is a case for an enhanced subvention for those community facilities, especially where they are operating in disadvantaged areas.

Can the deputation give a general outline of how the second intervention will operate to ensure sustainability and some detail on what it might involve?

Senator Joan Freeman: I thank the deputation for the presentation. I am new to the area of children. The members of the deputation will forgive me if I ask questions that they have answered 2,000 years ago.

My question relates to the courses, workshops and training that the committees are running. My area of interest is in mental health. How do the committees measure the success of their work? Usually in research we measure before and after scenarios. Have the committees done that? What measuring technique is used? When will outcomes be seen?

Deputy Tom Neville: I apologise for being late. I watched the presentation on the television monitor in my office.

I wish to declare my interests. I am a non-executive director of a small not-for-profit child care facility in County Limerick. My questions follow on from what Deputy Rabbitte has said. Does the Department take on board suggestions made by the child care committees? I have consistently raised the issue of how owner-operated rural child care facilities are affected by the changes in training regulation. Such people must now return to education and undertake

training courses even though they have a medical background, strong qualifications and a great amount of experience. Taking time out to study or retrain and employ more people puts a huge pressure on an owner-operated business. I want people to employ people but often the option is unsustainable in small rural areas. I would like to hear the thoughts of the delegation on the matter.

Chairman: Many questions have been asked but the themes and interests are similar.

Ms Oonagh Fleming: I agree that many of the questions are similar and overlap. We will do our best to answer the questions as succinctly as possible. Ms O'Sullivan will commence by answering the questions on sustaining the sector in rural and urban areas.

Ms Karen O'Sullivan: Sustainability varies and depends on whether a facility is located in a suburb or a rural area and whether the area is disadvantaged or is a very small rural area that has a small number of families. We support financial and governance sustainability. Sustainability is dependent on a well-run service. We are very involved in working with community services through their directors and management.

The reliance on community employment, CE, came from a study conducted by the city and county child care committees, CCCs. There were murmurs of an over-reliance on CE schemes and people said there was an over-reliance on CE throughout the country. All the committees reviewed every service in their area to assess that reliance. The services that were identified were then put forward for in-depth and intensive supports, which included many services in Cork city, some of my services and services located throughout the country.

In terms of providing enough funding to employ staff immediately to replace CE participants, the reason CE staff must be replaced is because they are not qualified and child care staff must now have attained a minimum child care qualification. Therefore, CE workers could no longer be considered part of the adult-child ratio. Services were initially given funding to employ staff to replace CE workers directly. We worked closely with the services to assess how much money they needed to tide them over for the next year, which involved the phase 2 transition funding. Where things go from there is another matter. We are still working with the Department. We are still adding to how the Department considers CE reliance and supports community services. A sum of €1 million has been identified as enough to cover the cost of transition funding for the year. We are hopeful we can influence what happens next, particularly in terms of the affordable child care scheme. The rates for children and families who are more vulnerable and disadvantaged have been adjusted and increased. We hope the initiative will support the sustainable services that work, in particular with vulnerable families.

Deputy Neville mentioned the sustainability of services with older owners who do not have the requisite qualifications. The Department introduced a grandfather clause or, more appropriately, a grandparenting declaration. It means that people who have been involved in the sector for a long time, who were possibly in the latter part of their career and who could not take the time to pursue a formal qualification are allowed to work in the sector until 2020-2021 without a requirement to take on the qualification. Their years of skills and experience have been recognised. The provision was put in place to facilitate anyone who was not in a position to upskill. I believe I have covered all the sustainability questions. Please correct me if I have missed any question.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Have the child care committees been able to provide a relief panel, subject to funding?

Ms Karen O’Sullivan: There is a difficulty with providing a relief panel that will cover an entire county. If someone in Castletownbere telephones me to report that he or she has a desperate emergency due to a member of staff calling in sick, County Cork is a large county, and by the time a person has travelled from my office to Castletownbere, the session will have ended. The necessity to cover great distances makes providing a relief panel quite difficult. There are agencies and organisations that are working towards providing something akin to a nursing agency model. I mean a panel of relief staff that can be called upon to fill gaps in a service. I agree with the Deputy that staffing is a problem because the service provider has a legal obligation to ensure the correct number of staff are available at all times. There is no easy answer to providing relief staff.

Ms Oonagh Fleming: Ms O’Sullivan has answered many of the questions on sustainability and the link to the CE allowance. A Deputy mentioned the single affordable child care scheme, Deputy Jan O’Sullivan mentioned community services and Deputy Rabbitte asked whether the CCCs have influenced Government policy.

We indicated at the previous committee meeting we attended that the affordable child care scheme, as then designed, could leave some vulnerable children and families disadvantaged. Since the postponement, the Minister has announced that the system would not be ready. Instead of having something that was not going to work, the Department has enhanced what already exists, thus making it easier for everybody to work with it in the interim. The rate has also been substantially increased, which we anticipate will alleviate many of the sustainability issues for all services.

Sustainability in all its forms is important. The tools we use to measure financial sustainability are robust and consistent. It supports the services in assessing the bottom line and identifying ways to make ends meet. Income helps to alleviate costs. The more finance provided by a Government subvention, the lesser the need to ask parents for a contribution. We envisage that the enhanced community child care subvention that has replaced the affordable child care payment this year will provide relief to the sector, in particular community services.

Chairman: Excellent.

Ms Karen McCarthy: Senator Freeman asked us to identify our measures and techniques. We evaluate our training on an ongoing basis. We must start with the teams that have undertaken early childhood environment rating skills, ECERS, and infant toddler environment rating skills, ITERS, training, which are recognised evaluation tools. Mentor support also forms part of the training. We take a baseline measure of quite a number of areas through ECERS, which is for older children, and ITERS, which is for infants, and we measure it again at intervals.

In terms of AIM, Deputy O’Sullivan asked about parents. There has been a change in mind-set. The national schools are taking the same path. The school is assigned a support worker and the principal then decides which children would benefit most from their allocation. We are delivering a number of workshops around the country whereby we target parents’ groups with which we are familiar in order to give them more information about the schemes. We are not even at the end of year one with the new model. We provide information on access to supports and making an application. The length of time for decisions in early November and December was unduly long but we have really caught up now and decisions are being made quite quickly. The difficulty is getting information to people. We had a meeting with parents last Thursday night who have children starting in September. We are using a process with them whereby they can make their AIM applications at the moment although they still cannot register for the ECCE

programme. At least we are getting the ball rolling and hopefully that will make the waiting time for decisions shorter and allow supports to be put in place for the services as well and make the budgets available to them immediately in order that provision can be made for staff resources. It is a change of thinking and we make sure we give that message. Currently, we have regional co-ordinators available to us. The teams come with us when we do presentations and we try to answer all of the questions or find the answers if we do not have the information to make sure parents have an understanding of the model. We have not had much negativity.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: Do the witnesses feel parents know about the system?

Ms Karen McCarthy: They do, but the Department is looking at carrying out another publicity campaign because the approach in the sector is new. Work is under way on a communications strategy to ensure parents are more informed about AIM.

Chairman: I have two indications for supplementary questions from Deputy Rabbitte and Deputy Neville. If any other members have questions they may ask them but I urge them to ask questions rather than to make statements.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Before we get to my supplementary question, I was wondering about the top three issues that are affecting child care providers. Could the witnesses answer that because I am sure they have identified them and I would love to hear what they are?

My supplementary question is about the community child care schemes. Was it not a sello-tape effect when we accepted CE workers at that time and that an issue arose then with sustainability and the issue still exists? The sum of €1 million will only provide three weeks wages not to mind the once-off payment. Sustainability is an issue and we need to expand the discussion further in that regard.

Chairman: Could Deputy Rabbitte confine her contribution to questions?

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: In terms of inspections, we talked about policy and governance, are data collected on the number of crèches inspected in the various city and county child care committee areas? Are the data fed back to Tusla? Where do the data go? Tusla does not have an integrated ICT system so where is the information on inspections kept?

Deputy Tom Neville: In relation to what was said about the grandfather declaration, did the witnesses say it runs until 2021?

Ms Oonagh Fleming: It is closed-----

Chairman: It is 2021. We will get clarity in a moment. Is that the question?

Deputy Tom Neville: The second part of the question relates to other qualifications such as medical qualifications, for example, nurses.

Chairman: We will get an elaboration on that for the Deputy in a moment.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I have a further question on CE workers. Ms Karen O’Sullivan said some of the funding was in order to replace CE workers with qualified child care workers. Many of the CE workers love working in child care and would love to upskill and become child care workers. Is the only option for them to go and do a course in a college of further education or is there a way for them to upskill and stay in the community service as some of them would like to do that?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I inquired about the childminding issue.

Senator Máire Devine: My question is also about CE workers. In the inner city area they are devastated that they cannot continue. I know the intention is to improve standards but it would be an uplift for them if there could be a concentration on them in order for them to continue their career in child care. What, if any, contact do the witnesses have with the children of asylum seekers and refugees, or who has the remit or responsibility for them? What is the governance structure in that regard?

Senator Joan Freeman: Is there an internal complaints committee or system that filters complaints in a very unbiased way? How does the system work?

Chairman: I thank the Senator. There are up to eight questions. CE workers have come up three times. Deputy Rabbitte also inquired about the top three issues that arise. Questions were also asked about inspections and data. Deputy Neville inquired about the grandfather issue and qualifications. Deputy Jan O'Sullivan also inquired about CE workers. Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked about childminding. Senator Devine asked about CE workers and refugees, and Senator Freeman inquired about complaints.

Ms Oonagh Fleming: There were a few questions about CE schemes. Deputy Rabbitte asked if linking CE schemes and community child care was akin to putting on sellotape. I suppose one must put things into the cultural context at the time. Community employment schemes provided placements for people in order for them to get a genuine employment experience, whatever that was, such as building walls or being a caretaker. It was not exclusive to child care. We have certain pockets of the country where CE schemes were more prevalent than others and the way they were implemented is not the same everywhere. In some places CE participants were never included in the adult to child ratios in early years services whereas in other areas they were. What we discovered is that although there were high numbers of CE workers in lots of services they were not always required to meet the ratios. They were there in a support fashion and that is still the case but they still have gainful participation in the community child care setting.

The Department of Social Protection specifically changed the scheme for child care just over three years ago to create a three-year scheme which allows CE workers to advance their career. I am not sure whether it was Senator Devine or Senator Freeman who expressed concern in that regard. Participants have two years to get their child care qualification and a further year to enhance their employability by getting a full year's placement within a child care service. The first three-year scheme is complete and now there should be some roll-over whereby there are some fully qualified CE participants in a worthwhile placement in a child care setting meeting the requirements while others are in training. That is the way it is at the moment. I do not think it was a case of sellotape but providing placements for CE participants.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Were the workers ex-ratio?

Chairman: Could the witnesses continue to respond to the other questions?

Ms Karen O'Sullivan: In terms of the top three issues, if one asked private providers and community providers everyone would have slightly different ones but for me personally in Cork the first is baseline costs, which vary hugely. If one is in or around the suburbs of Cork one is paying much higher rates and higher rents than someone in a rural area. Baseline costs and their variability have an impact.

CITY AND COUNTY CHILD CARE COMMITTEES: DISCUSSION

The second is reliance on funding schemes. We have to be honest. The funding schemes are keeping everyone open. One has to adapt one's model to suit the funding. The third issue is the rapid pace of change. Sometimes I think our providers would just like us to stop, take a breath, review and then move forward. We, as child care committees, would welcome that opportunity as well.

Ms Karen McCarthy: I will follow on from one of Deputy Rabbitte's questions on inspections and inspection reports. Inspection reports are made available publicly through the Pobal website. We have access through our own internal database system that is linked through the Department so we can view reports. Discussions are ongoing on how we might offer quality supports to services. If there are any issues identified within reports, we could work with the service in addressing any areas that may have been highlighted by the inspectors.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The original question was around Tusla inspections.

Chairman: Just a second, Deputy.

Ms Karen McCarthy: That is on the Tusla inspections.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: All right.

Ms Karen McCarthy: Deputy Neville asked about qualifications. There is an eligible qualification list available through the Department and people have the opportunity to apply there to have a qualification recognised. These are not all child care related. Nursing qualifications are included. There is an opportunity for a person to look for recognition from the Department to get a qualification added to that list to make the person eligible under the regulations on qualifications.

Not all of the qualifications are there. I take the Deputy's point about people upskilling when they already have a primary degree in a specialised area-----

Deputy Tom Neville: This person has.

Ms Karen McCarthy: -----and the experience. There is a learner fund working group where we discuss that type of thing, that is, trying to recognise experience when it is a relevant qualification. In terms of the learner fund for this year, they are looking outside of the box. They are not only looking at FETAC levels 5, 6 and 7 in a child care qualification.

In terms of the access and inclusion model, AIM, there was a change in the legislation recently to allow the skill base that would be most relevant to support a child's needs. They would not need a child care related qualification. If it was a nursing qualification or sign language, whatever the qualification, there is a small tweak in the legislation to allow that they are not required to have a child care qualification. It allows more applicants, particularly the special needs assistants who would have been the primary person who would have supported children in services up until now and would not have a specific early years only qualification.

Deputy Tom Neville: Does it only cover special needs?

Ms Karen McCarthy: The small change to the legislation is only for ECCE support at level 7 in-service.

Chairman: There was Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire's question about childminding.

Ms Karen O'Sullivan: As regards childminding, the DCYA has a working group looking at the regulation and registration of childminders in a way that would suit the Irish context. It is looking at comparable jurisdictions, such as Wales and Scotland, and the North, and how they have gone about registering childminders. There is a working group, including Childminding Ireland and other organisations, which is looking at that. As the Deputy mentioned, we are looking for registered childminders for Government funding to go into but we recognise that the registration and the regulations must be proportionate to a person minding a small number of children in the person's home and that the current regulations on larger child care services are not directly applicable. The group is looking at how we can manage that process to suit everyone to allow persons to choose registered regulated childminders but to allow childminders to continue the valuable work that they do in their own homes.

We were asked about asylum seekers and refugees by Senator Devine. The child care committees have been very involved. Certainly, with the recent resettlement of Syrian refugees, we negotiated with the DCYA to ensure that there was funding made available for the provision of child care for young children coming in so that their parents could access English language classes. We have worked closely with the Department to try to ensure that the refugees coming in to be resettled are supported in every way and that the children are supported with their integration, including bringing the younger children who would be at school-age level to after-school, camps, etc. We have been working with the Department of Justice and Equality and other agencies on that.

With the asylum seekers and those in reception centres, we ensure that either there is child care provision on site or the children have access to the ECCE services, that is, the free pre-school year, when they are qualified off-site as far as possible. There are several specific child care funding programmes for refugee resettlement children. Also, we now have a new one for transitional funding for children who are experiencing homelessness. We have a new funding scheme specifically so that those children can get the opportunity to be out of bed and breakfast accommodation or hotels and having a better experience during the day, and also giving the parents the time to do what they need to do.

Chairman: What of the complaints system that Senator Freeman asked about?

Ms Oonagh Fleming: Each of the CCCs is an independent organisation and, therefore, has its own individual internal complaints system. CCI is merely a collective organisation of 30 independent entities - 29 of them are companies and one is a local authority structure. It is an internal complaints system at a local CCC level. Obviously, complaints would also be made to the Department. They would be made in other ways. They would be fed back down to us.

Senator Joan Freeman: Is there a co-ordination of those complaints?

Ms Oonagh Fleming: If it would be co-ordinated, it is not through CCI. We have not taken that on or looked at it yet. As for whether there is a co-ordination of complaints within the Department, I would imagine that there is.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their time and engagement, and their courtesy today to the members. I thank the members for their co-operation and interest in the subject matter this morning. If further questions arise, I am sure the committee secretariat would be quite happy to facilitate them. I thank the witnesses for their input. We wish them continued success in all that they do.

CITY AND COUNTY CHILD CARE COMMITTEES: DISCUSSION

The joint committee went into private session at 10.56 a.m. and adjourned at 11.21 a.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 May 2017.