

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ, COMHIONANNAS, MÍCHUMAS, LÁN- PHÁIRTÍOCHT AGUS ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRA- TION AND YOUTH

Dé Máirt, 25 Bealtaine 2021

Tuesday, 25 May 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Patrick Costello,	Sharon Keogan,
Alan Dillon,	Erin McGreehan,
Jennifer Murnane O'Connor,	Lynn Ruane,
Mark Ward,	Mary Seery Kearney.
Jennifer Whitmore.*	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Holly Cairns.

Teachta / Deputy Kathleen Funchion sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028: Discussion

Chairman: If any members or witnesses participating remotely are experiencing any sound or technical issues, could you let us know through the chat function? Otherwise, we will proceed.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore is substituting for Deputy Holly Cairns. We have received apologies from Deputy Sean Sherlock.

I remind members who are participating remotely to keep their devices on mute until they are invited to speak. While they are speaking I ask that, where possible, they have their cameras switched on and be mindful that we are in public session.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the place in which Parliament has chosen to sit, namely Leinster House or the convention centre, to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate where he or she is not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate at the meeting from outside the precincts will be refused.

Our business today is consideration of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028. I welcome all our witnesses. Everybody is joining us virtually and will address the committee via Microsoft Teams. The following witnesses will address the committee: Ms Marian Quinn, chairperson, and Ms Ida Lane, Association of Childhood Professionals; Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke, chief executive, and Ms Mary Walsh, chairperson, Childminding Ireland; and Ms Teresa Heeney, chief executive officer, and Ms Frances Byrne, director of policy and advocacy, Early Childhood Ireland. Ms Heeney is attending another meeting with the Minister and will join us once she can get to this meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to engage with the witnesses on the action plan, the aim of which is to provide greater recognition of childminding and to support childminders in their work of providing high-quality early learning care and school-age childcare, thus supporting child development and learning outcomes and helping families. It is envisaged that the action plan will involve change and significant benefits for childminders, children and the families using childminding services. Members wish to hear the opinions of stakeholders working in the industry on the provisions of the action plan.

Before I invite witnesses to give their opening statements, I need to remind them about parliamentary privilege when addressing a parliamentary committee. As all the witnesses are appearing before the committee virtually, I need to point out that there is uncertainty as to whether parliamentary privilege will apply to their evidence if given from a location outside of the parliamentary precincts of Leinster House. Therefore, if I direct witnesses to cease giving evidence relating to a particular matter, it is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

I will call on the witnesses in the order in which they are to deliver their opening statements. We will go first to Ms Ida Lane, then Ms Orbinski Burke and, finally, Ms Frances Byrne. We will have questions and answers when all the witnesses are finished.

Ms Ida Lane: I thank the committee for the invitation to speak. I am here on behalf of the Association of Childhood Professionals, ACP, a voluntary membership organisation representing practitioners in early years and school-age childcare. As a professional association, all our members have a minimum of a level 5 qualification in early years. This includes our members who are childminders. I have been providing home-based early years and after-school care in my family home for the past 14 years. I started childminding by providing a service to three

preschool children. With this number the regulations precluded me from registering with the HSE so, like many other childminders, I became a member of the professional childminders organisation, Childminding Ireland, and got childminding insurance, Garda vetting and paediatric first aid training. I have done child protection training as well as voluntarily notifying my service with my local childcare committee. In 2009, to enable my service to survive the introduction of the free preschool year, I registered with the HSE and opened my early childhood care and education, ECCE, preschool catering for six preschool children, which I still run in the heart of my home to this day. I therefore feel I am well positioned to speak here about the difficulties of working with increased regulation, inspection and oversight within the home environment.

I have been asked to set out what I see as the strengths and challenges of the recently published national childminding action plan. The strengths include a recognition that childminders are an integral part of the childcare landscape in Ireland and that childminders offer care to multi-age groups of children, as in family groups, preschool, schoolgoing children and after-school care. They can all be catered for. There is a recognition that low adult-child ratios and consistent caring in a family home setting offer positive well-being outcomes for children. There is acknowledgement that childminders can offer a wrap-around childcare option that can be flexible and negotiable and, where possible, offers flexibility in respect of early, late, overnight and weekend arrangements. The action plan builds on recommendations, experiences and expertise gathered from childminders, children, parents, childminding networks, organisations and county childcare committees. Formal recognition is finally being given to the childminding sector, recognising that children, families and communities have benefited from the quality of care offered through the dedication and commitment of childminders who offer their childcare services. Its approach is comprehensive, identifying core areas of implementation, namely regulations and inspection, training and support, funding and financial support, consultation and communication.

While I welcome the formal recognition the action plan gives to the central placement of childminding in the Irish childcare landscape, there are, in my view, certain challenges within the plan. The timeframe for the full implementation of the plan is overly ambitious, considering that there are thousands of non-regulated childminders caring for children that have absolutely no idea that the regulation of childminding is rapidly approaching or that they will need to engage in accredited training and meet regulations and face inspections. Serious investment in communication and consultation will have to be made to engage these childminders. Connections were made with only a small percentage of working childminders, generally those who were already engaged with Tusla, Childminding Ireland and local county childcare committees. These childminders are committed to raising professional standards in childcare and welcome appropriate regulation but their view may not be shared by many who see childminding as a short-term and more casual job. I have concerns also that the Department sees the networking groups as being their main communication highway to reach out and contact or connect with many or all childminders.

I am also concerned that experienced, knowledgeable childminders will be excluded from applying for childminding development officer positions due to not having level 8 degrees that are focused on centre-based rather than home-based care and education. Childminders must be centrally involved in the development of a phased training and qualifications framework that identifies necessary training, desirable training and, finally, as childminding incrementally become increasingly professionalised, the qualifications that are needed or the “icing on the cake”. All training needs to be accredited and, to allow for professional and personal com-

mitments, training should be broken down into smaller “micro credentials” that incrementally build to a full qualification. We should note that increased regulation, administration, inspection, audits, etc., will result in a higher financial cost for childminders. Significant State investment will be required to make sure that this increased cost does not mean that childminders can only operate by charging parents more. We also need to be mindful that significant investment continues to be required for the development of centre-based provision, both early years and school-age. The funding required to implement the action plan cannot be to the detriment of continued increased investment in the area of centre-based provision.

We also need to be mindful that small home- and centre-based services, subject to current regulations, standards, inspections and oversight, may lose out to childminders, who may be subject to less onerous inspections and regulations.

I thank committee members for listening and welcome their questions.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: I thank the committee for the opportunity to make this presentation at a time when policy developments and structural changes will have a direct impact on the future of childminding in Ireland. We have lodged a submission with the committee and, in the interests of time, I will present a truncated version.

Many on the committee or their family members will have had children minded by a childminder. I ask members to picture that childminder. How will the new policy and regulatory environment impact on them and how are their views being captured by the Government as it makes changes?

We all want an environment that supports healthy, happy, safeguarded and flourishing children, which is what quality childminders provide to the children in their care. Childminding is a relationship-based, home-from-home form of childcare. The same childminder will typically mind a child from babyhood, through to secondary school.

Childminding is different from centre-based or creche care in a number of important respects. For example, childminding takes place in a family home and not a premises, childminders mind small numbers of children, spontaneity is possible and allows each childminding day to be child led and children belong there, rather than attend there.

Childminding Ireland is the organisation fighting for childminding, founded by childminders and run by childminders at every level. We represent over 4,000 childminding contacts throughout the country, with both childminders and parents using our services. We actively encourage childminders to become engaged. We believe in a grassroots approach and in empowering childminders.

For the first time in the history of the State, all childminding is being included in the regulatory and support system. We urge the committee to recommend that the one organisation with an authentic childminding voice should be adequately funded.

I know members want to hear our thoughts on the action plan for childminding. While Childminding Ireland supports the visions, aims and objectives of the action plan, we have serious concerns about the implementation. The action plan promises many positives. For example, training will be delivered in formats that are suited to childminders, while new regulations and a new inspection model specific to childminding will be introduced. However, we are deeply concerned about the implementation of the plan as the initial signs from the workforce development planning process are not positive. The childminding sector should materially input

on the shape of things to come and be in the majority, supported by relevant framework experts, for example, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, and education and training boards, ETBs, for the training and supports advisory group. The Department's method of consultation of childminders needs new thinking. We know the Department was satisfied with the consultation on the draft action plan but we were not.

There needs to be active engagement with parents who choose childminders for their children. Parental satisfaction with childminding is currently very high. Clarity is needed on the evaluation of progress. How will we know what is and is not working?

There is a lot yet to be decided. We need new thinking. The gravitational pull towards centre-based care as the norm is strong. Recommendations for childminding are being made through the prism of the centre-based view. The workforce development plan steering group is currently without a single childminding representative and the structures feeding into the group are dominated by centre-based interests.

Our recommendations are as follows. There are thousands of childminders that are unengaged and unaware that the action plan exists. This must be acknowledged and addressed. Childminders and those proximate to childminding must be in the majority on all of the advisory groups for the action plan. It is inappropriate for those not proximate to childminding to make recommendations for an entire workforce. Childminding Ireland must have a seat on the steering group for the workforce development plan. Childminding Ireland needs to be appropriately resourced to support and represent childminding and parents, particularly at this time of change.

I thank committee members for their time and attention and we are happy to answer questions.

Ms Frances Byrne: As the Chair said earlier, our CEO sends her apologies. She is attending a meeting with the Department but hopes to be here in time for the follow-up questions and answers.

We welcome the opportunity to present to the committee today about the recently published national action plan for childminding. As the leading support organisation in our sector, we have broadly welcomed the plan. Childminding is regulated in most European countries and Early Childhood Ireland strongly believes the move to regulate the currently informal childminding sector in Ireland is in the best interests of children.

The plan recognises and we agree that childminding plays a central role in the provision of both early learning and care and school-age childcare in Ireland. The plan follows through on the commitments made in the First 5 strategy published in late 2018 and in last year's programme for Government. It estimates that there are approximately 15,000 non-relative childminders in Ireland. At the moment, the Child Care Act 1991, as we have heard from previous speakers, exempts most childminders from regulation. Currently fewer than 80 childminders are registered with Tusla. One consequence of this is that the vast majority of childminders cannot take part in the national childcare scheme, so thousands of families cannot access subsidies to reduce the fees they pay.

Our second annual childcare barometer, which was published in 2019 and a link for which we have provided to members today, showed overwhelming public support for ensuring regulations and supports were extended to all paid childminders. At that time, 87% of Irish adults

were in favour of Garda vetting and basic training requirements for childminding and we believe that this was testament to the importance of this option for families.

The national action plan mainly addresses self-employed childminders who work in their own homes. It is not primarily concerned with *au pairs* or nannies who work in the child's home. The plan does, however, include an action to develop information and training resources in relation to them. The plan will not extend regulation to those who solely care for children related to them.

Early Childhood Ireland recognises the scale of the challenge in moving childminding from an invisible, informal sector to a regulated, formal sector that sits properly within the early learning and care and school-age childcare systems. Our learning from and experience of transitioning from an unregulated centre-based informal childcare sector to a regulated, publicly funded one highlights the importance of the availability of appropriate supports and phased transition periods.

It is also imperative that the registration process is smooth and clear for childminders. The timing of the phases will need to be signalled well in advance to them and to the statutory and non-governmental organisations tasked with supporting the sector so that we can all be ready.

The action plan sets out a phased approach to reform. Phase 1 will be preparatory, lasting two to three years; phase 2 will be a transition phase, lasting three to five years; and phase 3 will involve full implementation and the end of all transitional arrangements. Early Childhood Ireland believes that the phased approach to reform as set out in the plan is reasonable.

We have a concern about a caveat in the plan about timing, however:

While the end-point is clear [we know that is 2028], the Action Plan leaves open the precise timing of movement between Phases 1, 2 and 3. Given the potential cost to the Exchequer of opening the National Childcare Scheme to childminders, the timing of the transition from Phase 1 to 2 will be Budget-dependent and will depend on agreement with the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform.

The Government must prioritise completing these phases given the interests of children and their families and to avoid unnecessary delays for childminders. The estimates indicated in the plan are not exorbitant, rising to €23 million annually by phase 3. This amount of investment is not beyond the reach of a wealthy country. It is vital that children of all ages can benefit from quality experiences, regardless of whether their parents avail of a childminder or a setting or both.

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the publication of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028. It is a positive step forward, as childminders already play a vital role in the provision of early learning and care and school-age childcare in Ireland. This must be recognised, valued and supported. We hope members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will play a role, collectively and individually, within their communities to support and promote this plan. Finally, we thank the Chairperson for the invitation to attend today and to the clerk and her team for their support in advance of this meeting.

Chairman: I thank Ms Byrne and all our witnesses. I am opening the meeting for questions now. For the information of the witnesses, we take each Deputy or Senator individually and everybody will have a five-minute slot. We start with Deputy Murnane O'Connor, and I ask

her to confirm her location.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the witnesses for appearing before us today. This matter is very important. I share the concerns Ms Lane expressed regarding the programme. Is the plan a bit overly ambitious? We may need to find out more about it. This process began in 2016 and we are now in 2021. How many childminders have notified the city and county childcare committees, CCCCs? During the drafting of this document, how many childminders sat on the board? Mention was also made of thousands of existing childminders now facing these new regulations. Childminding is a home from home and it is very important. We must fully support these childminders with real and purposeful investment. They cannot be left behind, as many childminders are not even aware yet of these changes.

I am also concerned the increased regulation, administration and inspections will result in high financial costs to the childminders which may end up being passed on to hard-pressed parents. We know how difficult it is for parents to work and pay for childcare. Therefore, it is important we get more information on that issue. What do the witnesses think would be a more realistic timeframe? I refer especially to communication and information in this regard, because that aspect must be examined. In addition, have we any idea of the funding that would be required to facilitate these changes? I thank the witnesses.

Chairman: Deputy Murnane O'Connor's initial question was for Ms Lane.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Yes, it was.

Ms Ida Lane: Roughly, 80 childminders are registered with Tusla. Ms Orbinski Burke might have more information regarding Childminding Ireland, which has many members registered with the city and county childcare committees. We lost our childminding advisers years ago and, therefore, we lost all support. They drifted away, if that makes sense. Suddenly, now, we are trying to get them to come back again and get those people to believe in and trust a system which has let them down and excluded them before. I feel that is where communication must come in, even in respect of childminders registered with county and city childcare committees and Childminding Ireland. They must be involved.

I am a member and we have been excluded. We have not been included in things. We have had a bit of talk and involvement, which is fair enough. When it comes to the draft plan, however, the Childminding Ireland childminders, who have been vetted by the Garda, who have insurance, paediatric first aid and safety training, and who are all very conscious of wanting to be professionals, are not mentioned. We have been excluded. That is not good for building trust. That is my personal opinion.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank Ms Lane.

Chairman: Would Deputy Murnane O'Connor like any of the other witnesses to contribute on these points? She has just over one minute remaining in her time.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: No, that is fine. My remaining query concerns whether we must look at a more realistic timeframe. As Ms Lane said, it is important there is a great deal of communication and information involved in this process. The services are excellent and that is not in question. However, everyone must be listened to and it is important everyone gets that chance. It is important, therefore, to know how many childminders sat on the board when this plan was drafted. It is important we listen to everyone in this regard and I ask that all these perspectives be taken into consideration from today. I thank everyone again.

Perhaps Ms Walsh and Ms Byrne might come in now, if they wish to.

Ms Mary Walsh: The Deputy asked about the original drafting of the plan. One childminder was involved in that process and that was me.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That was it?

Ms Mary Walsh: Yes.

Chairman: I see Ms Orbinski Burke and Ms Quinn have their hands raised. Would they like to contribute?

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: Yes. I do not know the number of childminders who have voluntarily notified, but that is probably something we could find out and communicate to the committee. Childminding Ireland has about 2,000 childminding contacts, of whom about 720 are members. We have childminders on our board and working in our office and they are involved fully throughout the whole organisation. We will contact the city and county childcare committees and then revert to the committee with the required information.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank Ms Orbinski Burke.

Chairman: Would Ms Quinn like to contribute on this part?

Ms Marian Quinn: No, it is fine. The question has been answered.

Chairman: I thank everyone very much. I call Deputy Costello. I ask him to confirm his location.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I thank the Chair and I confirm that I am in my office in Leinster House.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Picking up on the question from Deputy Murnane O'Connor concerning the number of childminders involved in developing the action plan in respect of the various working groups, we saw from the presentations that the answer was that the number was small to non-existent. One recommendation this committee can certainly make, therefore, is that if the Minister is making decisions concerning a particular sector, it is important there be extensive consultation with representatives from that sector. Turning to a point raised already, I am conscious of the informal nature of some childminding services. We can see the major differences in the numbers between the estimates of how many childminders there are, how many are registered with Tusla and how many engage with the various organisations represented here today.

I am also concerned that if we rush any attempt to regulate this area and we get it wrong, the ultimate consequence will be to drive childminders out of the sector. People will just not mind children. As someone who has experienced crèche fees going up recently, that is not a good outcome for anyone and especially not for the children benefiting from these services now. One of the ways to carry out a process such as this properly is to include the groups about to be regulated. Equally, it is important to reach out to people. The points made about the difficulty with engagement, the lack of it and its informal nature have been raised several times in several ways. What I would love to hear from the witnesses is how we should reach out to childminders, the people we want to reach. If there are estimated to be 15,000 childminders, of

whom 4,000 are linked with Childminding Ireland and only 80 linked with Tusla, how do we reach all of them?

Chairman: Does the Deputy want to hear from a specific witness or from all of them?

Deputy Patrick Costello: Perhaps we could hear from each organisation because each has a slightly different take. If they could each give me a very quick answer it would be very helpful.

Chairman: We will begin with Ms Quinn and move on to Childminding Ireland.

Ms Marian Quinn: A major awareness-raising campaign will be needed on the national airwaves and in the national newspapers. Discussions should take place straight away on the benefits of this plan, why it is needed and how it will support and help childminders, children and the families who work with them. Given that it is linked to parents accessing the national childcare scheme, those parents could bring the plan to the attention of childminders who may not have picked up on it or who may believe it does not directly relate to them or that they could not engage with it. However, this needs to happen over time. As we heard, it took five years to put together the plan so we cannot rush its implementation without contacting the childminders and families who are directly involved. The Deputy is right that we will lose them if this is rushed, whether it is participation, qualification or something else.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: Further to what Ms Quinn was saying, which was absolutely correct, an awful lot of money must be spent on the communication piece because childminders work alone. It is not like we can contact a big group in a crèche, for example. Money must be put into communications and advertising.

There are two other points to note. We can also try to contact childminders through the parents who use their services, maybe through schools for school-age children and perhaps through other vehicles for preschool children. The other point is a relationship based form of childcare. An awful lot of childminders know other people who are childminding. If we have more resources, we can branch out through that network. I take the Deputy's comment that it is something which will take time to do properly.

Ms Frances Byrne: I did not realise the boss had joined the call, so I will keep this short as I am sure Ms Heeney is anxious to speak. We are inclined to hold up Scandinavian countries as examples of the direction we want to take in terms of investment, subsidies for parents and quality. In two of the those countries, childminders are regulated and treated as professionals like the rest of the workforce. What we are seeking to do is very challenging because of where we in Ireland are coming from but it is not impossible.

It is important that we keep children at the centre of this; it is certainly important for children. Childminders should be brought into this in a timely and reasonable way. Nobody is talking about the kind of regulation that settings must go through. That is absolutely not the case and would not make sense. It is not outside our wits to do it.

I entirely agree with our ACP colleagues. This is about the Government taking responsibility and getting the word out. One of our concerns is that if there is stopping and starting with the phases, it will undermine confidence among families and childminders. Those are just some words of caution.

Chairman: Ms Heeney has joined us.

Ms Teresa Heeney: I thank the Chair and apologise for being late. I was at another meeting with the Department. I did not hear my colleagues from Childminding Ireland or the ACP so the committee might forgive me if I say anything that has already been said.

To respond to Deputy Costello's question about how we do this, I agree with Ms Quinn that we need a significant advertising campaign. We have experience of bringing an unregistered sector into legislation as it was only recently that centre-based services became registered. We know, therefore, how to do this. We also have significant infrastructure in Tusla, the city and county childcare committees and the voluntary childcare organisations and we have a small but, I imagine, growing childminding advisory cohort around the country. We have the National Parents' Council which now has an early years division and I have no doubt it would be very supportive as well. As such, we have the infrastructure but all of it will need significant re-sourcing if we are to target and reach the 15,000 additional early years and school-age childcare settings that children attend daily because it is their parents' preferred choice.

Ms Ida Lane: I agree on the need for significant resourcing, building up trust and strong collaboration. I run a very small ECCE in my home but I have also been engaged in childminding, so I stand in both camps. ECCE or centre-based care has had roughly 30 years to get to where it is now, yet we are going to ask childminders who do not even know that this is happening to be regulated in seven years' time. I do not see how that will happen. We need to go a bit slower, engage and build up strong trust. Then we will be successful. However, if we rush into this headlong we are heading for trouble. That is what I have to say.

Chairman: Will Senator McGreehan confirm she is in Leinster House?

Senator Erin McGreehan: I am in Leinster House. I thank all our witnesses for appearing. Their presentations were interesting and informative. We all recognise childcare has been underfunded, misunderstood and insufficiently respected for far too long. To have this conversation and an action plan is, therefore, very positive. We are looking at the pitfalls. I know childminders and I have needed them. From living in a rural area where there is not much access to centre-based care for children, I know that childminding is the only way people can have their children looked after.

With all this regulation, is there a risk of a significant drop-off in the number of childminders? I believe there will be, although I hope that will not be the case. Childminders may decide they only want to do this for a couple of years while their own children are young and then return to work when their children start school. It may cause other childminders to decide they have been in the game long enough and give up or bow out. I fear there will be a problem there with how we support childminders, the majority of whom are female. How do we support and empower our childminders to give regulation to the incredible service they already provide. We hand over our children to childminders because they are the second mothers and are so important to a family.

How will we create a balance between centre-based services and childminding? Centre-based services are so important, particularly for older children. Other members covered the issues of resources and awareness about which I also intended to ask. Any of the witnesses who have an opinion on them may respond to my questions.

Chairman: Thanks very much, Senator. Does anybody want to come in on those? First, Ms Quinn.

Ms Marian Quinn: Senator McGreehan is correct about the potential for drop off. Regulation will be something that, even with a light touch coming in gently, is a change of practice. We know a change is something that takes a while for people to embrace and to engage with, depending on the level of change. These are changes that will need to be made in the childminder's own home, and possibly to the infrastructure of the childminder's home and to the routine and order in it. I would worry if it is not done in a way that brings childminders with them in terms of having built up trust, and that the trust, once regulation starts, will not snowball. We know, from experience in centre-based care that some of the level of regulation required is excessive. There are small services that cater for what could be 15 children up to services that cater for 300 children which are all experiencing the same level of regulation. I suppose there would want to be absolute assurances for the childminders that is not something that will happen.

At the centre of this are children and their safety. Obviously, that is paramount, but we need to do it in a phased way to prevent that drop off. It comes down to the building of trust because if you will not trust your partners in this development, you will say you are leaving because you do not know what is coming down the road or if this is the start of a slippery slope. We need to have people mindful of that in the process.

Chairman: Thanks. Ms Orbinski Burke was looking to come in.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: Just to add to what Ms Quinn was saying there, which I completely agree with, nobody is in this for the money. There is very little money in childminding. If regulation is too onerous and if the administrative burden is too onerous, it will be an absolute disaster. We do not want to see a curriculum in a family home. That was the little bit I wanted to add. Ms Walsh wanted to come in as well.

Chairman: Ms Walsh, are you looking to come in?

Ms Mary Walsh: As a working childminder, I just want to say the biggest fear is that we will lose childminders. We have excellent childminders who came through a previous system in the early 2000s and who have continued to keep up their first aid, Garda vetting, training and insurance in the absence of any supports from Government. The only supports we receive are from Childminding Ireland. It is important that childminders have confidence in this process and that they are included and listened to.

Childminding is very different from centre-based care. It is delivered in a family home and the biggest fear that childminders would have is that they would have to turn their homes into mini-crèches. It needs to be recognised for the type of childcare that it is. It is home-based, it is home from home and it is a totally different environment to centre-based care.

All types of childcare can exist. However, in rural Ireland the choice is not there. We need to ensure that there is childcare for the whole country.

Chairman: Thanks. Ms Heeney also has indicated.

Ms Teresa Heeney: Thank you, Chairman. I thank Senator McGreehan for her question on the drop off. Internationally, there is, indeed, some evidence that there is a challenge in retaining the numbers of childminders working in the profession but these countries have regulations and it is not necessarily about regulation. It is about that workforce wanting to work in a sector that is professional and supportive because that is how they see themselves.

I would take the opportunity to say that we cannot wait for 30 years for these regulations. There are more children in childminders' homes today than there are in any centre in the country and we need to support those childminders with that huge responsibility.

The Senator is correct. Although I do not have the information, I would imagine that the workforce is probably 99.9% female. These are women who in the main probably do not have access to pensions and we would need to be supporting that workforce as well as professional mothers of the early years sector.

It is also important to say these regulations have not been written. They have not started writing these regulations. They do not know what the inspection regime will look like. The professionals who are generally around this table have the wherewithal to make sure that they are measured and suitable and that we do not see family homes becoming otherwise because we do not want parents not having access to the childminding settings that they are choosing today in the thousands.

Chairman: Thanks. Ms Lane, did you want to come in?

Ms Ida Lane: Very briefly. I have gone from being a childminder with three children to doing early childhood care and education, ECCE, with six. I have six children. My service is a very small one. I have gone from having just a small number of policies which were simple to keep to having 300 pages of policies. I must have a policy for my hen in the back garden. I have one for my dogs that are crated away. I have a goldfish policy. It is beyond ridiculous. That is in my family home. I do not want to see that happening for any childminder. It cannot go that direction. You cannot be worrying yourself sick over whether you have a policy for whatever it is.

It needs to be kept simple. It needs to be kept streamlined and completely different from centre-based care. As I say, I went from childminder to being treated as centre-based even though I only have six children. It is a very frightening prospect. I understand completely where small childminders are coming from and where they would be rattling in their boots and saying that they cannot face the stress of that and they will go. That is something we must be extremely mindful of.

Chairman: Thanks. We are moving on then to Senator Seery Kearney. Senator, can you confirm your location too, please?

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: Thank you, Chair. I am in Leinster House.

I thank the witnesses for their participation, for coming and speaking so frankly with us today. Their submissions to us are a thorough and honest appraisal of the fears that would lie in the process ahead.

I would despair at the notion that we could not get there by 2028. The past year has proven the centrality and absolute necessity of good-quality childcare and how essential it is to everybody's quality of life and ability to function, and particularly for the access to the workplace of women who, despite our best efforts, are in the main the primary carers. One of the lessons we have learned from Covid has been that a hybrid working model is in our future and in order to do that, we need childminding alongside crèche and centre-based facilities.

That said, I hear everything that the witnesses are saying about the fears with regard to regulation. My experience of being an adviser within the county and city children committees

and being involved within the childcare sector has been that the current inspection regime and regulation regime is arbitrary in its application, causes much administrative burden and is remarkably difficult. I am looking forward to this committee reviewing that and taking it by the teeth and tearing it apart, I hope, into something that is more manageable because it is onerous for centre-based providers. It is essential that the witnesses are involved in putting in place the regulations as we go forward.

Over the past couple of months, my party has conducted a widespread care-of-the-child consultation and we have run policy laboratories. Arising out of that, we have found the priority - 81% of the participants were parents - that people required availability, affordability and location. To me, childminding fits those requirements really nicely and well. What do the witnesses believe are reasonable regulations? What should be expected of childminders in their homes? When it comes to qualifications, I believe they should all be QQI-accredited and that we should be setting up childminding as a career path and a career of choice for as many as possible and looking at qualifications in that regard. We could use a grandfathering system in recognition of experience in respect of current childminders in a way that was not facilitated in professionalism and centre-based care. We can learn from where we missed and lost people in that process in order that we can bring that forward and into this. I would be particularly interested in hearing what the witnesses have to say about that.

Chairman: Does the Senator want to hear from everybody?

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: Yes.

Ms Frances Byrne: That was a very insightful commentary. I agree completely with the Senator regarding the gendered nature of the sector. One of the things we often talk about is looking at early years and school-age care through a number of lenses. As the Senator noted, despite progress and many of us wanting it to be different, it is a hugely gendered issue on the demand side. It has a significant impact on working mothers whether we like it or not involving such things as cost. This is not right but we also have a very gendered workforce and I include childminders in that. Providers are overwhelmingly women who are all doing brilliant work but it would be wonderful to see more men in the sector. A total of 98% of staff in settings are women. What we really need is more investment so that salaries can increase and it becomes a viable career.

I also welcome what the Senator said about Covid. We saw the sharp end of the way society can fall apart. Many childminders were already working in pods. Centre-based care had to catch up with that, so we learned a lot about our sector very broadly. I do not think anybody has all the answers to the questions asked by the Senator. As Ms Heeney said, it is about getting people around the table and making sure the people who are involved every day and know best are involved in the decision-making about that with obviously the best interests of children central to all our shared concerns. I have no doubt that this will be the case. There is a need for qualifications of some kind. It should not necessarily be the same as what is currently expected from those who work in settings. That said, workforce development planning is ongoing and will report by the end of the year. There is currently a childminding working group, which presents us all with an opportunity to influence what comes out of that so by the end of this year, we will have some answers and guidance. I know that Early Childhood Ireland and other organisations have been working very hard in those forums.

I agree that the time is reasonable but the Government must really get serious about this both in terms of investment and communicating with parents, society and childminders most of all.

We often refer to parental choice. What Early Childhood Ireland wants to see is that by 2028, parents will have genuine parental choice. At the moment, there are parents who would love to choose a crèche, childminder or a combination but as we heard from a member of the committee, cannot make a choice because of where they are. It is about ensuring that everybody is brought in so that parents can fully act in the best interests of their children and make all those decisions appropriately.

Ms Mary Walsh: The Senator asked what we need. Before we look at regulations or anything else, childminders need to be brought to the table and listened to.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I think we have well and truly heard that. What other things does the sector need and what would regulation look like?

Ms Mary Walsh: I do not know what regulation would look like but it must be workable and reasonable and maintain the home-from-home environment childminders offer children. Childminders are single-handed providers who cannot spend their days generating mountains of paperwork to satisfy tick-box exercises. There must be an examination of the quality of home-based childcare and what the markers for that are. We are a long way away from that because nobody has asked us yet.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I am asking the question now.

Ms Mary Walsh: As a childminder, I have worked for 26 years in my own home providing childcare. I initially thought I would be a childminder for three years until my children went to school but I remained a childminder. What would be reasonable for me would be for the house to be safe and for adequate precautions to be taken to ensure that no child is in danger. I do not want to have to create a sleep room in my home. I do not want to have to close off my kitchen because it is part of my home and the children have access to it. It is the distinction that matters - that the house remains a home and the children are in an environment similar to the one they left behind in their home that morning.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: What I am hearing from Ms Walsh is that part of what childminding offers is that preservation of the home experience, as opposed to the centre experience, and that this is what should be central in the design of any regulations in this regard. It is practical to have a sleep room but it is not practical to close off a kitchen. Children should have that freedom to roam in the same way as they would in their own home, which is one of the beauties of the choice of childminding.

Ms Mary Walsh: That should be the overriding thought in the mind of anybody designing these regulations.

Chairman: The next speaker is Deputy Ward. Could he confirm his location?

Deputy Mark Ward: I am in Leinster House 2000. I thank the witnesses for their very insightful contribution. What I am hearing is that we do not need to regulate childminders out of childminding. While I smiled when the analogy of the goldfish came out, we do not need to get to that level of regulation when it comes to one's own home and children in their own home so we must be mindful of that.

Mention was made of a potential increase in costs for childminders and the potential for this to be passed on to parents. I am a firm believer that regulation does not necessarily have to mean taxation but what tax incentives would the witnesses like to see their members and par-

ents be able to avail of that would make things better? It is magic wand time. If the witnesses were charged with developing the national childcare scheme, what would be the one thing they insert into it that would make things better for their members? Have any of the witnesses engaged with or made their concerns known to the Ombudsman for Children and what would their concerns be?

Chairman: Ms Quinn indicated in the last round so I will let her in first. Witnesses should indicate now if they want to come in on this issue.

Ms Marian Quinn: Regarding Senator Seery Kearney's point on qualifications, many different courses have been offered over the last number of years to childminders and centre-based staff. It is about developing those as micro-credentials, even if just two credits are given. Childminders have engaged with a quality assurance process, QAP, supporting quality over a number of years. There is work that goes into that, such as attendance at workshops etc. If that had been developed into a micro-credential it would have met documented learning outcomes and childminders would have completed a certain amount of credits already. It is the same if something is going to be done about child protection or early years services; we have the quality regulatory framework. If all those courses are accredited, before we know it we would seamlessly have, at least a foundation, if not a level 5, qualification. That is one matter that could be looked at.

As Deputy Ward mentioned, regulation does cost more. It is worth making the national childcare scheme, NCS, accessible to families to keep the cost down. Two things are needed. There will need to be grants and supports for childminders to be able to implement and meet the regulatory needs, whatever they are and as minimal as they should be. For example, capital investment might be needed by childminders to buy some kind of equipment in order to meet fire safety requirements and so on. From the parents' side, investment into the national childcare scheme is needed. When childminders are able to register, parents will be able to avail of it. However, the national childcare scheme, while it is brilliant at bringing in more parents and providing subsidies for more of them than previously, it does have difficulties and glitches in the maintenance of the system, such as the generation of childcare identifier code keys, CHICKs, to see how much a parent will be eligible for.

Those kinds of things need to be sorted out because they will be an extra burden on childminders in engaging with the kind of practice they will need to. On the results of Fine Gael's policy, a parent talked last night about the NCS and how she is finding it particularly challenging because it keeps changing and she keeps having to go back into the system. Those glitches need to be worked out and there needs to be enough subsidy available to parents to make it worthwhile for them to sign up to avail of it. The subsidy also needs to be made worthwhile for childminders when they are able to avail of it in the context of the responsibility and interactions they need to have about signing in, engaging with CHICKs and supporting parents around that. Some of the glitches with the NCS need to be worked out.

I am not an advocate for tax incentives because it is presumed that people are paying tax and they are putting money in upfront etc. A direct subsidy would be best, whether it is through childminders or families.

Chairman: I call Ms Heeney and Ms Walsh. As there probably were some questions earlier that they did not get to address, they can do so together now.

Ms Teresa Heeney: I thank the Senator for her questions on what kind of inspections would

be appropriate. A fundamental principle is at play here, which is that as a State we have a responsibility to inspect these settings. This is not because money is changing hands because it is not yet in most settings. More money should be changing hands via the national childcare scheme. The introduction of inspection regimes will facilitate that and it is in the best interest of children and families. To have an inspection regime is absolutely a requirement the State must deliver on and I really welcome the fact that we are having that conversation today. I just want to confirm that.

As to the level of the inspection regime, while I do not like the phrase “light touch” because it is synonymous with bad times in the very recent past in this country, the regime does need to be negotiated and discussed with people who work in this field. At the very minimum, we want to build on what it is about the childminding setting that parents are choosing. They are choosing a home-based setting, so absolutely we do not want to close a kitchen or garden. Those are the things parents are choosing and what they enjoy about using a childminding home, so we need to make sure they are retained. However, we must make sure that places are safe, the food children get is nutritious and there are no fire issues, for example. The fundamentals of a safe location, to begin with, are important. I will not go into the issue but the national childcare scheme, in our view, needs to be available to all families who are using childminders. We need to build on the national childcare scheme because it does afford us an opportunity to develop a model of support in order to deliver a more affordable childcare system in this country.

Ms Mary Walsh: On affordability or making childcare more expensive, no major capital investment is required for childminders. The house and building are there although equipment is possibly needed. Unless regulation is overly onerous, no major investment will be required. However, investment is needed in the mentoring of childminders, by experienced childminders, in order to make this transition. That is really important because many childminders have come through the system already and left it because of over-regulation. That needs to be addressed in order to bring those people back. A lot of money was spent in the early 2000s on childminders who left the system completely because crèche-based regulations were imposed on them and they were frightened out of the sector.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I confirm I am in Agriculture House on the Leinster House campus. I thank everyone for coming in today. It is a very interesting conversation, one that has been a long time coming and has been a long time needed. I used childminders because it was, essentially, like having a second mammy for my children. They would go to the childminder’s house, do their homework and cook with her children. They had someone who loved them looking after them and taking care of them. That is something really valuable. Each family and child are different and a child’s care needs are different. We need to have all those choices. At different stages, each child needs different levels and types of care. I always picked a childminder for the first couple of years. When my children needed a little more socialisation or formalisation they went into an early childhood care and education, ECCE, or crèche-based scheme. We need to ensure that choice is available for families and that all families can use it.

From speaking to friends of mine who mind children, they are really nervous about this and are concerned about what it could mean for them. The communication part of this will be absolutely key. Ms Heeney talked about pension insurance. A huge number of benefits and securities could potentially be built into this system for childminders, while still getting the balance right and having very family-based care being given. However, communication will be the biggest issue in all of this. It is not just about what the childminders want to see, although that is obviously a large part of it. Anyway, it is important that we will talk to parents to find

out exactly why they send their children to childminders. Much of the time it is out of a sense of love of family and normal living in someone else's house. That is what they are seeking when they send their children to a childminder. It is also about simplicity and handiness. The childminder picks up the children at school and does all the normal things.

It is about ensuring that we bring all of that into the system. I believe there has to be a community-based, grassroots approach to this system if we bring it in or if it does get put in. Do the representatives see a role for county childcare committees in that regard? Much of the time, childcare in other countries is regulated and managed on a community basis. Is that a better approach? I do not imagine that approach would bring the sense of fear if that was how it was managed and rolled out.

I have to ask Ms Lane a question about the goldfish policy. What was that about? Is that an actual thing? If it is, can she tell the committee what is in it? The main question for all the representatives is whether they believe it would be useful if the county childcare committees were fundamental in the roll-out of this process.

Chairman: I am going to start with Ms Lane because she had indicated earlier. Then we will hear from Ms Burke, Ms Quinn and Ms Byrne. Can they please be brief in their responses?

Ms Ida Lane: The goldfish policy is a simple thing. A Tusla representative came in and saw that we have a goldfish. Questions were asked. Will the children touch it? Who cleans it? Who feeds the fish? It was pointed out that we can get all sorts of illnesses from that. The list was extraordinary. We were told we have to have a goldfish policy and that the fish had to be put up out of reach and sealed off. The children can look but not touch it. They never did touch it anyway because I am careful. The point was we had to have the policy written out. It is same with the hen. We were told the hen cannot run around the garden. She is in an enclosed run. The children were not allowed touch it or do anything. That was it simply.

Deputy Ward discussed the national childcare scheme. Payment under the scheme is hourly based but childminders charge per day or maybe per half day. This has been a problem with the scheme. Perhaps a parent has not been taking the full day for a time and the money has been recouped by the Department or Pobal or whoever. That is causing a problem for full-day carers. It would be a major problem for a childminder who is expecting €200 to come in for a week if €20 or €30 is taken back. This has to be reported. That is a big problem with the NCS especially where childminders are small operators and every cent earned is important for the family income.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: I will address the question on county childcare committees. It is definitely important that childminders have local support. It is badly needed. We should not wed it to any particular organisation. A structural review is going on at the moment of all the structures within the early years sector. We do not know what it will look like in future. Support for childminders can be housed in many different places. I agree with the premise that it should mean local as well as national support for childminders.

Ms Marian Quinn: I definitely agree with the point on local supports. I agree with Ms Orbinski Burke in terms of not saying necessarily where it is housed. People are involved in providing supports in mentoring or guidance on quality and having particular standards for childminders. There needs to be expertise in childminding. We can see it in centre-based assessments. We can have mentors who are experienced and qualified. Perhaps they are working with those aged over three. Perhaps the mentoring and support given to those working with

children under three years is not as strong as it could be for that age group. The same needs to happen with childminding. It is a distinct way of engaging with children. As with early years services, there is a risk of “schoolification”. Similarly, there is a risk centralisation - if we can call it that - of childminding services rather than the local approach from people who have expertise in childminding.

Ms Frances Byrne: We agree with the previous speakers. The local and expert eyes are important. It is also important to acknowledge that the county childcare committees or CCCs, as we all affectionately call them, are already doing this. There are development officers doing it and offering the service. It is not a secret that there are ongoing discussions in respect of workforce development. It is something that has come out of the First 5 strategy in strengthening links between smaller settings and childminders locally. Certainly, if there is to be commonality around qualification, even though it might only be a small part of what is expected of centre-based assessments, there would be opportunities for training and co-learning. That is not to take away from the point made by Ms Quinn. I entirely agree about particular kinds of expertise. However, there is a good deal to be said for educators, no matter which hat they are wearing or what they do all day, to get together for training and so on. Certainly, in respect of shared services, if childminding comes more into regulation then I absolutely agree with point on the local expertise.

Chairman: We are moving on to Senator Lynn Ruane. Can you confirm your location, Senator, please?

Senator Lynn Ruane: I am in Leinster House. My apologies - I am jumping in and out of two committees at the same time. It seems that in the parts I have jumped in for many of my questions have come up and have been answered.

I will hone in a little on what is coming up for me in some conversations. I relied on childminders especially when I was earning little and when I wanted to go to college. I reckon there is a need for professionalisation in terms of the safety of children. However, there is a fear of over-professionalisation and a judgment of what childcare should look like. It comes up for me as an issue in communities where there might be limited literacy or early school leaving. There are all sorts of fears around Tusla and institutions. We have all these things acting in the background but they are no less capable or less able to be childminders for neighbours or friends or the daughters of friends. That is how I availed of childcare. Many of the childminders I used would shy away from being part of any regulated system or from registering with Tusla. How can the action plan operate in a way that we can recognise the professionalism of the work without over-professionalising it to the point where women and mothers, especially those who are least well off and in low paid jobs, are not completely excluded from extra financial supports? Is the balance failing in the action plan? How is this panning out? How can we ensure that women and one-parent families can be supported? How can we ensure that we do not impose some sort of ideal or fairy-tale idea of what some person’s house is supposed to look like when a childminder is minding a neighbour’s child? I am concerned that my scenario is being replicated throughout our communities. I am mindful of the difference that having access to childcare supports would have made to my life. I definitely would have been caught out and would have been unable to access centralised childcare or pay for private childcare. There are many people in limbo in that sense. Does the proposed action plan adequately address the barriers faced by childminders? Some of them may register but some might have fears of registering. How do we alleviate those fears? People are afraid they will be means tested or that there will be on-the-spot checks on their home. Not every community would be into that. Sometimes

that fear is not grounded in the childminding ability but simply in the lives and the environment in which people grow up and live. It is not so much a question but more of a concern that has come up. Perhaps Ms Heeney or Ms Byrne could reply to that point.

Ms Frances Byrne: I am happy to answer that question. All of the concerns raised by Senator Ruane are exactly the issues that need to be teased out, and we need to do that quickly. No more than the issue that was brought up in regard to gender, there absolutely are concerns about ensuring that all families, all childminders and all potential childminders are involved. Of course there are issues of concern that would extend to mothers. I say “mothers” because, as we said earlier, it is largely to mothers that all of this decision-making falls. I include in that mothers in direct provision, for example, and mothers looking to come out of direct provision.

The Senator has raised a really important point and I very much welcome her comments. We use the word “diversity” loosely but it is important that equality is front and centre in all of its forms and visibilities. There are communities where we have already seen issues in regard to the national childcare scheme, for instance, where people who are not working have had to seek sponsorship and there was huge fear around having to register with Tusla. As the Senator said, that fear is not necessarily based on anything in particular and there was no suggestion that anything untoward was going on. It was just a fear people had. It is very good that the Government and the Department recognised that issue and expanded the list of sponsored organisations. That type of thinking will need to happen in terms of the development of the national action plan.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: I completely understand the Senator’s concerns and I really welcome her raising them. There is such a wide variety of childminders that every family should be able to find one who replicates their family setting. I completely agree that children should be cared for locally. An issue of concern to Childminding Ireland is that all the barriers and thresholds to entering into childminding would be tackled and the system made as open and inclusive as possible. With great respect to everybody who is working hard in all the various groups, there tends to be a self-selecting cohort of people involved in those groups, often people who have been through education systems and all the rest of it and are used to working around a table and so on. We need to be completely dedicated to ensuring that every single communication that goes out and every single role profile and course that is created is as open, broad and welcoming as possible and uses plain English. Sometimes people mistake the desire to professionalise with using language and terminology that can become a barrier. Professionalism is a very subjective thing. I am hugely passionate about this issue and I assure the Senator of my very best efforts to ensure the whole system is as open and inclusive as possible.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Before beginning, I confirm that I am here in the convention centre, on the banks of the Liffey. I welcome the witnesses and thank them for taking the time to attend the meeting, especially Ms Walsh, who is from Cornanool outside Castlebar. She is very welcome.

The early learning and childcare sectors, along with childminding services, have shown real leadership during the pandemic in remaining open and caring for the children of essential workers at a time of real anxiety across our society. We must acknowledge that. As someone from a rural constituency, I understand the challenges facing parents in accessing childminding and childcare services. It can be extremely difficult, as other members referenced. It is not always feasible to have centre-based providers within a particular geographic area. We need a variety of both home-based and centre-based provision. It is also important that we keep children locally. Having children cared for locally feeds into the preschools, which is hugely important

for enrolment numbers in rural national schools. If parents are commuting to nearby towns and must take their children to be minded there, there is a much increased likelihood that those children will go on to attend a primary school there rather than the one down the road from their home.

I have a question for Ms Orbinski Burke on a specific point concerning her opening statement. She said that Childminding Ireland's core objectives are to support and represent childminders but it is chronically restricted in its efforts to do so due to underfunding. Will she outline what level of resources or funding would be necessary to support the organisation under the regulatory and support system for the sector in the years ahead? I would also like to hear from the stakeholders present on their experience to date with the steering group that is overseeing the implementation of the action plan. Do they feel they are getting the required representation and recognition within the decision-making process and being consulted effectively as we move to the implementation stages, including in respect of the workforce development planning process?

Chairman: I was going to ask Ms Orbinski Burke to respond first but there seems to be a technical issue with her connection. I will go instead to Ms Heeney.

Ms Teresa Heeney: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I will not address the one he specifically put to Ms Orbinski Burke. One of the things we need to be in these discussions is ambitious for the early years and childcare sector in Ireland. As the Deputy correctly pointed out, our sector has really delivered throughout the pandemic. We must not forget that and it certainly must not be forgotten in the forthcoming budget. We are in the middle of discussions about a new funding model and a workforce development plan. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, shared with us in the Dáil a few weeks ago that he is hopeful of an increase in the budget for this sector arising out of the findings of those engagements.

One of the points I want to make is that we would never plan an education system for primary schools without seeking to ensure that children do not have to travel far to attend school. It is not beyond us to plan similarly for younger children. We need a local planning mechanism that has an appropriate line of sight on the number of childminders working within a local area and also takes into account the number of playschools and centre-based settings. This would enable us to know the capacity of each individual rural area, education district or whatever measure we want to use and allow us to plan for an expansion of the sector, whether by increasing the number of childminders or centre-based settings. We absolutely must be ambitious for the sector and plan properly in order to ensure a large, diverse mix of provision in each local area.

On the Deputy's question regarding the steering group for the implementation plan, my understanding is that the group has not yet been convened. It is up to all of us to ensure the voices that need to be around the table will be accommodated. I agree with my colleagues that childminders should be at that table and that we must get a good range of voices. I thank the Deputy for his question and I hope that answers it to some extent.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: I apologise for not being able to respond a few minutes ago. I had a bit of Internet trouble. I thank Deputy Dillon for his question, which I really appreciate. He asked about constraints on the work of Childminding Ireland. We are completely under-resourced. We have one full-time and four part-time members of staff. We engage regularly, at least weekly, with 4,000 childminding contacts. Our staff are highly skilled, dedicated, passionate about childminding and very overworked. Staff include former childminders. It is very difficult even in terms of attending meetings. It is outrageous, especially during this time

of change in the childminding sector, that the national association of childminding, which is the authentic voice of childminding in the sector, is completely under-resourced. We need additional funding to be able to support childminders properly. I thank the Deputy for his question.

Ms Marian Quinn: On the funding and what will be required, one of the estimates, which is probably the best-case scenario in terms of the number of people who are brought into registration and those families who can access it, is €51 million per year. When we look at the budget, the Government has indicated that it will at least double the spending on early childhood education and care, and school-aged childcare over the next ten years. A significant portion of that must go towards childminding. Another significant portion must go to school-aged childcare, along with continuing to resolve the issues in centre-based services, where they are experiencing a staffing crisis and increasing costs.

The statement in the action plan is reasonable, which must be acknowledged, but it states that the phases and how the action plan progresses is budget dependent. This is worrying in relation to the potential stop-starting, as was mentioned earlier, and then having to cherry-pick areas to develop because of a lack of funding. In centre-based service, many difficulties have happened as a result of sequencing and out of sequencing of policy implementation. That is something we must be careful of in childminding. If it is to be budget dependent, we should not cherry-pick in an order that creates perverse consequences or difficulties in the sector. The plan that is tied to the budget must be clearly thought out.

Chairman: We have some additional time. Do members of the committee or witnesses feel there was something they would have liked to have come in on but did not get the opportunity to do so? I call Ms Burke first and then Ms Lane.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: I will go back to the regulatory question. We need a straightforward regulatory system. I know it relates to Childminding Ireland membership criteria as well. The package covers insurance for childminding, Garda vetting, child safeguarding, a code of ethics, paediatric first aid, and some instruction in child development and nutrition. It could be something akin to that. If one keeps it simple and makes it accessible, it is more likely to work.

There are plans for continuing professional development and opportunities for people to learn other practical skills that will support them in their childminding work. The threshold should be as accessible as possible. Obviously, child safety is of primary concern.

Ms Ida Lane: Going back to the point made about childminders working with centre-based professionals, I have experienced it the other way around. I had centre-based professionals come to my home. They were taken aback by the freedom the children had, how relaxed, engaged and happy they were and how they were playing around and working together along with the amount of equipment I had invested in over the years, including books. The professionals found it completely different from their crèches. Instead of us having to go out to crèches - how that would work, I have no idea, if one had to drag a load of children along - perhaps they should come the other way. They could learn from us to make it more homely. They went back to their very large crèches with major ideas from my home. Maybe it could go the other way around.

Ms Teresa Heeney: I agree with Ms Lane that there is much to be learned from each other; there is no doubt about that. I have said this already so forgive me for repeating myself, but we must be ambitious discussing this. There are more children in childminder homes than in any

centre. The State has a responsibility to make sure that the people working in those settings and those children are doing the best they possibly can.

It is important that we acknowledge that quality cannot be assumed. We should not assume that everyone has the same understanding of what quality looks like. While there may be good quality in one setting, it may not be objective quality and we have seen, to our cost, evidence of that over the years. It is important to inspect these services and to provide the supports that are needed for this sector.

It is brilliant that we are having this discussion. Our colleagues in Scotland and Northern Ireland are registered. They have achieved this ambition for children. I welcome today's discussion and I look forward to getting through phase 1 anyway, and then moving on to phase 2 and 3 of this plan.

Chairman: Before I wrap it up, I have one basic question. I know there are approximately 80 registered childminders, but what is the approximate number of children who are being cared for by childminders, even anecdotally? Do any of the witnesses from the organisations know this? They can send on the information if they do not have it to hand.

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: Do you mean the number of children who are minded by the 80 Tusla-registered childminders?

Chairman: In general, is there an approximate number? I know we do not know exactly. We know there are 80 childminders registered but is there a rough idea, even anecdotally, of how many children are being looked after by childminders?

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: On average, 3.5.

Chairman: Is that 3.5 children per childminder?

Ms Bernadette Orbinski Burke: Yes, on average. It depends on the childminding setting because some will have children full time and others will have children part time for different hours, on different days. From our survey, I think it worked out at approximately 3.5 on average. We can get back to the committee with that figure, if it would be helpful.

Chairman: Yes, thank you. Ms Heeney wanted to come in on that point.

Ms Teresa Heeney: The national action plan suggests that 82,000 children are being looked after by the 15,000 childminders. We all think there is a higher number of childminders than that. It is quite a conservative figure. Using the mathematics used in the action plan, that is the number we are looking at.

Chairman: I acknowledge the role of the childminders. It is extremely difficult and demanding work for them and anyone who works in the early years setting. In the past year and a half, we have seen with Covid, everyone in that sector has stepped up to the plate. They and the work they do has been invaluable. It is a sector I would like to see receiving more focus even in relation to wages in the sector. It is great that the committee has an opportunity to examine this. We are beginning by looking at childminding but we have a number of upcoming sessions on early years and it is important that we are looking at this. I acknowledge everybody working in the sector because it is not an easy task. It has been particularly difficult over the past year and a half and I want to put this on record.

I sincerely thank all of the witnesses. It is a bit more difficult with people having to use

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Zoom and it is not like before when we could have people in the room. I thank everyone for bearing with us. I also thank the committee members for their questions and for sticking to their time limits. It is great we were able to get everything in within the two hour slot, which can be difficult some days. My sincere thanks to everybody. Is it agreed that the opening statements will be published on the Oireachtas website? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.10 p.m. *sine die*.