

Provision of quality early childcare services (Czech Republic, 10-11 November 2015)

Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland¹

Marion Martin

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

Avril McMonagle

Childcare Committees Ireland (CCI)

A Vision for Children Growing Up in Ireland

The vision for children growing up in Ireland is captured in “Better Outcomes Brighter Futures”, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (DCYA, 2014):

“Our vision is to make Ireland the best small country in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.”

Developing the Childcare Infrastructure in Ireland

The past two decades have seen a number of landmark initiatives and the publication of a series of significant reports in the area of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. Such initiatives and developments represent something of a paradigm shift in Irish child and family policy. It is now well-established that investment in the early years improves outcomes for children and families and that such investment can support children in benefiting more from school as well as compensating, to a degree, for inequalities in other factors related to disadvantage and parental income.

Over the decade 2000 to 2010, the State, initially in partnership with the EU, invested 425 million EUR to create childcare places throughout Ireland. From the years 2006-2010 the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) was the state vehicle for investment in the sector. The NCIP succeeded and built further on the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006 which provided capital funding, staffing grants and quality programmes. The programme aimed to provide a proactive response to the development of quality childcare supports and services, planned for and developed locally and centred on the needs of the child and the family. Over the period 2000-2010, over 65,000 early childhood places were created.

Currently, there are a number of explicit aims of the Government’s investment in early years care and education in Ireland:

- To promote optimal development for all children and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children, through the provision of quality early childhood care and education services.

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- To enable parents to prepare for a return to paid employment by participating in training, education and other activation measures.
- To support families, particularly those in low-paid employment, in making work pay.

Implicit in these objectives is a further objective of poverty reduction. Many of the current childcare funding programmes work in conjunction with other income support measures (both universal such as Child Benefit and targeted such as job seekers, family income supplement and lone parents' payments) and are being utilised to leverage labour market activation and reduce the reliance on income supports.

Key Statistics

In 2014, there were an estimated 435,747 children aged 0-5 years and 458,665 children aged 6-12 years living in Ireland. Consistent poverty was on a downward trajectory for children and working age adults until 2008, however, the increase in deprivation has seen consistent poverty rates for children and working age adults rise since then. About 1 in every 14 (7 %) children aged 0-5 were living in consistent poverty in 2013, while for children aged 5-11 the consistent poverty rate was 11 % - about one in nine children in this age group.

In response, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020) has set a target of lifting at least 70,000 of these children out of poverty by 2020.

Women's participation in the labour force and the relationship with childcare provision

In 2008, there were 921,600 women in employment in Ireland, an employment rate of 60.5 %. However, during the economic crisis the figure dropped significantly, falling to 55.2 % by 2012. By Q1/2015, the rate increased slightly to 56.9 %. As regards female unemployment, the rate was as low as 4 % during Ireland's boom years but it more than doubled during the crisis to 8.3 % in 2009 and rose to a peak of 11.4 % in 2013 before falling back to 9.9 % in 2014.

Maternity and Parental Leave Arrangements

Since 2007, women have been entitled to 26 weeks' paid maternity leave, and an additional 16 weeks' unpaid leave. Maternity Benefit is a payment for employed and self-employed people who meet the PRSI contribution criteria for the relevant tax year. Budget 2016 announced the introduction of 2 weeks paid paternity leave to commence in September 2016, as Ireland did not previously have a paternity entitlement for fathers.

Patterns of Parental, Formal and/or Informal Care in Ireland

Childcare provision in Ireland developed mainly on a demand and supply basis and as a result it is somewhat uncoordinated, and can be variable in quality. Beyond preschool, provision for 0-3 year olds in Ireland is largely available on the private market place with costs difficult to regulate. Further steps need to be taken to draw the non-formal sector closer to the standards and requirements for the formal sector. A stepped programme of reforms migrating from voluntary through to mandatory requirements has been signposted for development.

According to data drawn from Growing Up in Ireland, a national longitudinal study which collects data at three different ages, at nine months of age, 62 % of children were cared for at home by a parent and just 11 % were in centre-based settings (i.e. formal care). By age 3, the percentage cared for at home by a parent fell to



50 % while the percentage in centre-based settings rose to 27 %. By five years of age, the majority of children in the infant cohort (who had not yet started primary school) were cared for at home by a parent (i.e. 63 %) and 10 % were in centre-based care.

Affordability

The choice of childcare arrangements (parental, formal and/or informal care) is influenced by a large number of factors. However, affordability is often cited as among the most relevant. Ireland has the fourth highest net cost of childcare as a percentage of family income across OECD countries.

A nationwide report commissioned by the Donegal County Childcare Committee (Indecon, 2013) found that typical full-time childcare costs range from 730 EUR to 1,100 EUR per month, with a two-child family likely to spend 16,500 EUR annually. Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) data indicates that in Quarter 1 of 2015 there were 38,900 persons wanting to work but not seeking employment because “suitable care services for children are not available or affordable”. This suggests there is a considerable cohort of parents that could be potentially attracted back in to the labour force if quality and affordable childcare provisions were improved.

There is increasing recognition that a lack of affordable childcare in Ireland has enormous social consequences especially in terms of preventing children and their families from breaking out of poverty, and for gender equality (National Women’s Council, 2005).

Initiatives to Develop Regulation and Support Quality Improvement

During the past decade, the rapid expansion of early years provision in Ireland has been accompanied by increasing demands for regulation, standard and curriculum development as well as professionalisation of the early years workforce.

The development of *Síolta* – The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and *Aistear* – The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) were important milestones in establishing quality and curriculum for the early years which went beyond the basic regulatory framework set in the Child Care Regulations under the Child Care Act, 1991.

To advance and support the provision of childcare facilities on a local level, City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) were established in 2001. Funded by the DCYA, 30 of these organisations operate across Ireland and over the last 15 years have been at the centre of all state developments and initiatives aimed at supporting the early year sector. In addition to supporting the administration of all Government funding programmes for childcare, City and County Childcare Committees act as the local ‘one stop shop’ for early childhood services, childminders and parents looking for support with quality development, HR, governance, financial sustainability and continuing professional development. Collectively, City and County Childcare Committees have a national reach into all 4,300 early childhood services across Ireland.

Better Start – National Quality Development Service

Initiated in 2014, Better Start encompasses a range of quality development supports offered collectively by all organisations funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs including Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. This collective quality development initiative provides a valuable mentoring, advice and support service to early years services.



The Better Start initiative also provides the first nationally coordinated Early Years Specialist Service aimed at delivering intensive quality mentoring supports to early years services. Better Start has been hugely welcomed by the sector as a very practical resource to assist practitioners and services. Its positive supporting role works well in parallel with the inspection regimes.

Regulation and Inspection

Under the Child Care Act provisions, Part 12 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (amended Part VII of the Child Care Act 1991) new powers for the registration of early years services and the making of regulations for the purpose of securing the health, safety and welfare and promoting the development of children attending early years services are provided.

Education-focussed Inspections

Education-focused inspections have been established by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) with the support of DCYA to support a stronger focus on the quality of early years educational provision. The DES Inspectorate will work with services to acknowledge good educational practice and to identify poor practice, or practice in need of improvement. The DES team will encourage the development of professional self-evaluation processes guided by Aistear and Siolta. In its initial phase, 2015/16, this new inspection system will focus on the quality of provision in the ECCE programme.

Training the Workforce

Funding for the ECCE programme has also, since 2010, incentivised the development of a higher education graduate cohort in the early years workforce by offering a higher capitation grant to services where the lead staff have achieved a bachelor degree in early Childhood Care and Education or equivalent. Today 28 % of services on contract to deliver the ECCE programme receive higher capitation grant.

In 2014 the DCYA established a Learner Fund of 3m EUR for the period 2014-2015 to support the up-skilling of the existing workforce to achieve minimum mandatory qualifications at NFQ level five and NFQ level 6 on the National Framework for Qualifications. A continued investment in an early years Learner Fund will form part of future investment.

Existing Provision and Investment

As it stands, the annual spend by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on childcare and early education has been in the region of 0.2 % of GDP in recent years. The OECD, in drawing international comparisons on public expenditure on childcare and early education, adjusts for cross-national differences in the compulsory age of entry into primary school. Therefore, for countries where children enter school at age 5, such as Ireland, expenditure on childcare and early education is adjusted by adding up the expenditure corresponding to children aged five who are enrolled in primary school. When Ireland's expenditure is adjusted in this way, the OECD reports that Ireland actually spends 0.5 % of GDP.

Current Investment and Budget 2016

The Irish Government currently provides approximately 260 EUR million annually to early years and school-age care and education services. The majority of this funding (i.e. approximately 246 EUR million) is directed towards three programmes, which aim to improve accessibility, affordability and quality. These programmes – the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, the Community



Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, and the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and support provision for more than 100,000 children each year.

The recent childcare package announced as part of Budget 2016, sees and added investment of 85m EUR towards a number of measures. According to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, this represents a good 'first step' on the road to achieving affordable, high quality childcare that is accessible for all children.

The ECCE programme was introduced in January 2010 for an annual investment of 175m EUR. Almost every pre-school service (more than 4,300) in the state is participating, with up to 68,000 children – or 95 % of the eligible age cohort participating. As announced in Budget 2016, from September 2016, every child in Ireland will be able to start pre-school at age three, and to remain in pre-school until they start primary school. Children will be able to enrol in pre-school at three different points in the year – September, January and April.

The CCS programme provides funding to childcare services to enable them to provide quality childcare at reduced rates to disadvantaged and low-income working parents. About 25,000 children are catered for under the CCS each year in almost 900 community childcare services. Parents qualify as disadvantaged or low-income on the basis of means-tested entitlements.

Under a suite of **Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) Programmes**, childcare services are contracted to provide childcare places to qualifying parents, trainees or students. This includes a Childcare Education and Training Support Programme to provide subsidised childcare, an Afterschool Child Care programme supports low-income and unemployed people to take up a job, increase their days of employment or take up a place on a Department of Social Protection Employment programme. In addition, the Community Employment Childcare programme is targeted specifically at participants in the Community Employment (CE) schemes operated by the Department of Social Protection.

Budget 2016 announced the development of a single Affordable Childcare programme to provide working families with good quality childcare at a cost they can afford to be in place by 2017. This single programme will replace existing targeted measures Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), along with the Training & Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes, comprising After-School Childcare (ASCC), Childcare Education & Training Support (CETS), and Community Employment Childcare (CEC), providing a new simplified subsidy programme, provided through both community/not-for-profit and private childcare providers.

During 2016, a suite of supports will be phased in to enable children with disabilities to fully participate in, and reap the benefits of, quality pre-school care and education. The proposed model focuses on the developmental level of children with disabilities, their functional ability and their needs. It does not focus on diagnosis, and in any event, it recognises that many children may not have a formal diagnosis at the time of presenting to pre-school.

The following graphic represents a summary of the agreed model. It demonstrates seven levels of support to enable the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the ECCE Programme. The model progresses from a number of universal supports for all children with a disability (i.e. Levels 1 to 4) to more targeted supports (i.e. Levels 5 to 7) for children with complex needs arising from a disability.



A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme
for Children with a Disability



It is estimated that the above model will cost 13.75m EUR in 2016, an additional 8.3m EUR in 2017 and an additional 1m EUR in 2018 and in 2019. By 2019, the annual cost of the model is expected to be approximately 24m EUR.

Budget 2016 also announced a funding toward a number of measures to build the quality of ECCE provision, including:

- An audit of quality across early years services. It is envisaged that regular audits over time will measure the impact of investment on higher quality.
- Independent accreditation under the Síolta programme to provide an objective quality mark.
- Enhanced inspection: an expanded childcare inspection team to monitor compliance with new childcare regulations to be introduced.

Conclusion

Ireland has progressed significantly with regard to the provision of childcare services. Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020) recognises that the investment in children is in our collective social and economic interest. It sets out a changed approach which focuses on investment in early years care and education and implementation measures to support and regulate improvement in the quality of services. However, a number of key challenges face the continued development of the early years services in Ireland.

The immediate issues of affordability, accessibility and quality are affecting parents and families today. Whilst at the moment the initial focus is on the formal sector, future plans as regards regulation should include the informal pre-school sector (in particular childminders) as well as after-school provision.

There are clear drivers and much evidence to support investment in the area of early childhood care and education and after-school care. Both nationally and internationally, the Irish Government have already made commitments to advancing the dual objectives of improved child outcomes and labour market participation.



The challenge for Ireland is to ensure the objectives of supporting children's outcomes and supporting parents in terms of parental choice of care and removing barriers to work are met. Based on this, Government policy aims to take an approach, over a number of years, which focuses on three strands:

- Incremental investment in fee subsidisation through existing and new programmes;
- Ensuring adequate supply to meet future demand;
- Embedding quality in the sector.

These aims will require increased and sustained investment by the state in the coming years to transform the vision captured in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures into a tangible reality for all children growing up in Ireland.



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