

**Start Strong**  
*(formerly, Irish Childcare Policy Network)*

**Submission on a Workforce Development Plan  
 for the early childhood care and education sector**

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission on a Workforce Development Plan for the early childhood care and education sector. Start Strong was established in 2004 as the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN), which brought together people and organisations concerned with childcare and early learning in Ireland, to influence and advocate for policy development and appropriate investment in children's care and education. In 2008 ICPN was awarded a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies to progress this work, which will result later in 2009 in the formal launch of Start Strong.

**Changing practice environments**

While having a Workforce Development Plan will in itself be a positive step forwards, we believe that it should form part of a comprehensive, 10-year national plan for early childhood care and education. If the Workforce Development Plan is to bring about substantial change, it needs to start from a clearly articulated vision for the sector. Start Strong believes this vision should be one in which all young children in Ireland are supported to reach their potential through high quality care and education in all settings, including full day-care, sessional and childminding services, as well as in their own homes.

The years from birth to 6 are critically important in children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical and language development. Care and early education can make a large positive contribution to children's development, but only when they are of sufficient quality. Research evidence shows that quality in early childhood care and education services depends on having highly skilled and trained staff, and a high ratio of staff to children. We therefore believe the Workforce Development Plan should aim to develop a graduate-led, professional workforce in order to achieve high quality standards in the education and care of young children. The aim of achieving a professional workforce should apply to:

- All ages of children. There should be no distinction drawn between a pre-school sector for 3–5 year-olds for which educational qualifications are required, and a childcare sector for 0–3 year olds for which training requirements are either absent or are primarily concerned with care and safety. Those working with children of any age from birth to school entry and beyond should be concerned with *both* the education / development of children *and* with their care.
- All settings. Quality services and supports matter for all children in all settings. The same need for a professional workforce with training that integrates education and development with caring applies to childminders as much as it does to staff in sessional services and full-day crèches.

Initiatives have been in place for a number of years to raise standards in the sector, and the Consultation Document points to some evidence of success in raising qualification levels. It remains the case, however, that too many workers have no or minimal training and qualifications, and that there is insufficient recognition of

professionalism within the workforce, with low wages and poor career development opportunities. To achieve an effective transition to a professionalised workforce will require a more proactive approach by Government, with stronger regulations and significant public investment.

In this regard, we support the principle – introduced in the new Free Pre-School Year – of making Government funding conditional on qualification requirements as a means of raising standards, and we believe this principle should be extended to services for children under 3. In moving to the next stage of development of the workforce, a range of additional measures will be required, including:

- Minimum training and qualification requirements for all staff in all services. This should apply to both centre-based and childminding services, and to services for children of all ages from birth to school-entry, not just the pre-school year. Minimum requirements should also be established for trainers themselves.
- Grants and subsidies for current and prospective workers to participate in training courses and continuing professional development, along with a robust system for the recognition of prior learning and skills.
- Incentives for service-providers and parents to require more highly qualified staff. We support the principle recently announced that a higher rate of capitation grant in the Free Pre-School Year will be available for services with more highly qualified staff.
- Measures to raise awareness among parents of the importance of quality, of the link between quality and qualified staff, and of what different qualification levels mean.

### **The demand for education and training**

The level of training and qualifications among care and education workers with young children is varied. On the one hand, it remains the case that many in the workforce – both centre-based staff and childminders – have no qualifications or only basic training. On the other hand, there is a growing number of staff with higher qualifications, including at degree level, and there is also a significant number of skilled and experienced staff whose qualifications do not match their expertise.

The variability of standards across the sector partly reflects the lack of career development pathways. While some workers do choose to progress to higher levels of qualifications, the rewards for doing so tend to be minimal. Services may have little scope to raise wages for those with higher qualifications, and there are few specialist roles in the sector.

At root, ‘childcare’ is a low-status occupation that is seen as appropriate employment for unskilled and unqualified workers, in spite of the importance of the years from birth to school-entry in children’s development. The prominence of the Community Employment scheme within the sector has encouraged this view, through indicating to potential entrants to the workforce that childcare is an entry-route into the wider labour market rather than being a profession in its own right.

The current profile of the ECCE workforce therefore creates the need to both:

- Support the professionalisation of the sector, through: upskilling the potential and existing workforce; encouraging continuing professional development; and supporting the growth of career development pathways.

- Recognise professionalism within the sector, through: recognition of prior learning and skills; raising the status of the profession; and improving wages.

We support the introduction in the Free Pre-School Year of a requirement that Pre-School Year Leaders in participating services should be qualified to Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications, but we believe that the Workforce Development Plan should continue raising the bar over the coming years, with the aim of achieving a graduate-led, professional workforce in all services within 10 years. We accept that the level of qualification initially required is realistic given the low base from which the sector is starting, but the Workforce Development Plan should make clear that the responsibility and skill required in the care and education of young children of all ages (not just the pre-school year) implies the need for a higher level of qualifications.

We also support the recent decision by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to pay a higher capitation grant to services where a Pre-School Leader is qualified to Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications and Pre-School Assistants to Level 5. However, we believe this principle should apply to all types of service and all ages of children, not just sessional pre-school services, as quality standards need to be raised across all services. In particular, there is no reason to exclude full day-care services from this measure.

In moving towards a professional workforce, particular challenges arise in relation to childminders and CE workers:

*Childminders*. The Workforce Development Plan should be just as concerned with childminders as it is with centre-based services, as such a high proportion of children are cared for by childminders and quality is just as important for them. The proportion of childminders with relevant training or qualifications is unknown. A survey of members of Childminding Ireland in 2008 found that 58% had accredited training, and 85% a first aid certificate, but these figures are unlikely to be representative of childminders nationally.

Few childminders are required to be within the regulatory system, with fewer than 300 notified to the HSE. In contrast, the 1999 National Childcare Strategy estimated that there were then 37,900 paid childminders. Even if there is a significant margin of error in this figure, the number is likely to be larger than the number of staff in centre-based services, which the Workforce Development Plan Consultation Document estimates as 21,000. What is more, there is no reason to think that the number of childminders is falling. The latest data from the CSO's Quarterly National Household Survey indicates that the proportion of households with pre-school children using childminders remained constant between 2002 and 2007, at 13%.

If childminders are to form a central strand in the Workforce Development Plan, it is essential that they are brought within the scope of regulated, supported services. This could involve ensuring that regulations and training are appropriate to childminding settings, moving from voluntary notification to compulsory registration, and further enhancing the supports provided by Childminding Advisory Officers.

*Community Employment (CE)*. If the workforce is to be professionalized, CE schemes should either be phased out of childcare services or at least be always supernumerary, i.e. CE workers should not provide the direct care and education of young children and should not be included when calculating services' adult/child ratios. In doing this, however, it should be recognised that many community childcare services depend on CE schemes for their financial sustainability. According to the

Consultation Document (p.29) there are 1,760 ring-fenced CE childcare places, i.e. approaching 10% of all centre-based staff. Measures within the Workforce Development Plan to end reliance on CE should therefore involve accompanying measures to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of community services.

### **Sectoral standards for awards in ECCE**

While there should be some room for variation in the content of training courses to accommodate specific needs, professionalisation also requires that there should be a high degree of standardisation and transparency in qualification levels, the content of courses and training requirements, and that there should be procedures for the regular review of education and training courses:

- Course content and qualification requirements should reflect the fact that all those working with young children – from birth to 6 and in any setting – are concerned with both the education / development of children and their care.
- There should be consistency across training providers and awarding bodies in the standards required for different qualification levels. There is currently considerable variation in learning requirements.
- The Workforce Development Plan should also provide for consistency in the standards and qualifications required of trainers themselves.
- Transparency is needed in relation to standards and in relation to the status of different training courses, so that both trainees and employers can easily recognise the validity of courses and certificates.
- Standards and courses must be adjusted to reflect Síolta and Aistear, and the Workforce Development Plan should include procedures for regular review to ensure that courses are valid and remain up-to-date in terms of professional good practice.
- There is a need for further development of training in diversity awareness and in how to respond to the diverse care and education needs of individual children, whether children from religious minorities; children who speak a different language at home; Traveller children; children with disabilities; and children with emotional or behavioural challenges. More specialised training in these areas could lead to the development of specialist roles within the early years workforce to support children with additional needs.

### **Access and participation in training programmes**

A range of incentives and supports are needed to facilitate existing and potential new workers in the sector to participate in training programmes and gain qualifications:

- Grants and subsidies for trainees. Significant financial investment by Government will be required if there is to be a step-change in the level of qualifications in the sector, as the current low level of wages does not provide an incentive for a sufficient number of workers to finance their own training. The cost of participating in training includes not only the direct cost of enrolling on courses but also forgone earnings, and the level of subsidy needs to reflect this.
- Helping services to support professional development. If childcare services are to facilitate their workers to take part in training and continuing professional development, the Workforce Development Plan will need both to

introduce new requirements for employers and at the same time to provide financial supports for employers to help them cope with staff absences for training. An example of such an approach would be to make it a requirement of the Free Pre-School Year that all participating services set aside a certain number of days each year for in-service training, but to finance this by extending the number of days funded by the Free Pre-School Year scheme.

- Recognition of prior learning. There is a need for a robust system for recognition of prior learning, experience and skills, to ensure that there is effective acknowledgement of the professionalism that is already present in the sector and so that existing skilled workers are not put at a disadvantage relative to newly qualified but inexperienced entrants to the workforce.
- More flexible courses. It will only be possible to raise qualification levels if training courses are compatible with continuing employment. The Workforce Development Plan should ensure that a sufficient number of courses in all parts of the country (including via distance learning) are available part-time and on a modular basis, at all levels from Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications to degree level. Flexible courses also need to be subsidised on the same basis as full-time courses, with grants for degree programmes extended to students who wish to enrol in part-time degree courses.
- Including childminders. The Workforce Development Plan should include targeted measures to facilitate childminders to take part in accredited training leading to recognised qualifications. Measures should include: dedicated training programmes that are specific to childminders' needs and compatible with their working hours; grants to support childminders' participation in training; and measures to support childminders to move into the formal childcare sector. The further development of childminder networks may be an effective mechanism for engaging childminders and providing training and continuing professional development.
- Supports for diversity. The Workforce Development Plan should include measures to increase diversity in the workforce, including greater representation of men.

### **Supply of education and training places**

See above on Access and Effective Participation, especially the need for modular, part-time courses available in all areas of the country, including via distance learning.

### **Retention of qualified staff**

Measures to retain qualified workers are essential for the professionalisation of the workforce. Such measures are especially important at a time when the demand for childcare workers is likely to increase, given the current growth in the birth-rate in the country and the critical importance of keeping child/staff ratios low.

The level of wages is the single most important factor. A recent review of international research on child development concluded that wages are the primary determinant of staff turnover and that there is a strong relationship between wages and childcare quality in both centre-based services and childminding (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Washington DC, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, p.317). An initial step in the Workforce Development Plan should be the introduction of a national pay scale, as called for by the 1999 National Childcare Strategy (p.32) and in the NESF report, *Early Childhood Care and Education* (p.92).

The Workforce Development Plan also needs to promote career development pathways in the sector, so that workers entering the profession can have confidence that the experience and qualifications they gain will be rewarded through moving into positions of greater professional responsibility. The *Model Framework* presents a ladder of professional grades from Basic Practitioner through to Expert Practitioner. The Free Pre-School Year has begun the process of embedding this framework in services. The Workforce Development Plan needs to show how the framework will be taken forwards so that career development pathways are structured and clear for all those working in the sector:

- Within the Free Pre-School Year, clear indications need to be given on the time-frame over which qualification requirements will be raised and capitation grants increased, so that employers and workers can plan ahead and take part in training, with the confidence that higher qualifications can lead to higher wages.
- The ladder of qualification requirements being incrementally introduced through the Free Pre-School Year should be extended to services for children of all ages from birth to school-entry.
- The further development of local Childminder Networks could help the retention of trained childminders through improving their working conditions, channelling supports to them and reducing their isolation.

Given the constraints on parents' ability to pay high fees, it will only be possible to raise wages sufficiently – particularly for higher-grade posts – if a higher level of subsidy or capitation grant is available for all quality services (for all children from birth to school-entry). While the Government's budgetary situation may make it difficult to increase subsidies substantially in the short-term, this longer-term ambition should be clearly laid out in the Workforce Development Plan.