



# Start Strong Analysis of 'TOWARDS RECOVERY Programme for a National Government 2011 – 2016' March 2011

## Overview

The new Programme for Government contains several positive commitments for young children (such as maintenance of the Free Pre-School Year and the development of area-based initiatives) and a number of education commitments (on educational outcomes, literacy, and equity in education) which may have positive implications for young children.

There are also a number of respects in which we believe the Programme for Government could have gone further, in spite of the economic and budgetary situation the Government faces – or perhaps because of it.

Now, more than ever, we need a Government that will provide political leadership and be ambitious for our young children. Now, more than ever, we need to invest in our young children – recognising that they are part of our society now, and the future of our economy. The first six years of a child's life have an enormous impact on their physical, mental and emotional development and, in turn, their life-chances. There is a large and growing body of research and evidence that shows this.

The creation of the new post of Minister for Children is something which Start Strong very much welcomes. We hope this step and the commitment to a referendum on children's rights indicate the new Government intends to give children's rights and needs a high priority in policy making.

In this paper we review the commitments to young children made in the Programme for Government and highlight the areas where the Programme for Government is silent. We hope the new Government will use the forthcoming opportunity of the National Children's Strategy to reinforce – and go beyond – its stated commitments in the Programme for Government, particularly in relation to services and supports for young children and their families.

## Government developments

We welcome into office all the Ministers whose responsibilities affect young children, including the Ministers for Finance, Education and Skills, Health and, of course, the new Minister for Children – the first time we have had a Children's Minister with a full Cabinet seat, the first time children have had a vote at the Cabinet table. We particularly welcome Minister Frances Fitzgerald's initial comments on the importance of early care and education.<sup>1</sup>

The creation of a Minister for Children could be a major step forwards for young children in Ireland. It was something we explicitly called for in our *Children 2020* report last autumn, 'to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children'.<sup>2</sup>

The change certainly has symbolic importance, yet its real impact will depend on what powers and responsibilities the new Minister has, and on how effectively the new Department of Children can work with other Departments, in particular the Departments of Education and Health.

If there is effective cooperation across Departments, we believe there is the opportunity for the Minister for Children to show leadership in helping to draw together the different policy areas that impact on young children, including early education, childcare, the infant classes of primary schools, supports for parenting and other family supports, and the work of Public Health Nurses. We hope the Minister for Children will meet this challenge and will succeed in putting children's interests at the forefront of Government policy.

The forthcoming National Children's Strategy will be an excellent opportunity for the new Government to demonstrate its capacity for joined-up policy-making.



## Commitments in the Programme for Government

### Referendum:

**The Government 'will give priority to ... a referendum to amend the Constitution to ensure that children's rights are strengthened, along the lines recommended by the All-Party Oireachtas committee.'**

*(Programme for Government, p. 18)*

We welcome this commitment. We hope that it will lead to a firm constitutional basis for the recognition of children's rights. We urge the Government to act swiftly to set a date for the referendum.

### Education:

**'This Government's ambition is to build a knowledge society. Education is at the heart of a more cohesive, more equal and more successful society, and it will be the engine of sustainable economic growth....Even in our country's crisis, we can make progress in education and protect frontline services.'**

*(Programme for Government, p. 39)*

Start Strong welcomes the Government's recognition of the importance and impact of education, and particularly that Early Childhood Care and Education is part of their 'engine of sustainable economic growth'. Investing in young children will lay the foundations for growth in the future, both for the economy – with high economic returns to such investment – and for our children, whose well-being and development must be a central priority in policy-making.

### Free pre-school year:

**'We will maintain the free pre-school year in Early Childhood Care and Education to promote the best outcomes for children and families. We will improve the quality of the pre-school year by implementing standards and reviewing training options.'**

*(Programme for Government, p. 39)*

Maintaining the Free Pre-School Year is vitally important as it embodies many elements of good practice in early care and education systems: it is universal and free, it directly supports the provision of services for children, and it involves measures to raise quality standards.

However, the Free Pre-School Year only offers one year of support, so it is essential that the Government sees it as a measure to build on over time, rather than an end goal. Children's

learning and development starts from the time they are born, and supports and services for young children and their families need to be available throughout the early years, including quality, affordable services outside the home and accessible supports for parents.

For example, the Government's commitment to improve quality should not be limited to the pre-school year. Research evidence identifies quality as the key to achieving positive outcomes for young children, whatever the age of the child.<sup>3</sup> When quality is poor in early care and education, not only are the benefits minimal but children can suffer.<sup>4</sup>

The research evidence also shows that central to quality is professionalisation of the early years workforce. The Programme for Government talks of 'implementing standards and reviewing training options'. These are positive commitments, but a key priority needs to be raising qualification levels.

### Area-based initiatives for children:

**'As resources allow, this Government will invest in a targeted early childhood education programme for disadvantaged children, building on existing targeted pre-school supports for families most in need of assistance such as the youngballymun project,'**

*(Programme for Government, p. 39)*

and

**'We will adopt a new area based approach to child poverty, which draws on best international practice and existing services to tackle every aspect of child poverty. Initially, this model will be rolled out to up to ten of Ireland's most disadvantaged communities, in cooperation with philanthropic partners to co-fund and manage the project.'**

*(Programme for Government, p. 52)*

While we do not yet know the detail of these proposals, we believe they offer great potential for developing new approaches, in particular for integrated approaches in which services and supports for young children and their families are brought together to achieve positive outcomes for children. Area-based initiatives for children are closely related to the 'early childhood hubs' which we called for in our *Children 2020* report.<sup>5</sup>

There has been growing interest in Ireland and internationally in the integrated delivery of services for young children and their families.<sup>6</sup> We agree with the Government that, in developing such initiatives, we can learn from youngballymun and also from other initiatives



such as Preparing for Life and Tallaght West CDI, as well as internationally from integrated early childhood initiatives such as the Sure Start programme in the UK.

A wide range of services and supports are relevant as young children learn and develop – socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively and in their language development – throughout their daily lives, not just in pre-school services. Public health nurses, for example, are in a good position to support not just children's health but also their early learning, through the supports they give to parents.

We hope the Government's efforts to fulfil these two commitments will be steps on the road to the universal provision of integrated supports for young children and their families. While we believe there is a good case for beginning this type of initiative in disadvantaged communities, the aim should be to move incrementally – as resources allow – to roll out such initiatives to all communities. There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, the majority of children from disadvantaged backgrounds live outside designated disadvantaged areas,<sup>7</sup> and such children should not be denied the opportunities available to those living in disadvantaged communities. Secondly, while the benefits are greatest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, *all* children benefit from high quality care and education in their early years.<sup>8</sup> If we are to put children's interests at the heart of Government, our aim should be to build quality services and supports for *all* young children.

#### **Education outcomes:**

***'A longer term aim of this Government will be to position Ireland in the top ten performing countries in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).'***

***(Programme for Government, p. 40)***

We welcome the Government's commitment to improving outcomes in education and its commitment to 'draw from top performing education models like Finland' to reverse the downward trend in Ireland's educational outcomes over recent years.

If the Government wants to achieve that aim, it must start with the youngest children. Of course all stages of the education system have important roles to play in improving outcomes, but the research evidence shows that investment in children's earliest years has the highest returns of all. The fact that the Government itself is citing the example of

Finland is significant, as Finland's educational success rests on strong foundations of high quality, affordable care and education for young children.

#### **Literacy:**

***'A national literacy strategy for children and young people will be developed as a matter of urgency.'***

***(Programme for Government, p. 40)***

We welcome the Government's commitment to make literacy 'a national cause', but we are disappointed that the commitments in this area do not yet include reference to children's early years. Children's early years are crucial in laying the foundations for literacy, particularly in the development of oral language skills. Without these strong foundations, any strategy will start at a disadvantage.

We were encouraged by the reference in *Labour's Plan for Literacy* (published by the Labour Party in February) to the importance of pre-school education in improving literacy:

*'When resources allow, Labour will build on the existing Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme to provide a comprehensive, regularised and universal preschool year, with an emphasis on clear developmental goals for pre-school children.'*<sup>9</sup>

As the new Government begins its work of making literacy a national cause, we hope it will keep early childhood education centre-stage and will draw on our recommendations in the area.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Equity in education:**

***'We will examine how to make existing expenditure on educational disadvantage more effective... We will publish a plan for the implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 to prioritise access for children with special needs to an individual education plan... We will improve co-ordination and integration to delivery of services to the Traveller community ...'***

***(Programme for Government, p. 42)***

We welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government to 'deliver equity in education', but the specific commitments on schools must be accompanied by measures to deliver equity in early care and education too.

The Government will need to act to ensure that services for young children are inclusive, welcoming and supportive for children of all abilities and all backgrounds – ethnic, cultural, social, linguistic, ability and family structure.<sup>11</sup>



This will require early years practitioners to have respect for diversity and know how to provide for the meaningful integration of all children and how to promote equality within services.<sup>12</sup> Inclusive services should also involve greater diversity in the type of people who are in the early years workforce.

### **What's missing from the Programme for Government?**

#### **Prevention and early intervention**

Inevitably, much of the Programme for Government addresses the economic and fiscal crisis facing the State. In this regard it is disappointing that the Programme for Government fails to explicitly recognise the link between investment in young children and the future of our economy.

We are acutely aware of the economic difficulties we face as a country and the budget constraints within which the Government must act. But investing in quality services and supports for young children can bring large economic returns in the future while impacting on children's lives now. Prevention and early intervention make sound economic sense.

Pre-election documents highlighted the economic rationale for prevention and early intervention. Fine Gael's policy report *Reinventing Government* explicitly argued that the Government should invest now in areas such as early childhood development 'to make big savings later':

*'No matter how much more efficient we can make hospitals, welfare administration and prisons, it will be far more cost effective to address the underlying sources of ill-health, economic exclusion and crime. The savings from preventative services can dwarf those from traditional efficiency drives.'*<sup>13</sup>

This contrasts with the Programme for Government, which states that the Government's investment strategy 'will prioritise investment in school building, non-national roads, healthcare and in job-creation'.

#### **National plan for early care and education**

Given the economic rationale for prevention and early intervention, investment in quality care and education for young children is one of the best investments we can make as a society. Of course we will not achieve high quality, affordable, accessible care and education for all young children overnight. But what the Government can start doing right now

is developing a national plan for children's early care and education, to help meet international standards over a longer-term time-frame.

Unlike most OECD countries, Ireland has no comprehensive national plan for early childhood education and care. In a UNICEF League Table, published in 2008, Ireland comes bottom of the list of 25 economically advanced countries, meeting just one of ten minimum standards. The existence of a national plan is one of UNICEF's benchmarks.

Start Strong recently published *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future*, which sets out what children's early care and education in Ireland could be in 10 years' time. The first step is to develop a long-term plan. Such a plan would be an effective way for the Government to plan how to meet the commitments it has made in relation to young children – and to start addressing what's missing from its commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with RTÉ's Morning Ireland on 11th March 2011, Minister Frances Fitzgerald TD stated that 'The PhDs of the future depend on the early childhood education that we give our children now'.

<sup>2</sup> Start Strong (2010) *Children 2020: Planning Now, For the Future*. Dublin: Start Strong, p.16.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips (eds.), Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office.

<sup>5</sup> Start Strong (2010), *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> OECD (2004) *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Country Note for Ireland*; NESF (2005) *Early Childhood Care and Education*.

<sup>7</sup> E. Smyth and S. Mc. Coy (2009) *Investing in Education, Combating Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

<sup>8</sup> Pam Sammons (2010) 'Does pre-school make a difference?' in Kathy Sylva *et al.*, *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Labour Party (2011) *Labour's Plan for Literacy*.

<sup>10</sup> Start Strong (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy in Schools*. Dublin: Start Strong.

<sup>11</sup> In relation to children with disabilities, it will be important that the Government implements the new Framework for Action for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education Settings (Eucharía McCarthy and Mary Moloney, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> OMCYA (2006) *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers*. Dublin: OMCYA.

<sup>13</sup> Fine Gael (2010) *Reinventing Government: Protecting Services and Getting the Economy Back on Track*.

