

January 2009

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

High quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) delivers long-term dividends to children, families and society¹. Early childhood is a time of great opportunity for learning and early interventions promoting the educational and social development of a child are more cost effective than later remediation.

While every child can benefit from quality pre-school, for children living in poverty, pre-school could be the first step on a journey of escape from the intergenerational cycle of poverty². Participation in quality ECEC improves the child's readiness for school and overall school performance.

Barnardos wants every child to have access to a guaranteed, quality, regulated childcare place, staffed by well-trained individuals capable of providing for the development and wellbeing of each child in their care and inspected to ensure compliance with State regulations.

Current Government Policy

Ireland's approach to early childhood services continues to be fragmented between the welfare (childcare) and education (early education) sectors while also trying to meet the needs of working parents. This fragmentation continues to perpetuate rather than eliminate child poverty and leaves many early childhood services out of reach of those trying to return to work³.


The Government policy has been to make direct financial supports to parents through universal payments of Child Benefit and Early Childcare Supplement as opposed to investing in the creation of a comprehensive ECEC infrastructure. The National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 has a budget of €575m and aims to create 50,000 childcare places.

Issues of affordability and quality provision remain ongoing. The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs introduced the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme in 2008. This scheme is administered through community childcare providers and aims to reduce childcare fees for parents who are in receipt of social welfare payments or Family Income Supplement or other forms of low income benefit, such as the Medical or GP card. The amount of the subvention varies according to the type of benefit the parent is receiving and the duration of the childcare being availed of.

¹ Heckman, J and Masterov, D (2007) The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children, Discussion paper no. 2725, Germany, Institute for the Study of Labor.

² Lynch R.G. (2007) Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High Quality PreKindergarten;

³ Combat Poverty Agency (2008) The Role of Early Childhood Care and Education – an Anti-Poverty Perspective, Noirin Hayes, Dublin



The limitations of the scheme are that it focuses only on economic disadvantage and fails to consider the needs of the children directly. Childcare should be recognised for what it is - early years education where children spend some of their formative years in a supported learning environment, preparing for school and integration into the wider community. The scheme also creates poverty traps as children of parents in low paid employment get a smaller subvention than parents on social welfare, thereby making it more financially beneficial for parents to go on social welfare so as to avail of the scheme rather than work in a low paid job.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education has now been incorporated into the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the roll out of the SIOLTA strategy is set to continue.

Recommendations

Implement the National Economic Social Forum's (NESF) blueprint for universal access to Early Childhood Education and Care providing each child with a free quality pre-school place. Roll-out of these places needs to begin with those who are disadvantaged. The Early Childcare Supplement of €1,100 per annum to all children under five and half costs the exchequer €350m per annum. This far exceeds the NESF estimated cost of €145m for providing a universal free quality half-day pre-school place to all children the year prior to joining primary school.

Ensure no closure of community childcare facilities or rise in fees for parents not eligible for the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme but who are in low paid employment.

