

Submission for Public Consultation on the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Sector in Ireland
Barnardos

2nd October 2020

Vision for the workforce for early learning and care and school-age childcare by 2028?

Ireland to have:

- A systemic approach to professionalisation leading to a ‘competent early childhood system’ with shared orientations by all that together constitute the system: practitioners, early childhood settings, training and professional development, research, regulation and governance, inspection and evaluation. (Urban et al, 2012)
- An effective, solutions focused workforce development strategy to underpin the quality of early childhood provision and long term sustainability.
- An early childhood sector highly valued in society for its crucial role in the development and education of our youngest citizens.
- A more gender-balanced workforce comprised of highly motivated, educated, and competent people from diverse backgrounds.
- A structured, clear and easy to understand career path.
- Fair working conditions for all in the sector with a nationally agreed pay scale linked to occupational role profiles and recognising the knowledge, competencies, qualifications required for quality as well as experience, level of responsibility and length of service.
- Access to high quality training and CPD for all sector roles to support a knowledgeable, confident, articulate and reflective workforce to lead policy, practice and change.
- The care and education of all young children – whose brain development depends on quality daily interactions and experiences – widely acknowledged both culturally and financially as a highly valued task for all who would consider undertaking it.

Naming of the Profession

Job title for a qualified (NFQ Level 5) practitioner

Early Years Educator/Early Years Teacher

Job title for a graduate (NFQ Level 7 or 8) room-leader

Senior Early Years Educator/Senior Early Years Teacher

Job title for pedagogical leader for a whole early learning and care service?

Early Years Pedagogical Team Leader

Policy Challenges

What are the main barriers to attracting and retaining more workers in the sector (both early learning and care and school-age childcare)?

- The most significant barrier is the low pay and poor working conditions in the sector. This includes the hours of work, lack of job security, sick pay and pensions issues and lack of resources generally.
- The work is demanding and stressful without adequate supports and recognition.
- The perceived low status of the sector in society and in the overall education sector itself is also a significant barrier.
- Lack of opportunity to progress education and training due to lack of non-contact time, lack of supports and low pay irrespective of qualification level.
- Lack of a clear career path presents a barrier to those with ambition to advance their career within the sector.
- Lack of gender balance is a particular issue in the sector with the predominantly female workforce. This acts as a disincentive to male participation and a barrier to gender equality for female early years professionals.

What are the main barriers to achieving a graduate-led workforce in early learning and care services, by 2028?

- No clear links between higher qualifications and better pay and opportunities – low pay regardless of qualification level.
- Poor working conditions, lack of job security and lack of full-year work in preschools acts as a barrier to a long and expensive degree course.
- Low status and lack of recognition of the value of the profession in society, particularly in services for children aged 6mths to 3yrs and childminding.
- Lack of a career path with an agreed, appropriate salary scale that recognises the knowledge and competencies required of the roles.
- Staff do not have the same opportunities for induction, in-service training and CPD as available to school teachers.
- Lack of in-service supports (due to lack of non-contact time) to nurture critical thinking, dialogue or reflection for those with level 5 means that not enough staff are motivated, encouraged or incentivised sufficiently to undertake further training.
- Lack of opportunities for those at level 5/6 to train to graduate level while working.
- The commitment to the profession and to working to provide the best quality care and education for young children is too often not acknowledged.
- Graduates are moving out of the sector to roles perceived as having higher value such as primary school teaching and roles that do not involve direct work with children.

What are the main barriers to practitioners' ongoing professional development?

- The most significant barrier is lack of paid non-contact time (time on the job not spent with the children).
- Lack of available funding in the sector generally to cover costs of CPD.

- Lack of recognition and reward for engagement in ongoing professional development.
- Expectation to train outside of work hours on evenings and weekends.
- Lack of formal supervision structures and processes or mentoring systems in early years provision.
- Lack of easy access to training venues or online options for many.
- In settings the demands of essential training in areas such First Aid, Manual Handling and Child Protection reduce availability of time and resources for professional development in areas that support quality pedagogical practice, quality professional practice (as described in Síolta) and other practice areas.

Policy Solutions

How could working in the sector (both early learning and care and school-age childcare) be made more attractive for those considering entering into it?

- The sector requires better pay and conditions. Significantly more funding essential to provide better pay and working conditions with appropriate nationally agreed salary scales for the sector, linked to occupational role profiles.
- Promote work in the sector as professional via publications, publicity, social media, and in guidance to careers advisers to support professional identity.
- SAC requires further development, recognition and value, further regulation and minimum training.
- There needs to be more coherent career progression and more advancement through appropriate ongoing CPD, initial and higher qualifications.
- A full working year with paid holidays for those working in preschools to have job security (and in a position to apply for mortgages) is very important. This would also provide non-contact time for professional development.
- In tandem with better funding and resources allowing for better pay and conditions a Government awareness campaign highlighting the huge value of quality early years provision to society and that quality of care can play a critical role in a child's life outcomes, would benefit everyone.
- A campaign to further promote the integration of early years education within the overall education continuum would help attract more talented new entrants. The capacity of early childhood education and care to support child development, and in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, has long been acknowledged.

How can retention of staff be improved?

- Introduce a nationally agreed pay scale for the early years workforce linked to occupational role profiles that recognises qualifications, experience and length of service (Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs in July 2017).
- Increase the number of paid weeks for ECCE staff in the year and introduce paid summer leave.

- A clear plan for more financial support and incentives to improve reflective practice, gain higher qualifications and progress careers and motivate existing practitioners to stay in the profession.
- Provide funding for paid non-contact time for team meetings, reflective practice, quality assurance (Síolta QAP), pedagogical documentation, professional development and activities focused on parents.
- Provide guidance and resourcing for settings to have management structures to facilitate CPD and practice and provide opportunities for career advancement. Some do not have room leaders due to cost implications.
- Knowledge, quality of leadership and competences of service team leaders/managers is important to retaining staff. High quality supports for development of leadership and management practice within the workforce will support retention.
- The commitment among many early years professionals to continuously improve needs recognition and acknowledgment through some form of State awards system.
- Provide professional supports to providers to improve staff recruitment processes and procedures.

What policies would best support achievement of a graduate-led workforce in early learning and care services by 2028?

- A policy that leads to appropriate recognition and remuneration for all roles in the sector needs to be a priority.
- Provision of incentives and enhanced supports (such as high quality practice resources, professional mentoring and specialist library access) to improve reflective practice, gain higher qualifications and progress careers.
- Raise awareness through social media and other means of the types of stimulating, interesting and engaging roles where positive change can be effected – roles that involve engaging in collaborative structures and interagency working.
- Further enhanced funding supplements to providers with bands according to the proportion of higher qualified staff recruited and retained.
- Teaching institutions providing initial training to be more selective so that more of those who graduate with relevant degrees are more likely to remain in the early years sector.
- Provision of professional supports to providers to improve staff recruitment processes and procedures.
- Consideration given to a portfolio approach to recognising and accrediting prior experience and learning.
- Incentivise levels 5 and 6 to engage in graduate level training through paid, part-time/accessible opportunities.

How should practitioners' ongoing professional development be supported through defining occupational roles and establishing career pathways within the sector?

- Defining occupational roles with required competencies clearly outlined will provide clear direction for all especially training institutions.
- Clarity of definition of occupational roles would indicate a new professionalism in the sector and thereby help to attract more talented entrants to the profession.
- A commitment on the part of an early years professional to ongoing professional development needs to be recognised, with CPD and higher qualifications leading to better pay and advancement opportunities within the sector and beyond.
- Create opportunities for specialisms in areas linked to core competencies such as Infant Mental Health, Therapeutic Play, Outdoor Play.

How should practitioners' ongoing professional development be supported through training?

- Research has shown that continuing professional development (CPD) is essential in order to maintain a high quality and up-to-date early years practice. (OECD 2012)
- CPD can be delivered through varied means including meetings, workshops, conferences, subject training (face-to-face and online), coaching and mentoring. In order to be most effective it needs to be ongoing, targeted to the needs of practitioners and linked to real practice. The Nutbrown Review in the UK recommended a 'blended approach' with 'high quality materials, work-based learning and support, visits to other [high quality] settings, experiences which challenge thinking, attending conferences, and provision of mentoring from outstanding leaders and peers' (www.gov.uk/government/publications/nutbrown-review-foundations-for-quality). This requires adequate funding and adequate paid non-contact time.
- Consider a requirement for minimum CPD to maintain professional status as in other professions.
- Establish training/peer learning network structures to facilitate ongoing CPD.
- Professional development is particularly important for childminders, most of whom work alone, without peer support, supervision or management. They also have fewer resources and fewer opportunities for training and development. Childminders could be supported through partnership arrangements with centre-based providers.

Further Comments

Do you have any further comments to make on the workforce development plan for the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector?

- A coordinated, cohesive and effective governance structure at policy level that sets professional standards and oversees quality assurance and monitoring, accompanied by a unified professional body is necessary for development in the sector.
- The biggest influence on the quality of early education and care is its people.
- A clear definition of the core knowledge, competencies, understandings, practices and values that all people working with children and their families should have is essential.

- The quality of recruitment, training and working conditions is critical to quality provision for children and families.
- The complexity of the work and the diversity of the children and families requires continuous reflection on pedagogical practice and a systemic approach to professionalisation.
- Support and early intervention for the most vulnerable children is essential for a fairer, more just society. A joined up service and successful early intervention requires equitable and respectful relationships with parents, other professionals and agencies. This requires trust and respect for each professional's specialism.
- More focus on children's rights and awareness of the profession in the wider national and international context by all practitioners would enhance professional practice across the sector.