



Submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs
on its Statement of Strategy 2016-2018

September 2016

Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Statement of Strategy 2016-2018 for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

We believe that the continued existence of a separate Government Minister and Department is critical to the progression of a range of significant measures that will have a profound effect on the lives of children in the coming years, and particularly for young children.

Our submission is purposefully short and set out in a format that, we believe, will make it easier for the Department to take account of when devising its Statement of Strategy. We have focused our input on the key issues that need attention for young children, particularly in the area of early education and care, and have set out clear recommendations that may easily be inserted under appropriate objectives.

Background

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) is the representative and support body for early education and care in Ireland. We have over 3,500 childcare members who support over 100,000 children and their families through preschool, afterschool and full day care provision nationwide. Our work includes quality enhancement, publications, political advocacy, training, business support and information for a sector that employs 25,000 people. The best interests of the children availing of early education and care is of utmost importance to ECI and we work to ensure that all children are thriving and learning in quality early childhood settings.

Recommendations

The principle of the 'best interests of the child' needs to underlie the Statement of Strategy. We believe that DCYA must take the lead in a whole of Government approach, as set out in 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' (BOBF), to ensure that the needs, rights and best interests of children are the paramount consideration in the development of laws, policies and services and in the decisions that impact their lives. This is in keeping with the constitutional provision, following the amendment on Children's Rights in 2012. The role of DCYA in coordinating with other Government departments is critical to its success.

Early Childhood Ireland recommends the adoption of the following in its Statement of Strategy for 2016-2018.

Child Poverty

Publish and implement an Action Plan to tackle child poverty, taking a whole-of-Government approach and focusing on better services for children, as part of the Government's efforts to successfully meet the Government's target of eliminating consistent poverty by 2020.

National Early Years Strategy

Publish the National Early Years Strategy to guide the development of policy and provision for young children by all relevant bodies.

State Supports for Early Education and Care

Increase investment in early childhood education and care towards the UNICEF target of 1% of GDP, making significant progress towards this target during the period to 2021 through an additional investment of at least €100 million per year, each year.

Develop and implement a new Single Affordable Childcare Scheme, based on a review of the cost of providing quality childcare and an alignment of costs and supports, where the state subsidises the provision of childcare across all relevant age groups that is high quality for children, sustainable for providers and affordable for parents.

Introduce a Childcare Subsidy for children aged under three in early education and care and increase the subsidy over the three-year period, as part of the planned 'Single Affordable Childcare Programme'.

Sustainable Models of Childcare

Work with the sector to identify existing and new collaborative models of early education and care that are sustainable, in terms of governance and financial viability, and support the promulgation of successful models.

Professionalisation

Drive quality throughout the sector by investing in the professionalisation of the workforce, including through a new comprehensive and permanent 'Learner Fund' and five days Continuing Professional Development each year.

Develop and implement a 'Workforce Development Plan' to ensure that the sector can recruit and retain high quality professionals.

Work with the sector to address low pay, including through a review of pay and conditions, learning from the experience of other countries in their journey to increasing and recognising appropriate pay levels.

Inspections

Develop and introduce a more coherent and cohesive system for inspections across the early education and care sector, further developing the inspection systems of TUSLA and Department of Education and Skills to ensure consistency of approach for providers.

'Out of School' Care

Introduce a new system to support and expand 'out of school' care ('afterschool') for school-age children, including quality standards, state subsidies and regulations for the sector. The models to be deployed should be solidly based on the best interests of the child, and not on the best use of school buildings. All expansion should build on existing quality provision and avoid displacement.

Children with Additional Needs

Roll out the AIM Programme to ensure that children with additional needs are supported so that they can avail of good quality, inclusive preschool, and expand the provision to all early education and care settings involving children under six and those in afterschool provision.

Parental Leave

Continue to increase parental leave towards the target that children can be at home until they reach 12 months and, following maternity leave, both parents can share responsibility for looking after their child during this critical first year.

Childminding

Introduce regulations and provide supports for childminding to ensure that children receive the best quality care in their early years.