



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

2 October 2020

## 1. Vision for the workforce

What is your vision for the workforce for early learning and care and school-age childcare by 2028?

1. Working conditions. ELC/SAC careers should be a realistic choice for all. Workers must be adequately paid, have access to stable contracts and career progression mechanisms.

2. Professionalisation. A professional identity provides the individual and the professional community with an agreed set of values and recognised responsibilities. Professional identity is also socially sanctioned, in the sense that society's perceived image of a group affects how that group perceives itself. A cohesive professional identity, which is acknowledged and respected by the wider society, must be developed. It is vital that the government financially supports the establishment of a professional body for the workforce.

3. Skilling and training. We envision a workforce that has the right knowledge base, skills, and values to provide only the highest quality care and education to children and their families in the context of their communities.

4. Gender and ethnic diversity. A gender balanced workforce combats, from an early age, the notion that caring is an exclusively female role. Diversity enables children to relate to a diverse range of adults.

5. Research. A national infrastructure of research and data that provides timely and easily accessible information on the characteristics of the workforce, to allow for monitoring and evaluation.

## 2. Naming of the profession

What do you think the job title should be for a qualified (NFQ Level 5) practitioner in an early learning and care service?

A process of consultation should be led by a yet to be established and overdue professional body.

What do you think the job title should be for a graduate (NFQ Level 7 or 8) room-leader in an early learning and care service?

A process of consultation should be led by a yet to be established and overdue professional body.

What do you think the job title should be for someone who has the role of pedagogical leader for a whole early learning and care service?

A process of consultation should be led by a yet to be established and overdue professional body.

## 3. 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)?

1. Precarious work conditions. In 2018/2019 the average hourly wage of staff working in centre-based settings was approximately 43.5% below the average national wage. There are also significant wage asymmetries within the sector. Relief staff, assistants and non-ECCE room leaders, besides earning below the sectoral average, earn below the national living wage<sup>1</sup>. In addition, over 70% of professionals work unpaid hours as part of the job. Not only are wages low, but there is little scope for wage progression over time. The average hourly wage of staff who had been working in the sector for at least 20 years was only about 27.8% higher than the ones working for less than one year.

The early years sector can be described as a 'low hours' sector in comparison to others. Other contractual deficiencies include: a high incidence of fixed-term contracts; almost 80% of workers do not have sick pay; 90% do not have a private pension; and approximately 65% do not have paid maternity leave<sup>2</sup>.

2. Professionalisation issues. What it means to be an early years professional is complex and contested. Furthermore, Irish cultural norms work against ELC/SAC workers being seen as professionals. These norms 'validate' low wages in society, along with low status.

3. Lack of opportunities for ongoing professional development activities and few incentives to pursue higher education qualifications.

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

Besides all the points raised previously, a key barrier is that, although regulations have been successful in raising qualification levels, they did not, in turn, push up wages. The average hourly wage of staff with a level 5 qualification is €11.42, while for those with a level 7 is €13.93 – which is a modest increase. While qualifications are a driver of wages, their importance is not as significant as staff position and length of time in the sector<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, there are no financial incentives for people to obtain an undergraduate degree in early years and enter the sector; and there are no financial incentives for workers who are already in the sector to upskill further. Regarding the latter category of workers, in Nordic countries there are apprenticeship programs that build a bridge between workers with lower levels of qualification and the educational system. However, there are significant barriers to creating a similar programme in Ireland. This is because of the lack of good quality professional placement settings managed by graduates or having senior practitioners that are graduates. This ends up being a circular problem - because the system lacks graduates, this hinders the implementation of programmes that could raise the number of graduates in the future. Also, ELC degree programmes that do offer flexible, work-based routes for staff, do not regard these students as full-time, even though the credit system is full time, and thus the students pay fees.

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<sup>1</sup> Pobal. 2019. 2018/2019 Annual early years sector profile report. Dublin: Pobal.

<sup>2</sup> O'Sullivan, M. et al. 2020. Pathways to better prospects: Delivering decent terms and conditions for early years workers in Ireland: A literature review (Forthcoming). Dublin: Early Childhood Ireland and University of Limerick.

<sup>3</sup> Pobal, op. cit.

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

1. The development of the Criteria and Guidelines for ELC training and education was a key and welcome action in the development of the workforce. Another key development was the publication of the code of ethics for early years professionals. We all (employers, students, educators, parents, children, course providers, etc.) need to be confident that the workforce has the required skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes necessary to support children's learning, development, health and well-being. Up until the C&G there was no framework with which to do that. Now the C&G Group must be effective in its evaluation of programmes and training;
2. Lack of a well-funded CPD infrastructure. This would need to provide credits linked to the national qualifications framework and professional body framework. A new funding model will need to include both funding (backfilling for staff and pay for staff undertaking the training) for participation in accredited CPD but also time spent engaging in professional learning. These would include for example, peer learning such as Communities of Practice and attendance at conferences.

#### 4. 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?

1. To translate policy discussions into discernible goals and action plans;
2. Move towards a publicly funded model, in which the state funds wages, according to occupational roles and associated pay scales;
3. Aligning career prospects with teachers. This should not mean a move away from care towards education, pedagogically. These areas are inseparable, given the ELC age group, the need for shared physical affection and that care is a learning opportunity;
4. Actions to promote professionalisation, such as the creation of a professional body;
5. Promote access to high quality initial professional education and CPD. This refers to a variety of measures, such as: improvement of systems of evaluation of programmes and training; creation of a programme of bursaries/grants that offer fully-funded part-time higher education; introduction of minimum standards in professional placement settings; creating a well-funded CPD infrastructure;
6. Introduction of specific policies to promote gender diversity, diversity in abilities and ethnic diversity;
7. Creation of publicly accessible databases that track information on the socio-economic background of workers and characteristics of employment. Information on the sector is available through Pobal data, which collects limited information on work conditions and is only released in pre-tabulated tables. This limits the ability of other stakeholders to monitor the workforce.

How can retention of staff be improved?

If the policies suggested in the previous question are implemented, ELC/SAC staff will have stable careers with adequate pay and embedded progression mechanisms. They will also be able to enhance their personal skills and proficiency throughout their careers through training opportunities and peer

learning. The professional body will contribute to the consolidation of a professional identity that is socially valued. The professional body will develop communication plans, targeting key audiences, in order to create awareness of the profession and to reposition the profession in the minds of the key stakeholders, general public, parents and the workforce. Furthermore, the successes and setbacks of this policy effort will be objectively measurable and closely monitored by data collection systems. These policies will lay the structural foundations of staff retention.

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

Ireland is not that far from the intermediate goal set by First 5 of having at least a 30% graduate workforce by 2021. According to Pobal<sup>4</sup>, approximately a quarter of staff working directly with children were qualified to at least a level 7 in 2018/2019. But the more ambitious final goal of having a graduate-led workforce by 2028 will only be achieved if appropriate financial incentives for people to qualify are in place. ELC/SAC workers cannot be expected to survive on their vocational commitment. In addition to the policies previously mentioned, it is important that pay scales consider employee's qualifications, position, and years of experience. It is also imperative that workplaces are conducive to reflection, planning, collaboration and balance.

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

The variety of job titles in the sector reflects the many different types of professionals that form the ELC/SAC workforce. But this variety hinders the efforts to address professionalisation challenges, including professional identity and occupational prestige. It also makes it difficult for the public to clearly identify the workforce which in turn impacts the discourses of professionalism. Practitioners in the ELC/SAC community are best placed to develop and construct what it means to be a professional. Practitioners should consider a 'by us' rather than an 'on us' approach to professionalisation – in other words, practitioners must be able to influence their own development as professionals.

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

It is important to highlight that CPD does not only relate to structured ways of learning, such as attending professional courses. Informal CPD, understood as self-managed learning, should also be supported. This would include providing educators with paid time to reflect on their practice, undertake child observation and documentation with a view to extending the child's learning. Further avenues of professional learning should also be opened and encouraged, such as mentoring for individual staff to support their practice, to follow the example of Better Start, which already provides a specialist on-site mentoring service for settings. This could be external mentoring, particularly in the early days of their careers, in the context of a sector that has uneven quality and services don't necessarily have mentoring skills. Alternatively, a practitioner could be included in a local community of practice/learning community.

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<sup>4</sup> Pobal, op.cit.

## 5. 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?

Childminders are an invaluable part of the workforce. While in the previous questions we addressed general issues affecting the ELC/SAC workforce, naturally there are important specificities when it comes to improving work conditions of childminders, in comparison with centre-based staff. These specificities have been acknowledged by the launch of the Draft Childminding Action Plan, which aims at “moving childminding into the mainstream of regulation and State support”<sup>5</sup>. Early Childhood Ireland is fully supportive of this policy goal. As it is detailed in our Funding Model submission, we believe that childminders should be eligible to participate in the publicly funded system which we are advocating for. This will greatly increase their income prospects and career opportunities.

We also believe that quality measures should be promptly implemented, which includes mentoring, CPD, advice, pedagogical leadership and peer exchange of learning and good practice. The Plan points to different possible avenues regarding the qualification requirements for registered childminders. We believe that, as childminders work alone, levels 5 and 6 on the National Qualifications Framework are appropriate training levels. We recommend that awards be transferable across home- and centre-based settings and that online training should be encouraged.

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<sup>5</sup> DCYA. 2019. Draft Childminding Action Plan. Dublin: DCYA (page 27).