

Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) Early Years Sub-Group

21 November 2022, 4pm via Webex Videoconference

In attendance

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)

Minister Roderic O’Gorman (Chair), Anne-Marie Brooks (Assistant Secretary), Davin Roche (Principal Officer) Toby Wolfe (Principal Officer), Hazel O’Byrne (Principal Officer), Mark Considine (Principal Officer), Jane Ann Duffy (Principal Officer), Sinead Reilly (Financial Accountant), Orla Cooper (Assistant Principal Officer), Sara Stephens (Assistant Principal Officer and Secretariat), Aideen Sutton (Higher Executive Officer and Secretariat)

ICTU

Dr. Laura Bambrick, David Joyce

SIPTU

Darragh O’Connor

IBEC

Dr. Kara McGann, Darragh Whelan

Apologies

Owen Reidy (ICTU)

1. Welcome and introduction

The Minister welcomed members of the LEEF EY Sub-Group to the meeting, and reflected on key milestones marked by his Department in 2022 as well as significant developments expected in 2023, including reaching the First 5 investment target in early learning and childcare of €1 billion five years ahead of schedule.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the last meeting (15 December 2021) were agreed.

3. Input from Equality Division

Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022

- The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022 has passed Committee Stage in the Dáil and is awaiting Report Stage. The Bill is intended to transpose the remaining provisions of the Work Life Balance Directive by introducing leave for medical care purposes and the right to request flexible working for parents and carers. The Bill also extends breastfeeding breaks to two years. Amendments to the Bill were also brought to introduce five days paid domestic violence leave. In addition, the Government has also decided to incorporate the provisions of the Right to Request Remote Working Bill into the Bill and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment are drafting amendments to the Bill for Report Stage.

Gender Pay Gap reporting

- It was noted that December will see the publication of gender pay gap reports for organisations with over 250 employees for the first time. This is a very positive development and will encourage employers to consider their gender pay gap and introduce measures to address it.

EU legislation

- The proposal for a Pay Transparency Directive is going through trilogue negotiations in Brussels. The proposed Directive will introduce gender pay gap reporting across the EU – and may require some amendments to legislation. The proposed Directive will also introduce certain rights for employees, including that the salary scale for a position must be made available to prospective employees.
- The proposal for an EU Directive on Gender Balance on Corporate Boards has been agreed and will shortly come into force. The Directive will require Member States to ensure that for listed companies members of the under-represented sex hold at least 40% of non-executive director positions; or, members of the under-represented sex hold at least 33% of all director positions, including both executive and non-executive directors.
- There is also a suspension clause for certain provisions where a Member State has an existing measure which has a similar effect, and the Balance for Better Business initiative will be relevant in considering transposition.

Other

- The DCEDIY is engaging with CSO on the development of National Equality Data Strategy. While it is envisaged this Strategy will focus on official data sources held by the State (survey and administrative data), at the request of LEEF EY Sub-Group members, DCEDIY will raise the issue of data from other sources, including multinationals with the CSO (noting that the EU Directive on Gender Balance in Corporate Boards might also be another avenue to pursue these data).
- The DCEDIY undertook to revert to members of the LEEF EY Subgroup with any updates on Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities.
- The DCEDIY described some supports for Traveller and Roma to engage in education, training and employment. The DCEDIY undertook to revert with further information for LEEF EY Sub-Group members.

4. Input from Early Learning and Childcare Division

Budget 2023

A total of €1.025 billion was announced in Budget 2023 for early learning and childcare. This represents a €346m increase on last year's funding and means the First 5 investment target of €1 billion by 2028 has been exceeded, five years ahead of schedule. This investment comprises:

- €266m to support continued implementation of, and enhancements to, the Core Funding Scheme;
- €357.6m for the continued implementation of, and enhancements to the National Childcare Scheme (NCS);
- €308.2m for the continuation of the ECCE programme and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM); and
- €84.5m to support the delivery of a range of regulatory and quality supports for the implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding, Nurturing Skills: the Workforce Plan, and the ongoing development of the registration and inspection system as well as policy development commitments set out in First 5 and the Programme for Government.

National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

- The enhancements to National Childcare Scheme subsidies, which will come into effect on 2 January 2023, were welcomed by members of the LEEF EY Sub-Group. Plans to raise awareness of these enhancements (through social media and native articles) were discussed. The DCEDIY undertook to share material on these changes with members of the LEEF EY Sub-Group who can, in turn, shared with their own members.

ECCE Programme (Including AIM)

- The LEEF EY Sub-Group were updated on two major independent reviews, one of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (which is close to completion) and another of the ECCE Programme (which will be undertaken by Stranmillis University College, Belfast). The findings from these reviews will inform future developments to these schemes.

Core Funding

- 94% of all eligible providers have now signed up to Core Funding, 92% of private services and 97% of community services and Core Funding contracts have an average value of just under €60,000 per year.
- The DCEDIY is planning for year 2 of the scheme (from September 2023) including the allocation of addition €28 million secured for the Scheme in Budget 2023. Approximately, €4 million of this funding for Year 2 will achieve the removal of 3-year experience rule for graduate premiums, with the allocation of remaining €21 million to be used for other developments to the Scheme, informed by the emerging data from Year 1 of operation.
- It was noted that the Sustainability Fund is available for services experiencing any financial or other operational difficulties to get supports.
- Some Sub-Group members, while welcoming the new Employment Regulation Orders (supported by Core Funding) noted that the minimum rate for early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners (€13 per hour) is now below the new Living Wage. The Minister and the DCEDIY accepted that further progress is needed in relation to pay in the sector.

Policy Implementation

Partnership for the Public Good

- Partnership for the Public Good includes 25 recommendations grouped across five themes: Core Funding; Tackling Disadvantage; Affordability Measures; Fee Management; Role of the State.
- Announcements in Budget 2022 and 2023 and the launch of the new funding model – Together for Getter - signalled the commitment to the first stage of implementation of the Expert Group’s recommendations - providing funding to introduce the new Core Funding scheme and enhancements to the NCS.
- The DCEDIY are now prioritising the development of the final strand of the funding model – Tackling Disadvantage, where services will be provided with a proportionate mix of universal and targeted supports to support children and families accessing their services who are experiencing disadvantage.

Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC, 2022-2028

- Nurturing Skills was launched in December 2021 and aims to strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation for those working in ELC and SAC.
- It was noted that the main focus in the early stages of implementation of Nurturing Skills is to raise qualification levels in the sector. In this context, work is currently underway on the design of the new learner fund to reduce the cost to early years educators employed in the sector of participating in designated ELC courses at levels 6-8 while continuing to work.
- A Monitoring Committee has been established to oversee implementation of Nurturing Skills. The Monitoring Committee, which is chaired by the Department and includes representatives of relevant Government Departments and agencies as well as stakeholders, met on three occasions during 2022, and in January 2023 will submit to the Minister its first annual report on implementation of Nurturing Skills.

National Action Plan for Childminding, 2021-2028 (NAPC)

- Phase 1 of the National Action Plan for Childminding sets out the route to registration for all childminders, within 2-3 years. The Plan was published in April 2021 and the following work has been undertaken:
 - Establishment of Steering Group and four Advisory Groups
 - Appointment of National Childminding Coordinator
 - Appointment of CCC Childminding Lead managing a team of 12 Regional Childminding Development Officers (CMDO) based in City/County Childcare Committees (that will rise to a team of 22 CMDO in 2023)
 - Development of Foundation and other training (underway)
 - Drafting of childminder-specific regulations (underway)
- The reliance of families on childminders and the lack of awareness of the NAPC and plans to open up the NCS to these families was noted. The DCEDIY advised that a communications plan for the NAPC is in development.

Supply and Demand

- The LEEF EY Sub-Group was advised that latest capacity data shows that, while the supply of ELC and SAC is broadly meeting demand, there is evidence of undersupply for some cohorts (babies and toddlers) and in some areas. A number of steps are being taken to address undersupply including the allocation of funding under the NDP for the Building Blocks Capital

Programme as well as work underway to update planning guidelines with the Department of Housing. Members of the LEEF EY Sub-Group were also advised of the positive impact of Core Funding on capacity, particularly for cohorts and in areas where there have been capacity challenges.

- The DCEDIY undertook to revert with data from Pobal on the number of services, built with capital investment under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP).

Reform of the Operating Model

- The independent review of the ELC and SAC operating model was completed in March 2022. The recommendation – that a dedicated state agency is the optimal operating model for ELC and SAC – was accepted by Government.
- A project team in DCEDIY is now tasked with undertaking further detailed analysis, planning, consultation and engagement to establish the functions and design of this new agency alongside a comprehensive evidence-based cost projection for its establishment and annual running costs.

5. AOB

- The Minister closed the meeting by thanking members for their continued support and engagement.

ENDS