

## **National Collaborative Forum for the Early Years Care and Education Sector**

### **(The Early Years Forum)**

**Minutes of meeting – Monday 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2016 2.30 p.m., Mespil Road**

**Attendance List: See Appendix 1**

#### **1. Welcome to the Minister and Forum Members**

- Bernie McNally welcomed the group to the meeting. It was agreed that all members would introduce themselves later in the meeting for the benefit of newcomers.

#### **2. Address by the Minister**

- Minister Zappone welcomed the group, referencing the role they can all play in providing a solid infrastructure of affordability, accessibility, and quality and creating an Early Years (EY) sector that everyone can be prouder of.
- The Minister referred to the announcements in Budget 2017 which will help pave a radical new path for the sector. The role of the organisations represented on the Forum, in raising awareness and creating persuasive arguments to encourage Government investment, was appreciated and must continue.
- Budget 2017 did not provide everything the sector wants and needs, but it demonstrated the Government's commitment to accessible, high quality and affordable early years services.

#### **3. Proposals RE: priority issues for the Forum: 3 representatives from the Forum**

Bernie McNally informed the group that, because the Minister was unable to stay for the entire meeting, three representatives of the Forum had been asked to make a brief presentation on their priority issues.

##### **Teresa Heeney (Early Childhood Ireland):**

###### (a) Workforce Planning

There needs to be a strategy for the development of the EY workforce. Services in the EY sector are struggling to recruit and retain staff. This is essential for addressing every other priority issue.

###### (b) Capitation for ECCE

An increase in the capitation for ECCE should be regarded as a budgetary priority. This is the most effective lever in increasing the salaries of EY professionals.

**Denise McCormilla (National Childhood Network):**

(a) ACS (Affordable Childcare Scheme) as it currently exists is unworkable

A number of issues relating to the affordable childcare scheme were highlighted:

- Payment is set for 48 weeks, rather than 52 weeks. People need to be paid for 52 weeks.
- The cost of delivery hasn't been adequately calculated.
- Services will not be able to prepare appropriately for the scheme if they are not given advanced notice of the specifics.

It would be preferable to delay the introduction of the ACS rather than introduce it whilst there are concerns in the sector with regard to its capacity to deliver.

(b) We must get the EY Strategy right

The consultations for the EY Strategy must embody a whole of sector approach, taking on board all of the sector's different viewpoints. Through this, the child must remain the focus and drive the vision for the Early Years Strategy.

The EY Strategy must be completed and used as a guide for further investment.

**Mary Moloney (PLÉ):**

(a) Improve the status of childcare workers

The EY sector is facing a recruitment and retention crisis. Graduates are disillusioned and dissatisfied with the salaries on offer, and are instead returning to education to become primary school teachers or are working in unskilled jobs unrelated to their qualification.

The current funding schemes are creating a split system, and this is disadvantaging graduates. There is no incentive to upskill, excluding the status bonus that Level 7 graduates get when they're caring for 3-5 year olds. This is not sufficient to retain graduates in the sector.

(b) Independent statutory body to look at a number of areas

There should be an independent body to evaluate the 461 different educational programmes throughout the country.

There are a number of foreign degrees on the Recognised Qualifications List, and there is doubt as to whether the Department has a mechanism for assessing the capacities of these professionals in regard to the implementation of Síolta and Aistear.

There should be a register of graduates.

All three speakers acknowledged that these priority issues in isolation will not solve all the problems in the sector.

Laura McGarrigle (Department of Children and Youth Affairs) responded in relation to the EY Strategy and the Affordable Childcare Scheme. She said the Department appreciated the feedback on the EY Strategy, and that every organisation represented at the Forum had been invited to the Open Policy Debate. The ACS is being designed to provide a durable and sustainable long-term framework which would facilitate future investment. The Department has committed to a review of the cost of providing childcare. This review is expected to commence in the first quarter of 2017, and will inform the design of subsidy rates within the scheme.

Two additional issues were raised by other Forum members as follows:

**Marian Quinn (Association of Childcare Professionals):**

(a.) The figure for cost of delivery used in the ACS Policy Paper comes from a report that claims that this is an unsustainable cost of delivery.

(b) There is a fear that additional training may undermine existing qualifications.

**Regina Bushell (Private Early Education Providers) :**

(a) There is a staffing shortage in the early years sector. In an Irish context, this has been highlighted as far back as the 2015 SOLAS report; the same issue has been highlighted in a recent U.K. report.

(b) The Level 5 qualification makes acquiring cover for staff very difficult. This is a serious problem, particularly in rural areas.

Minister Zappone responded to the Forum as follows:

- It is important, over the coming months, to continue to look forward and have constructive, and often difficult, discussions which will inform policy.
- The increase in non-contact time was seen as an important signal of the recognition of the work that the professionals in the EY sector carry out.

**Comment [AG1]:** I put this in inverted commas in my notes, this is verbatim what was said. Bernie moved the meeting on at this point without any elaboration. I hoped it sense could be made of it retrospectively. Evidently not, will we delete?

**Comment [MH2]:** Adam, what does this mean?

- The State is not the employer of childcare professionals. However, that does not mean that it should step back and renounce responsibility. It does mean that we must pose the question of what strategies the State can employ to improve the terms and conditions for the sector.
- Most of the sector developments will not commence until late 2017, so there is time to take comments on board.

**The Minister left the meeting at this point.**

#### **4. Minutes and Matters Arising**

A member of the group expressed the opinion that the minutes of the first meeting did not reflect all the content of the meeting. DCYA clarified that the minutes were intended to be read in conjunction with the Issues/Responses document that issued with the draft minutes, but accepted that the minutes should have made this clear. It was agreed that the minutes would be amended accordingly. Subject to this amendment, the minutes of the first meeting were agreed.

#### **5. Early Years Sector Profile – Pobal presentation**

- Martin Quigley and Kelly-Ann McGrory gave a presentation on the Early Years Sector Profile. Slides of the presentation are attached to these minutes.
- Unlike the Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire, the Sector Profile survey responses are not anonymous; this adds a layer of validity to the results.
- The group responded positively to the comprehensive work undertaken by Pobal, and welcomed the online tool which has been developed to allow interrogation of the information gathered.
- A number of suggestions were made as to how to improve the Sector Profile survey. These were acknowledged by Martin Quigley, who stated the Sector Profile will be further refined in its next iteration.

#### **6. Updates from DCYA**

- DCYA gave an update on its meeting with the Department of Justice in relation to the Garda Vetting issue. This update is attached at Appendix 2.
- DCYA are carrying out an operational review in 2017; this will include the City/County Childcare Committees.
- Laura McGarrigle provided an update on AIM, stating that the Department succeeded in securing the necessary funding to continue AIM into 2017. The DCYA are aware that there is a learning curve related to the further rollout of AIM, and would welcome any feedback from Forum members.

- The ACS public consultation yielded over 4,000 individual respondents, and the DCYA will work with the Centre for Effective Services to analyse the data. DCYA is discussing the business and IT processes with Pobal, and intends to establish a small advisory group of providers to support the process, including testing.
- There was a discussion on the ACS Policy Paper. Issues relating to the period of time that the scheme covered and a potential capping of childcare fees were discussed. The ACS design team have always recognised that staff should be paid for 52 weeks and this is reflected in the subsidy rate. It was also noted that the Policy Paper reflects that prior to any decision to cap fees, there would have to be an extensive debate and this would involve key stakeholders.
- The ACS will not be piloted. It will have to be implemented in full from its commencement. The ICT system, however, will be intensively tested before it goes live.
- Each organisation represented on the Forum has been invited to the Open Policy Debate on the 7<sup>th</sup> December. It was suggested that, following the Debate, there could be a special convening of the EYF to discuss the EY Strategy.
- There was a discussion surrounding the impending Level 5 qualification requirement for all services, and the lack of available childcare professionals with this qualification. There was no consensus reached as to the exact cause of this shortage, the poor pay on offer was cited as one cause, whilst other members believed there was quite simply a shortage, and pay was not the primary driver. It was suggested that the shortage due to pay could be nationwide, but there could also be a localised issue where there simply aren't any available qualified staff. [Aoife Conduit responded ...](#)
- There was an issue raised where services were requested to enrol students for the January ECCE intake by December 26<sup>th</sup> or they wouldn't get paid for these children during the first payment week. It was asked if they could bring the enrolment date back to the 19<sup>th</sup>, when services are still in session. Pobal have provided an update on this (Appendix 3).

**Comment [MH3]:** I will wait for Sinead's response. I'm not sure if these details are correct.

**Comment [AG4]:** Pobal's update is at Appendix 3.

## 7. DCYA response to issues raised at the first meeting

- The issues and responses included in the Issues List were briefly discussed, and it was agreed that three of the issues should be dealt with by sub-groups of the Forum.

## 8. Discussion and decision RE: priority issues for the Forum (including timeframe) and Establishment of Sub-groups

It was agreed that three sub-groups would be established, as follows

1. Communications sub-group.
2. Irish language support sub-group.
3. Sub-group on incentivising the provision of services for 0 – 3 year olds.

DCYA will issue an invitation to each member of the Forum seeking expressions of interest in relation to participation in the sub-groups.

**Comment [AG5]:** Should we say each "organisation represented on the Forum"

**9. A.O.B.**

There was no additional business to discuss.

**10. Date for next meeting.**

The date for the next meeting was provisionally set as the afternoon of March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The time is to be confirmed.

## Appendix 1

### Attendance List

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Minister Zappone

Bernie McNally

Laura McGarrigle

Mary Hogan

Mark Considine

Adam Gunning

Parliamentary Advisory to the Minister

Magdalene Hayden

Department of Education and Skills

Aoife Conduit

The National Quality Support Service

Margaret Rogers

Childcare Committees Ireland

Oonagh Fleming +

Trish McLaughlin

Early Childhood Ireland

Teresa Heeney +

Paula Hilliard

National Children's Network

Denise McCormilla

Barnardos

Heino Schonfeld

Childminding Ireland

Bernadette Burke

Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association

Linda Grant

Private Early Education Providers

Regina Bushell

National Forum for Community Childcare Services

Marie Daly

PLÉ

Mary Maloney

Tusla

Fiona McDonnell

Pobal

Sinead McKeon

Gaelscoileanna Teo

Ciara Ní Bhroin

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

Suzanne Nic Géidí

Association of Childhood Professionals

Marian Quinn

## **Appendix 2**

### **Requirement to obtain a vetting disclosure in respect of each employment**

The members of the Forum asked whether it would be possible to have a system whereby a staff member could move from post to post without having to apply for Garda vetting each time. The Scottish system was mentioned as a possibility.

### **Response from Department of Justice**

The Scottish and UK vetting systems are based on having a 'Barring List' which is a list of persons barred from working with children because they have committed certain offences. As I understand it, the vetting card certifies that the person is not barred from working with children. The employer can check online that the card is still valid when considering a person for employment and at any stage thereafter, as the Barring List is kept up-to-date in relation to relevant offences.

At the time that the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act was being drafted, the then Attorney General advised that such a system would not be permissible in Ireland. He was of the view that it would infringe a person's entitlement to seek work, and would therefore be unconstitutional (the right to work).

For this reason, persons convicted under our Sex Offenders Acts are not legally barred from any particular work, but, if they work with children, they are obliged to inform their employer of the conviction and the employer then assesses whether the person is or is not suitable to commence or remain in that employment. It is a criminal offence for the person not to inform the employer.

In addition, the Gardaí also have the right to inform the employer that a person has been convicted of a sexual offence.

If we were to provide that a Vetting Disclosure has a validity period of, say, 12 months, this would mean that any convictions incurred after the disclosure has issued would not be notified to the employer. Where such convictions had been so incurred, the State would in effect be certifying that a person has a clean bill of health when in fact this is not the case. For this reason, vetting disclosures are issued to the employer at the time that the post is being filled. Based on the contents of the disclosure, it is the responsibility of each employer to decide whether or not to employ the person.



### **Appendix 3**

#### **PIP Announcement 2nd December**

##### **ECCE Registrations – January 2017**

To get ready for ECCE 2016/2017, we have made changes to PIP so that entry into the ECCE programme will occur at three points: September 2016, January 2017 and April 2017.

New child registrations for January 2017 can be input seven days before the child's start date. The earliest a child can be registered for the January 2017 entry point is 26th December 2016. We know that services will be closed for a period over the Christmas holidays; this is just to let you know PIP will accept registrations from the 26<sup>th</sup> December 2016.

Below are some important dates to keep in mind during the January 2017 ECCE registration process:

- Approved registrations on PIP by close of business on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January will be paid for in a catch up payment on the 6<sup>th</sup> January.
- Approved registrations on PIP by close of business on the 9<sup>th</sup> January will be paid for in a catch up payment on the 13<sup>th</sup> January.
- Approved registrations on PIP by close of business on the 16<sup>th</sup> January will be paid for in a catch up payment on the 20<sup>th</sup> January.
- All services will receive a four weeks payment on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2017 (excluding any non-payment weeks submitted).

The payment calendar will then resume with a payment of five weeks on 17th February 2017.

**Appendix 4**

DCYA Response to Issues Updated December 2016.