

**National Collaborative Forum for the Early Years Care and Education Sector.
(The Early Years Forum)
Minutes of meeting – Monday 6th November 2017
Oak Room, The Mansion House, Dublin 2.**

Attendance list: See Appendix 1. Apologies were noted

Welcome

The Minister welcomed everyone and thanked them for work done in preparation of the Forum and their on-going commitment to the Forum. She stated that it was important to note that the leaders of the sector were gathering around the table and encouraging each other in progressing the development of the sector. The Minister referred to the agenda and stated that she would be in attendance for the first three items on the agenda.

1. Q & A Session

Bernie McNally thanked the Minister and introduced the Q&A session.

Ian McKenna stated his question:

'I would like a discussion on the longer vision of the pre-school year - publications like the Time and Structure Primary School Curriculum published by the NCCA are effectively incorporating the ECCE/ Pre-school year into the primary school context. I would like to sense from the Minister of her longer term vision for the 3 - 6 age cohort, and whether Minister Zappone sees this element eventually falling within the remit of the Department of Education and Skills.'

Aoife Conduit replied stating that the NCCA is reviewing the primary curriculum. The Department of Education and Skills has received a lot of feedback and are currently working through it. No decisions have been made, although the focus of the recommendations is on the curriculum rather than the structure. The focus of both departments (DES and DCYA) is to ensure that the delivery of ECCE and Infants in primary school is linked up which will aid the transition from preschool to primary school and Síolta and Aistear provide valuable frameworks to facilitate that.

The Minister added that whatever answer we arrive at it has to be the best outcome for the child and that we also need to take account of the realities of where the sector is now and how it has developed.

Claire Woods stated her question:

Will the Affordable Childcare Scheme be fully ready for implementation by Sept 2018?

Anne-Marie Brooks replied stating that the DCYA cannot confirm an implementation date, however, a lot of progress has been made. The legislation is expected to be published by the end of the year and the OGCIO Peer Review Group (PRG) process to secure approval to tender for the development of the IT system is well underway.

The first stage of the peer review process 'Business Case Stage' has been passed and approval on the second stage 'Request for Tender (RfT) Stage' is expected this month. This will allow the RfT to be published and a vendor to be secured.

How will transition from current programmes to the new scheme be managed in terms of impact for current recipients of support who may no longer be eligible under the new scheme and the impact on Community Services as a result of eligibility changes?

Anne-Marie Brooks stated that the Department is expecting more families to benefit under the ACS than are benefitting under the current model. While there will be a small cohort who may have

reduced support under the new scheme, transitional arrangements will be put in place to allow existing supports to be continued for a period and the department is exploring the option of a sponsor model and are working with Tusla and the HSE in this regard.

Additional funding has also been secured as part of Budget 2018 to support the sustainability of community based childcare services during this transitional period and going forwards.

How will Childminders be incentivised to participate with the new scheme given that Childminders are an integral part of childcare provision for the under 3s?

Anne-Marie Brooks stated that a childminders working group has been established who are finalising their recommendations. As of now, only childminders registered with Tusla can avail of the ACS.

Other questions

Bernie McNally referred to two sets of questions that were received after the Agenda had been circulated and gave brief replies.

The timeline for EY strategy

Bernie McNally emphasised the importance of the Early Years Strategy. Its development in 2018 will be facilitated by the establishment of a new unit within Early Years focused on policy headed up by Anne-Marie Brooks.

- Professionalisation strategy

Bernie McNally encouraged all forum members to inform the development of a professionalisation strategy for the sector.

- Terms and conditions of workers

Bernie McNally said that this will be raised as part of the discussion on a Sectoral Employment Order listed later on in the agenda.

- Staff recruitment and retention

Bernie McNally stated that the Department is looking at the issue of future supply through the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and acknowledged that retention is one of the biggest issues in this respect. The increase in capitation was highlighted.

- Administration for providers

Under Budget 2018 funding of €18 million has been secured in the form of programme support payments.

- Incentives for 0-3 childcare

Bernie McNally said that this will be raised as part of the updates/recommendations from the sub groups later on in the agenda.

- Can increased ECCE capitation be expedited?

There isn't capacity to bring the ECCE capitation payments forward due to budget constraints

- Comhad Naíonrá na Gaeltacht

Seven questions were received from Comhad Naíonrá na Gaeltacht. Bernie McNally suggested that the replies would be emailed out to the Forum members if everyone was agreeable.

Mairead Mac Con Iomaire reiterated that their request is for an assurance that Irish language speakers receive the same supports as the English language speakers. Sinead McKeon said that

Pobal has made the forms available in Irish, however, the IT system is not in Irish. Eugene Waters stated that the ACS website is currently being developed to be available in both Irish and English at a click of a button.

2. SEO

Bernie McNally opened the floor for a discussion, following a brief description of an SEO. Teresa Heeney from ECI and Denise McCormilla from National Childhood Network (NCN) updated the Forum on SEOs

Teresa Heeney:

- Most recent SEO approved by construction industry.
- Required to be deemed as an economic sector.
- SEO is the only conversation that is happening at the moment.
- In addition to challenges with rates of pay, there are other structural issues to do with employment in the sector including part-time work and a pensions gap.
- ECI believes that childcare is an economic sector.
- Pobal report confirms size and scope of sector.

Denise McCormilla:

- Crann and NCN worked together looking at specific job descriptions and salary scales
- A key need arose to get a credible support from an external agency to estimate the worth and value of the work force.
- Approached Mercer group who have agreed to work with ECI, ACP, Play, Crann and NCN to develop a salary scale based on all the roles in the sector
- Need to ascertain the cost of paying the sector if the sector was paid what it is worth.
- Move towards phased payments until workforce is paid what it is worth. This could be done over a number of years.

Teresa Heeney stated that there are structural problems with jobs in the sector. Services that are expanding are also contracting. They are expanding their morning sessions and contracting afternoon sessions which is resulting in the requirement for more staff for less hours. We have to think of how we can incentivise providers to keep afternoon sessions and incentivise parents to use afternoon sessions.

The Minister asked how do we incentivise providers and parents. Teresa Heeney stated that it comes down to money.

Regina Bushell stated that a report on the real cost of childcare is required before the issue of wages can be discussed.

Marian Quinn said that an SEO could potentially be a good thing. She enquired into how long it would take, and if there was an interim step before the SEO as people are leaving the sector before joining the union. She suggested ringfencing money that would be required to go towards wages as staffing grants, as was previously the case in community services.

The Minister said that she would consider realistic possibilities and work to progress them with DPER.

3. Independent Review of Costs

Anne-Marie Brooks introduced Crowe Horwath and set out the terms of reference for the review of costs. She stated that the review of costs is an important piece of work. It is an independent piece of

work but the Department will have oversight. She asked for the forum members to encourage colleagues to engage with the review.

Shane McQuillan began the Crowe Horwath presentation. He gave some background information on Crowe Horwath and stated that the review of costs cannot be done without the contribution of members of the sector. He then handed over to Vanya Sargent who spoke about the details of how the review will be carried out and explained that a call for evidence has been issued.

At this point the floor was opened for questions.

There was a general consensus within the forum that basing the scoping exercise around 11 providers was too small a number.

Fiona McDonnell noted that by only using 11 providers they may get the wrong information and then may not ask the correct questions on the survey.

Anne-Marie Brooks said that it was imperative to get the project started so the number of services in the initial scoping exercise will not change dramatically.

Heino Schonfield asked if Crowe Horwath will be looking other European countries for models of early years provision.

Shane McQuillan said that they were happy to take suggestions on board and will consider them.

Marian Quinn asked if Crowe Horwath will be engaging with staff or just the members.

Shane McQuillan replied that it is a large sector and that most of the data will be gathered through the survey. However, there are other instruments that can be used such as focus groups and stakeholder engagements.

Anne-Marie Brooks stated that the interim report should be available in April 2018.

The Minister began her closing remarks. In it she touched on the following:

- Some of the messages that the Department is receiving are that the sector needs more investment and that they need it soon.
- That it's important to begin the SEO process and leadership is needed in this regard.
- The sector has to raise its profile and become more visible.

At this point the Minister left.

Minutes

The minutes were approved.

Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Update on changes in staffing and structures within DCYA

See appendix 2 for PO structure chart

Bernie McNally provided an update on the new PO structure within Early Years.

- Early years has received approval for 5 POs which is a significant increase on the 1 PO allocated 3 years ago.
- It is a sign of the Department's dedication to early years care and education.
- Paul Fay will be assigned to Operations.
- Laura McGarrigle will be assigned to Projects
- Anne-Marie Brooks will be assigned to Policy
- The Governance and Finance and Quality posts have yet to be filled.

5. Updates/ recommendations from sub groups

The representatives of the sub groups gave a brief update to the forum.

0-3 sub group

Margaret Rogers provided an update on the 0-3 sub group.

- The sub-group has met on 4 occasions but a lot of substantial work occurred.
- The sub-group put forward recommendations in advance of Budget 18 but is planning to review them.
- An issue they have identified is the difficulty in obtaining data on childminding.
- Their key objectives are:
 - Giving staff working with 0-3 access to incentives (learner fund).
 - CPD grants
 - Possibility of capital funding to support 0-3s.
- Group is going to meet again before the end of the year and present its final report.

Response to Irish language sub-group recommendations

Aoife Conduit provided an update.

- Discussions are taking place between the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht about the recommendations submitted by the subgroup.
- An action plan for the next five years is being considered.

Professional sub-group (Code of Ethics proposal)

Ian McKenna asked if the issue of 3 years paid experience being required in order to be recognised as room leaders can be reviewed. This had always been the requirement, however, it is now being more rigorously enforced. Bernie McNally stated that a number of people have raised this issue, however, a change of policy would be required in order to address this. A Focused Policy Assessment is also being undertaken by the Research and Evaluation Unit of DCYA on this policy initiative which will be available shortly.

Heino Schonfeld presented the draft of the Code of Ethics.

- All professions have a code of ethics.
- Usually comes from a professional/regulatory body and helps to create some certainty/comfort.
- The hope is to get the Minister to endorse the code.
- Feedback was requested from the forum members with a view of penning a more inclusive draft which with the Early Years Forum would endorse then present to the Minister.

Heino Schonfeld asked for all feedback to be submitted by the end of November and asked the members to think in terms of high level ethical principles.

Communications Strategy

A very brief update was given on the communications strategy advising that a lot of work is being done in relation to this. It will be discussed in more detail at the next forum.

Childminding Working Group

Hazel O'Byrne provided a brief update.

- A drafting group are currently working on a summary report.
- This will be distributed in the coming weeks.

Early Years Forum Priority Issues List Update

Bernie McNally advised that a soft copy of the Issues List would be emailed to the forum members.

Update of Terms of Reference review

Hazel O'Byrne provided an update.

- The terms of reference have been circulated a couple of times
- The Department would like to receive more feedback from the forum members and will recirculate the terms of reference.
- The Department would like to add representatives for both children and parents to the forum and suggested Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) and the National Parents Council (NPC).

Bernie McNally asked the forum members if they were agreeable to inviting the CRA and the NPC to the next meeting. This was agreed by the members. Bernie also reiterated that the Department would welcome any feedback on how to improve the workings of the forum.

AOB

Hazel O'Byrne gave an update on School Age Childcare.

- A set of standards is being developed and it is hoped that these are finalised shortly by the group in preparation for wider consultation with the sector.

Marian Quinn brought up the issue of commercial rates. Bernie McNally stated that this issue requires primary legislative change and that the Department has progressed this issue as far as it can.

Marian Quinn enquired about the bursary. Hazel O'Byrne stated that there are plans to have another short round early in the new year for those graduating in November/December.

Marian Quinn asked about Garda Vetting. Hazel O'Byrne stated that the Department has met with the Garda Vetting Bureau and they are processing applications within a few days of receiving them. Further discussion is required with both ECI and Barnardos to explore if there is scope for efficiencies on their part of the process. However, it seems the biggest delay that has been identified concerns individual applicants submitting information required, during the 30 day period they have to do so. Bernie McNally stated that the Department of Justice and Equality has no plans to change the Garda Vetting process.

Appendix 1

Attendance List

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Minister Zappone
Bernie McNally
Anne-Marie Brooks
Toby Wolfe
Eugene Waters
Hazel O'Byrne
Orla Cooper
Myles O'Reilly
David O'Brien
Oonagh Fleming
Paul Pentony
Aoife Conduit
Margaret Rogers
Claire Woods
Trish McLaughlin
Teresa Heeny
Cathy Bent
Denise McCormilla
Heino Schonfeld
Marian Baker
Regina Bushell
Marie Daly
Mary Maloney
Fiona McDonnell
Sinead McKeon
Claire Spainneach
Mairéad Mac Con Iomaire
Marian Quinn
Ian McKenna

**Department of Education and Skills
The National Quality Support Service
Childcare Committees Ireland**

Early Childhood Ireland

**National Children's Network
Barnardos
Highscope
Private Early Education Providers
National Forum for Community Childcare Services
PLÉ
Tusla
Pobal
Gaeloideachas
Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
Association of Childhood Professionals
Saint Nicholas Montessori**

Apologies

**Childminding Ireland
Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
Early Childhood Ireland**

Bernadette Burke
Suzanne Nic Geidi
Louise Kilbane

Appendix 2

Early Years PO Structure (see attachment included with email).