

# National Collaborative Forum for the Early Learning and Care Sector

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## Minutes of Meeting – Monday, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2019. Hampton Hotel

Attendance List: See Appendix 1.

### 1. Minister's Address:

Minister Zappone thanked members for attending the first Forum meeting of 2019. She acknowledged the role the Forum has played in the progressive steps the sector and profession has taken since the inaugural meeting in 2016. The Minister hopes that the introduction of First 5 will lay a solid foundation for children and that members will see issues discussed at the Forum reflected in the document. The challenges facing the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) sector were also noted by the Minister and she requested that the steps taken to date should be viewed as steps on a path. The Minister noted that ELC and SAC remains a priority for the current Government despite ongoing challenges such as Brexit and homelessness.

### 2. Valuing the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Workforce – Where we are at:

Bernie McNally (DCYA) presented briefly on measures taken to date to support the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare workforce (slides available). It was noted that as per the EU Quality Framework, key to quality is a workforce that was valued, with good retention rates and appropriate terms and conditions.

### Feedback from selected Forum members:

Five members of the Early Years Forum had been asked to spend five minutes responding to this topic.

#### Denise McCormilla – National Childhood Network (NCN)

NCN has always worked to prioritise the early years quality agenda with emphasis on supporting the work force in a number of different ways. In recent years, realising the increasing responsibilities and challenges faced by the work force and the difficulty in securing staff, NCN has worked to improve staff terms and conditions to help secure the delivery of quality services.

In collaboration with the Crann Support Group, NCN commissioned Mercer to review the various roles within centre based services and to make recommendations for salary scales based on the roles identified. The Mercer report was circulated to roughly 4,000 service providers who broadly welcomed the recommendations.

In working to raise awareness of the need for increased Government investment in enhanced salary scales, NCN, Crann and Mercer presented the salary scales to politicians in Leinster House where they were also well received. They have also engaged with SIPTU and Impact to help secure a Sectoral Employment Order for the sector which will be essential if the pursuit for higher rates of pay for the early years workforce is to be achieved.

### **Marian Quinn – Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP)**

The ACP was established as there was a lot of discussion within the sector but there wasn't a focus on staff. The ACP has been networking with staff, politicians, and various governmental departments to ensure that staff issues are considered. This has included engaging with TDs as they worked on private members bills and trying to form cross-party consensus on the role of staff. The significance of early years education is a societal issue and it is important that parents and the media understand this. ACP has been working with unions to progress a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) however they wished to note that an employer-led resolution would be preferable.

### **Regina Bushell – Seas Suas**

Seas Suas was established three years ago to enable employers to put their voice forward. Seas Suas, as employers, understand the complexity of addressing pay and conditions. They have engaged with the DCYA, Minister Zappone, NCN, and providers in ELC and SAC contexts. Seas Suas believes that a SEO is premature and will cause fees to increase. Seas Suas do not wish to be negative and they believe that the introduction of First 5 is a very positive step forward. However, there are a number of stresses and anxieties in the sector including a staffing crisis and the prospect of a SEO without a guarantee of additional funding.

### **Mary Moloney - PLÉ**

Mary Moloney presented a slideshow on professional behaviour. The professionalisation Sub group and PLÉ are keen to assist the workforce with questions related to responsible performance and professional responsibilities. The Code of Ethics will be used as the basis for ensuring professional behaviour within a setting. They are seeking to avoid scenarios whereby staff seeking higher education attainment feel undermined for their ambition within their setting.

### **Teresa Heeney - ECI**

Teresa Heeney spoke through some of the key areas of work within ECI. The Jobsboard has now had over 1,000,000 unique views and they are looking at launching a HR EY Advice Services in April. The Childcare Barometer was launched in February. The report found that that increased investment in early years should be a priority. ECI remains committed to their key advocacy role and the work of the Professionalisation Sub-group. They are seeking funding for a research proposal around the professional structure of the sector. They are now running five different Erasmus projects and note that the Doing the Sums continues to be referenced.

### **Minister's Response:**

Minister Zappone thanked the contributors for their input and opened to the floor with the question; "what steps that can be taken to improve the standing of the sector going forward"?

### **Open Floor Discussion:**

A discussion ensued re the importance of the professionalisation agenda and the need to ensure that investment was passed on to staff by way of better terms and conditions. The recent Graduate Outcomes survey showed that 80% of graduates are currently earning €25,000. The positive development whereby the Tusla Inspectorate qualification requirements have been widened was noted. The continuing administrative demands were noted as was the deficit in certain services and training being available through Irish.

One member sought reflection on a partial solution to the recruitment crisis by allowing people work, initially without a qualification, where they were committed to receiving their qualification.

### **Response from Minister Zappone:**

The work the sector does in raising awareness of the needs within ELC/SAC is commendable. There have been a number of initiatives to support and enhance quality since 2015. However, the mechanisms that have been undertaken so far will not be the mechanisms that will bring about a “step change” within the sector.

Whilst this sector is not a public sector, it is a sector that receives significant public funding. On foot of advice from various sources, the Minister believes that the primary method of ensuring an attractive career in ELC/SAC, and good retention rates leading to high quality services for children, is an SEO.

The Minister noted that whilst the Mercer pay scales and Doing the Sums will both influence the funding model to be developed under First 5, the funding model by itself will not create the change that is desired.

Increased investment from Government will be necessary to support an SEO. The Minister stressed that urgent action was required from the sector.

## **3. Report from the Professionalisation sub-group**

Teresa Heeney (ECI) provided a presentation on the Professionalisation Sub-group (slides available).

## **4. Update on School Age Childcare Regulations – Next Steps**

Eimear Carron (DCYA) provided an update on the regulation of School Age Childcare (slides available).

A discussion ensued re the regulations, and whether there had been adequate consultation to inform the 1:12 ratio. DCYA stated that the expert group on SAC standards had recommended a 1:11 ratio, a previous working group a 1:8 ratio, and that youth services applied a recommended ratio of 1:8. DCYA said that the costings for the NCS SAC subsidy were based on a 1:11 ratio and hence DCYA did not expect to see a fee increase as a result of the ratio. There will be further consultation with regard to draft School Age Childcare Standards and further regulation.

The Minister exited at this point

## **5. Update on the Criteria and Guidelines for Degree Programmes**

Aoife Conduit (DES) presented on the criteria and guidelines for degree programmes. Responses to the presentation were requested from the floor. Concern was raised from the floor that the new HEA Graduate Outcomes survey indicates that some graduates returned that they had not had a professional placement but that PLÉ noted that they have done research on placements which shows that all higher education degree programmes have a professional placement element. Aoife Conduit (DES) will follow up with HEA on this issue.

## **6. First 5 Strategy**

### **Presentation on First 5**

Hazel O'Byrne (DCYA) presented an overview of the content of the First 5 strategy. Anne-Marie Brooks (DCYA) presented on the Implementation Plan for the actions within the Strategy with particular emphasis on ELC and SAC.

Anne-Marie Brooks indicated that the DCYA is seeking for other bodies to communicate the content of the Strategy and will be happy to provide summary information to support that. A key component to a successful implementation will be awareness raising. A monitoring and reporting office to support implementation of First 5 is to be established within DCYA.

First 5 has introduced the term “Early Learning and Care” or ELC in an attempt to move away from the most commonly used term among members of the general public - childcare. The rationale for this was outlined and is summarised below.

The term childcare which is used almost consistently by parents and other key stakeholders is not in line with current thinking in relation to the educational role played by the sector, nor is it helpful as collective efforts are made to raise the status of this work and move the profession forward over the coming decade.

Consideration was given to using the term Early Childhood Education and Care or ECEC in First 5, but despite many years of effort from across the sector, it has failed to become part of everyday language.

The Department looked internationally and found other jurisdictions who have experienced similar challenges. ELC is used elsewhere, for example in Scotland, Australia, Canada and the United States, and it seems to have been part of a change in the public's perception of what it is the sector does.

#### **Early Learning and Care**

- offers accessible, child-centred language that can be used in the everyday communications of the general public.
- highlights that learning starts before primary schooling – even before birth.

- reinforces the fact that learning and care are inseparable.
- places a clear focus on the educational experience from the child's perspective and the child's centrality in playing an active role within that holistic experience. This is in keeping with the national practice frameworks - Aistear and Siolta - and their promotion of the child as a co-creator of knowledge, which is so important in high-quality early education.

The Forum was advised that the change in terminology reflects a genuine commitment by the Department to change and improve both attitudes towards ELC, and the conditions under which it operates.

DCYA encouraged discussion and feedback re the term.

Feedback from tables was mixed, some welcoming the term and others not. A slim majority found in favour of it and DCYA received further feedback afterwards supporting the term. DCYA looks forward to further discussion and monitoring of whether the term is successful in reflecting the centrality of learning to working with young children.

## **7. Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

## **8. Pobal Sector Profile Report 2019 Update – Feedback on new questions**

Ela Hogan (Pobal) presented on the development of the Early Years Sector Profile.

## **9. Discussion on Future Agendas:**

The Affordable Childcare Scheme, School Age Childcare, the Implementation Plan for First 5 and the Funding Model were agreed as future agenda items. The format will return to full day meetings with key themes.

Members were encouraged to submit themes and items for future meetings.

## **10. Close**

Bernie McNally (DCYA) closed the meeting by thanking the members for their continued contribution and willingness to engage at the Forum.

## **Appendix 1. Attendance List**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>ORGANISATION</b>
Aine Gahan	Childcare Committees Ireland
Aine Lynch	National Parents Council
Aoife Conduit	Department of Education & Skills
Bernadette Burke	Childminding Ireland
Caroline Ní Chualáin	Comhar Naíonraí naGaeltachta
Clare Spáinneach	Gaelscoileanna Teo
David Burke	Pobal
Denise McCormilla	National Childhood Network
Fiona McDonnell	Tusla
Kerri Smith	Barnardos
Louise Kilbane	Early Childhood Ireland
Margaret Rogers	Better Start
Marian Quinn	Association of Childhood Professionals
Marie Daly	National Forum for Community Childcare Services
Mary Moloney	Plé (Pedagogy, Learning & Education Association)
Regina Bushell	Seas Suas
Sinéad Keenan	Early Childhood Ireland
Liz Kerrins	Childrens Rights Alliance
Teresa Heeney	Early Childhood Ireland
Gretta Murphy	Childcare Committees Ireland
Ulrike Farnleiter	*Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
Ela Hogan	Pobal
Bernie McNally	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Anne-Marie Brooks	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Paul Fay	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Hazel O'Byrne	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Nuala Connolly	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Eimear Carron	Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Adam Gunning	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Myles O'Reilly	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Shauna Butler	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Fergus Atkinson	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Lisa Walsh	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Dave Carabini	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Paul Orde	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Eric Twomey	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
William Cummings	Department of Children and Youth Affairs

\*Rotating Rep - St Nicholas Montessori, Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association and HighScope