

Q 14

Increase ECCE programme from 38 to 42 weeks for children aged 4 and upwards.

As per PQ reply 37129/15 (22nd October 2015), the cost of increasing the number of weeks of free pre-school care from 38 to 40 and 42 was estimated at an additional €10m and €20m per annum respectively. This estimate was based on the current programme, eligibility and capitation rates.

It should be noted that, under the current programme, children are eligible when they are within the qualifying age range which is 3 years and 2 months to 4 years and 7 months in the September of the relevant year. As the quoted costing is taken from PQ 37129, it is assumed that the proposal should in fact apply to the current qualifying age.

An extension to the free pre-school programme was announced in Budget 2016. This extension will come into effect in September 2016. The extension will provide for children enrolling in the programme at the age of 3, and continuing in the programme until they make the transition to primary school. In addition, the capitation rates will increase from €62.50 to €64.50 (standard rate) and from €73 to €75 (higher rate) from September 2016.

Currently around 67,000 participate in the free pre-school programme. It is estimated that the Budget 2016 initiative will increase the number of children benefiting from the programme to over 127,000 in a given year.

The estimated cost of increasing the number of free pre-school weeks from 38 to 40 and 42, based on the increased number of children availing of the programme and on the increased capitation rates, would be €17m and €34m respectively.

Q 15

Provide additional €5m to the Learner Fund for training ECCE service providers

PQ 25122/15 (23rd June 2015) stated that approximately 3,000 staff had benefited from a €3m Learner Fund allocated to support existing childcare staff to achieve the minimum Level 5 qualification requirement that will be introduced under the forthcoming revised Child Care Regulations.

A further €1.5m has been allocated in 2016 for Learner Fund 4, which will be directed towards staff who already hold the minimum qualification requirement, but who wish to upskill to achieve a Level 6 qualification which will be a requirement for all pre-school leaders from September 2016. This funding will be restricted to early years settings that commit to extending capacity to meet the demands of the extended free pre-school programme. A level 6 award costs in the region of €1,500, and it is anticipated therefore that up to 1,000 early years staff will benefit from Learner Fund 4.

The Department is satisfied that existing funds will be sufficient to support all existing childcare staff to achieve the minimum qualification requirements. As the pre-school capacity expands to meet increased demand under the free pre-school extension, it is hoped that additional staff will choose to upskill to meet the level 6 requirement for pre-

school leaders. The cost of the training programmes increase in accordance with the QQI level. An additional €5m allocation to the Learner Fund would fund the training of almost 3,500 additional staff to Level 6 on the QQI.