

Start Strong statement on prime time investigation ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

START STRONG SAYS PRIME TIME INVESTIGATION INTO CRECHES MUST BE CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Major reforms are needed to the inspection system, staff training, public funding, and legal exemptions

Start Strong - a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance children's early care and education in Ireland - today said that the Prime Time investigation, A Breach of Trust, must be a watershed in the history of Ireland's early care and education services.

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Toby Wolfe, Start Strong's Acting Director, said that Prime Time's investigation into standards in childcare services was deeply distressing:

"The abusive way children were treated in the creches shown on Prime Time shocked viewers. The programme also revealed disturbing figures that showed widespread breaches of regulations, insufficient inspections, and a lack of follow-through on non-compliance."

According to Mr Wolfe, "The early years are a critical period in children's development. The Prime Time programme showed what happens when children's interests are not put first. Children's rights must lie at the heart of early care and education. Above all, that requires interactions between adults and children that are positive, warm and nurturing."

Toby Wolfe said, "High quality early care and education can be hugely beneficial for children, and we know that there is much good practice in services across Ireland. However, it is clear that there is also bad practice, which - as Prime Time showed - can be harmful to children. Overall, quality is variable, and the lack of assurance is unacceptable."

In this context, Mr Wolfe highlighted some of the issues leading to the variable quality of Ireland's early years' provision:

"A quarter of staff in early care and education services have not yet achieved the basic FETAC Level 5 qualification, and the proportion of graduates in the sector is only around 10% - far less than the 60% recommended at European level. Current regulations focus primarily on health and safety - not on quality or children's experiences. And though we have had a national quality framework - *Síolta* - since 2006 and an early years' curriculum framework - *Aistear* - since 2009, there is still no national plan to implement these."

The Prime Time programme made clear that the mistreatment of children reflects structural problems in our system of early care and education, as well as insufficient investment. At the same time, it showed that a large volume of public funds has gone into services where quality standards are low or questionable, including through the Free Pre-School Year.

According to Mr Wolfe, the Prime Time programme has opened up an important debate on whether the for-profit model is appropriate for early care and education services. "Prime Time revealed significant public funding going to some services that are making substantial profits, while staff are paid low wages and have poor working conditions, and quality standards are too low. While many services are community-based or are not making large profits, some are, and we need to question this."

"Unfortunately, the problem of low wages, poor working conditions, and insufficient numbers of trained staff is widespread."

He explained that Start Strong has made a number of recommendations to Government - in the context of its submission on the National Early Years Strategy which is currently being developed - to improve the quality of Ireland's early care and education.

Mr Wolfe stated that we need both immediate actions and long-term reform, accompanied by a significant increase in public investment. "Start Strong's central recommendation is for the Government to ensure that no child is in a low quality service." According to Start Strong, specific measures that will help achieve this aim include:

- Carrying out an audit of quality across early care and education settings to provide a baseline for monitoring progress.

- Enhancing the system of regulation and inspection, through linking regulations to the Síolta national quality framework and Aistear curriculum framework, and through ensuring inspectors are qualified in early childhood care and education.
- Incentivising change through introducing a mechanism to ensure that public funding does not go to services that fail to meet quality standards.
- Introducing minimum qualification requirements for all those working in early care and education services - not just leaders of the Free Pre-School Year.
- Significantly increasing public investment to support training and higher qualifications for those working in early care and education services. The aim should be to achieve the benchmark of a 60% graduate workforce.

Start Strong has also recommended that the Government introduce the regulation of all paid childminders, with amendment of the Child Care Act 1991. Toby Wolfe said that there are particular issues in the childminding sector that need to be addressed in the context of improving the quality of childcare:

"While the Prime Time investigation focused on centre-based services, there are 50,000 young children in Ireland being cared for by paid childminders working in their own homes. Under current legislation, the large majority of paid childminders in Ireland are legally exempt from regulation and inspection." As a first step towards regulation, Start Strong have called for Garda vetting to apply to childminders.

Toby Wolfe concluded, "The development of the National Early Years Strategy gives us the opportunity to put in place the world-class early years' services that our children deserve. It's vital that we get the Strategy right and that the Government commits to investing in quality."

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