

Childcare issues not just the concern of parents ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The cost of childcare has to increase. There's no getting away from that unpalatable fact in the current drive for improved standards in the Republic's early childhood care and education centres.

The question is who's going to pay? The "squeezed", tax-paying families who already spend more of their take-home pay on childcare than parents in almost any other country in the world? Or a State that is still looking to cut, not increase, its current spending in the next budget?

"Fees to parents can't go up - it's as simple as that. There has to be a different way of building the system," says the new chief executive of Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), Teresa Heeney. And she's very clear that providers can't absorb the financial implications of higher standards, more training and better qualified staff.

"We have to begin to look at our responsibility for the education and care of our young children because of its own intrinsic good and because of its good for our country," she stresses. "It has to be good for children, it has to be good for families and, if it is good for both of those things, it will be good for society."

Irish society is still inclined to think that childcare centres are just the concern of parents who use them. Public debate about the continuing high cost, outside the families directly affected, has been muted in recent years.

Yet new figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development show that a family with two children in Ireland spends 40 per cent of the average wage to meet childcare costs, compared with an OECD average of 12 per cent. It's not called a second mortgage for nothing.

The main reason for the high cost is that, apart from the free, pre-school year scheme which covers three hours a day for 38 weeks and was taken up by 68,000 children in 2012-13, it is not subsidised for most parents. At the moment, the State invests just 0.4 per cent of GDP in children's early care and education, which is just over half of the OECD average.

As the economic recovery continues, childcare is likely to move up the national agenda again when employers start to complain that they can't find, or hold on to, suitable staff.

The author of the OECD study, Herwig Immervoll, was reported last month as warning that the high cost and limited availability of childcare here is a "particularly strong barrier" to women's participation in the labour market.

But the job of early childhood care and education centres is not "glorified babysitting", as the director of Start Strong, Cíairín de Buis, pointed out when welcoming the announcement in February by the Minister for Children, Frances Fitzgerald, of a review of investment in early years services.

"Children's early years are a crucial time. Their educational experience from nought to five has the most impact on their learning throughout their lives," de Buis said. It's an argument backed up by international research on early years programmes, as well as increasing knowledge about brain development.

So, in the week that primary and secondary school teachers are in the media limelight through their annual union conferences, it is timely to be hearing the views of a representative of their poor cousins in the early childhood education sector.

Sitting in her second-floor office in Hainault House, beside The Square in Tallaght, Heeney is only weeks into the top job at ECI, having taken over from Irene Gunning on March 1st.

Almost 75 per cent of the country's 4,600 notified providers of early childhood care and education services are members of the organisation, from private chains to community creches, as well as parent-toddler groups, and, between them, they cover an estimated 110,000 children.

They are still feeling the backlash, Heeney says, from RTÉ's Prime Time documentary, *A Breach of Trust*, in which undercover filming

captured, in the words at the time of the Minister for Children, "haunting images that will strike horror into every parent".

The fall-out hastened reform of the registration and inspection of childcare centres, with the Minister due to launch the new national standards for early years service next month, exactly one year after the programme was broadcast.

But that is an anniversary most involved in early childhood care and education would prefer forgotten. "A lot of services were embarrassed to see some of the things that they saw and felt the finger was being pointed at them too and that people didn't trust them," says Heeney.

However, the ECI also had many reports of parents going in the next day to empathise with staff in other creches, saying they knew such abuses were not happening there and that they were very happy with those services. In the year since, the ECI has been driving home to operators the need for good recruitment systems and tight training procedures. "I think what we saw on Prime Time was services with stressed staff who were poorly managed. So if we know that's what we saw, then that's what we have to try to address," she says.

It's no coincidence, perhaps, that the three centres that featured in the programme were all branches of chain operators?

"I don't think that is fair to say," she responds. "A service will be good or bad on the basis of how well it is managed and how well it is run."

In the immediate aftermath, the ECI encouraged open and transparent engagement with parents.

"We would have said take out your most recent inspection report, show it to the parents. If there is anything in it you think parents might be concerned about, explain that to them."

Three-quarters of childcare centres inspected by the Health Service Executive had not met all required standards. But there might have been a simple explanation for why not all the boxes were ticked on the day of inspection.

"For example, a lot of our services would be non-compliant with Garda vetting and they can do nothing about it because people hand in their notice," says Heeney.

"It takes two or three weeks to get somebody new and then it can take another eight to 10 weeks to get the Garda vetting back.

"You are not going to be compliant with something - you are either not going to be compliant with [staff-child] ratios or you are not going to be compliant with Garda vetting, and nobody is going to want to not be compliant with ratios," she points out.

Inspection of the early years services is now the responsibility of Tulsa, the Child and Family Agency, which was established on January 1st last.

No longer can somebody open a childcare centre without being inspected and approved for registration first; and while all existing services are "deemed" to be registered for the next three years, they are all due to be inspected for re-registration during that time.

The ECI has been briefed on the new inspection processes - "many of them looked quite good", Heeney reports - which involve parents and also allow the operators to provide feedback.

However, her concern is the prospect of only public health nurses continuing to conduct the inspections rather than involving early childhood education specialists. ECI's work is around curriculum development and enhancement of pedagogy, she points out.

"If we are expecting people to get early childhood education degrees, they deserve to be inspected by people who are their peers."

Currently, 19 universities and institutes of technology in Ireland offer degree courses in early childhood education. It's vital these graduates go on to work in this field, "and if we want to keep them in our sector, we have to pay them", she argues.

Heeney has just finished a nationwide consultation with ECI members, which will form the basis of a document, Get the Best Start, to be launched next month ahead of the local elections and in time for pre-budget decisions.

Key messages from members are the need for higher wages and the shortcomings, as they see it, of the universal pre-school year, such as the weekly capitation rate of €62.50 or €73 (depending on staff qualifications), and its restriction to just 38 weeks of the year.

"We have example after example of people with degrees being asked to go on the dole over the summer."

The other bugbear is that there is no allowance for any time not spent with children, which is needed, for example, for preparing for sessions, paperwork or for meeting parents. And the lack of special needs assistance is also a concern.

One operator told Heeney how she had twins attending her pre-school service and one could come every day and the other, with special needs, could come just the two days a week for which assistance was provided. "So the twin has to sit at home and wave goodbye to her sister."

Heeney, from Ballybofey, Co Donegal, was director of the National Children's Nurseries Association when it merged with the Irish Preschool Play Association to form the ECI in 2011.

A UCC graduate in social science, she has also spent time in youth work and with the ISPCC.

A mother of two children, aged almost 14 and 12, she sums up her priority in the new job as ensuring that we have a competent system of early childhood education. "By that I mean competent and well-trained staff, a well-informed group of parents and a competent set of structures within which a centre operates."

And she warns against seeing early education as simply preparation for primary school.

"The current problem with the Junior Cert is because it is seen as a route to the Leaving Cert and the current problem with the Leaving

Cert is that it has become simply the route to third-level," she suggests.

She doesn't want the same mistake made with this very new, early education system, where the emphasis is on following the interests of the child to foster self-development and a love of learning. "We are very concerned with children being well rather than doing well," she stresses.

Employers say they want creative staff who will persevere and work in teams. "They are all the key dispositions that children in good quality childcare settings achieve."

"Leveraging" the voice and opinion of parents is vital, she says, and the ECI is committed to guiding parents in what to look out for when choosing childcare.

"The voice of the parent," she adds, "will always win out."

- reprinted from the Irish Times ^[2]

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