

Call for Ireland's early years settings to be recognized as a 'public service'^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A new report commissioned by Start Strong, a coalition of organisations and individuals concerned with early care and education in Ireland, claims that the current way services are run on a market model and expected to operate as businesses, is not in the 'best interests of children', as their quality is very 'variable'.

To improve the standard of the country's early years services, it recommends that they be recognised as providing a public service and funded accordingly.

The report, 'Childcare': business or profession?, by Professors Eva Lloyd and Helen Penn, directors of ICMEC (International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare) the University of East London, compares the Irish childcare market to that of other countries and proposes a new model of early years services focused on quality that is accessible and affordable to families. Start Strong says that Ireland needs a new model that builds upon current private and community provision and childminding, but significantly enhances public investment and public involvement.

The report also backs continuing progress by the Irish Government to introduce a second free pre-school year, due to come in before 2020.

Along with this, it suggests providing income-related subsidies to families with low-incomes.

Ciairín de Buis, director of Start Strong, said, 'Currently early years services are run on a market model with services expected to operate as businesses. This is not in the best interests of children, as the quality of services is very variable. And it results in fees that are unaffordable to parents.

'To change this we need to recognise that early years services are providing a public service and should be funded accordingly.'

The report recognises that a lot has been achieved by the Irish Government, including the introduction of the free pre-school year, known as the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE), and minimum qualifications for early years staff, but says it should go further.

Under the ECCE scheme, children aged over three years and two months and less than four years seven months, are entitled to a free childcare place.

At the heart of the new model there must be the recognition of early care and education as a profession, this includes giving practitioners the qualifications, wages, working conditions and career development pathways and public esteem that characterise a profession.

Funding

The report makes a number of recommendations covering funding of early care and education services, quality and the cost of childcare in Ireland.

One suggestion is for central Government to develop a new funding model that uses supply-side funding, rather than tax-based solutions.

Start Strong says that funding should be linked to the cost of delivering quality services, including higher salaries for graduate staff, higher rates of funding when a service needs additional support for a child with special educational needs, or if it is based in a disadvantaged community.

Region: Europe^[3]

Tags: affordability^[4]

quality^[5]

privatization^[6]

public management^[7]

public-service

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/12/call-irelands-early-years-settings-be-recognized-public-service> [2]

<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/call-for-ireland-s-early-years-settings-to-be-recognised-as-a-public-service> [3]

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