

Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future investment in childcare in Ireland ^[1]

Author: Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) on Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education

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AVAILABILITY

Full report ^[2]

Background

In January 2015, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced the establishment of an Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) on Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education. The purpose of this Group is to identify and assess policies and future options for increasing the affordability, quality and supply of early years and school-age care and education services in Ireland. The full Terms of Reference for the IDG can be found in Appendix 1.

The work of the IDG is grounded in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the whole-of-Government policy framework, which sets out how we can best achieve optimum outcomes and bright futures for all children and their families (DCYA, 2014).

Methodology

The Group met in session on five occasions. Members of the Group also participated in an Open Policy Debate hosted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In addition, a number of bilateral discussions were held with individual departments and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on specific topics. Bilateral meetings were also held with the Departments of Health and Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht.

The Group considered a contextual paper prepared by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs which included international evidence as well as an examination of current provision and investment. This material was also made available in a primer document as an aid to the consultation processes. Material from the primer is also included in the report.

A public consultation process aimed at providers, practitioners, academics, advocates and parents was conducted on an on-line basis (launched on the 18th of April, 2015). A separate consultation process aimed directly at parents was also conducted (launched on 20th of April, 2015). All of these inputs are reflected in the final report and informed the options selected and recommendations made to the Group.

In light of the short time frame, the Department obtained the assistance of a number of organisations to assist in developing estimated costs of different options (based on existing work) and in facilitating and analysing outputs from the Open Policy Debate and the consultation processes. The assistance of the Centre for Effective Services and Start Strong is greatly appreciated in this regard. Thanks also to John Bowman who chaired the Open Policy Debate on behalf of the Department and to Pobal, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and Early Childhood Ireland who provided data used in this Report.

Executive summary

The report as a starting point for further work

The Inter-Departmental Group began its work in late January. The timeframe for the development of the Report has been particularly challenging. With that in mind, the Group is anxious to emphasise that the Report provides, at this point, a discussion document for a proposed platform for investment. Subject to the views of Government, each of the individual options, the pace of their implementation and the transition from existing arrangements will need considerable additional work in order to prepare detailed plans for implementation, specific rules for the schemes and more detailed costings.

The drivers for change

The Group also wish to emphasise that determining and generating consensus for the principles/policy objectives which should inform investment decisions in this area is complex. The Terms of Reference of the IDG indicate that Government acknowledges that there have been dual drivers of reform to date, namely:

- Recognition of the value of early years provision in ensuring that children get the best start, alongside

- Recognition that the availability of affordable childcare is either a barrier to or incentive for labour market participation. There are a number of explicit aims of the Government's current investment in early years:
- To promote optimal development for all children and to narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children, through the provision of quality early childhood care and education services. This is pursued at present, for example, through the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme;
- To enable parents to prepare for a return to paid employment by participating in training, education and other activation measures. At present this is pursued under the suite of Training and Education Childcare (TEC) Programmes; and
- To support families, particularly those in low paid employment, in making work pay. Currently the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme aims to do this.

Implicit in these objectives is a further objective of poverty reduction. Many of these programmes work in conjunction with other income support measures (both universal such as Child Benefit and targeted such as job seekers, family income supplement and lone parents' payments) and are being utilised to leverage labour market activation and reduce the reliance on income supports.

The IDG is of the view that these four objectives are all valid and are interrelated. There is some argument for suggesting that children's developmental outcomes, from a societal point of view, should be first among equals in these objectives. The IDG is of the view that these objectives can and should work in a complementary way. However, there is an inherent potential for tension between them. The work of the IDG has been focused on ensuring that these objectives can be held in balance and the possible trade-offs between different policy options are kept to a minimum in assessing and making recommendations on possible future investment options.

Key messages: evidence and consultation processes

There is a multiplicity of evidence that investment in early years improves outcomes for children and families. This not only brings specific developmental benefits to children but also compensates, to a degree, for other factors relating to disadvantage and parental income.

Affordability must be a policy priority. Availability and affordability of childcare remain critical barriers to seeking employment for many parents. Costs of childcare in Ireland are high and are not offset, as in some other countries, by benefits in the form of subsidies, direct payments etc. Parents tell us that affordability of childcare is a barrier to employment and is resulting in restricted working hours; turning down or leaving work; or being prevented from looking for work.

Embedded in research and increasingly a focus of Government and international initiatives is the importance of quality. Both parents and the wider public highlight the need for greater regulation and inspection. Professionalisation of the workforce is a key proxy for quality in terms of the international evidence. The need for a better recognised and qualified workforce was a common theme across the parental and public consultation processes.

Parents want choice and flexibility. This means looking at a wide range of options to support them, including extended parental leave benefits; and greater work place flexibility in respect of career breaks and job-sharing to enable them additional choice to remain at home. Evidence from international review highlights more extensive provision both of leave and paid benefits to parents, particularly in the very early years from infancy.

Accessibility of services was also a theme. The fragmented nature of provision in Ireland and the fact that there are a diverse and wide range of providers is clear. Also, the lack of a clear model of provision, especially for school-age childcare was highlighted. Both consultations pointed to the need to improve access and reduce the requirement for transportation by parents. They emphasised the need to establish links both to make services practically accessible for parents, and to ensure children have a positive experience of services. Continuity of approach and smooth transitions between services (both school and non-school) was seen as important.

How to invest is the subject of a number of international reviews. Most jurisdictions use more than one mechanism to support parents with a mixture of operational funding; fee subsidies; benefits and other tax based measures. On balance, there is a shift towards supply side measures which are seen as more optimal in terms of driving reform and quality improvement. Parents and the public had less homogenous views here but it is clear that the universal provision of subsidised pre-school year was seen as a key strength in terms of existing investments due to its universal provision and contribution to affordability.

Finally, there was a very strong focus on the need for inclusive provision. Again, both parents and the wider public consultations emphasised the need to ensure that services are fully accessible to children with additional needs, and that providers are well-equipped to provide the best possible service. This is seen as essential in order to ensure that children with additional needs can reap the full benefits of provision. While parents saw jobless and low income parents as a priority, the most popular priority overall was children with disabilities.

Policy objectives for future investment

Goals and Objectives

The IDG proposes that two high-level primary goals are agreed:

Supporting children's outcomes

Supporting children's outcomes in early years care and education and after-school care is about having the right kind of care options and services which are good for children, available when and where children need them and delivered to a quality standard. This means identifying the right models (including for those families and children who have particular needs) and putting in place the various levers for good governance, quality and regulation which support effective implementation of the model of support.

Objectives include:

- Identifying Inclusive Models of Care that Deliver Good Outcomes for All Children
- Ensuring Supply and Demand are Aligned
- Building Quality Capacity in Provision and the Profession
- Developing Governance and Regulation for Continuous Improvement

Supporting families in raising their children to reach their full potential

There are a number of ways in which families can promote good outcomes for children. Parents are the primary educators of their children, and their interaction with them provides the most important protective factor for a child's longer term outcomes. Parents' own economic security, education level and approach to parenting all have a potentially significant impact on a child's development. Parents need to be supported to make choices which are good for children, such as being able to take on the role of primary caregiver when that is best (under the age of 1); and having the possibility of flexible patterns of work when their children are young.

As children grow, parents' opportunity to participate in the workplace provides an important protective factor against child poverty and related child outcomes. This means it is critical for parents to have access to services that respond to their needs when they choose to work, removing barriers to employment and career progression. Finally, supporting families is about giving parents confidence in their understanding of the best options for their children and their family and what good quality services look like.

Objectives include:

- Supporting parental choice and removing barriers to work
- Making services affordable and responsive to the needs of parents
- Building parents understanding of and demand for quality

Related link: Blueprint proposes subsidised childcare for working parents [3]

Region: Europe [4]

Tags: affordability [5]

quality [6]

accessibility [7]

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