



**Submission on the Early Years Sector within Dublin City
to the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs
Frances Fitzgerald TD**

Current challenges and recommendations

January 2014

Dublin City Childcare Committee undertook a small scale research project during 2013. The purpose of this exercise was to compile a series of case studies to reflect the financial and general sustainability issues facing childcare services in Dublin City. A sample size of six providers from across Dublin city and representing a mix of both community and private providers was chosen. The services selected also represented a mix of the different types of services provided to communities. This research along with ongoing feedback from service providers to Dublin City Childcare Committee indicates a number of real challenges for the Early Years Sector within Dublin City which are documented below along with some possible recommendations.

Current Challenges

- Early Years services are under ongoing pressures to manage and support the various funding schemes / programmes. Each of the programmes place additional administrative burdens on the service to manage.
- New qualification requirements are putting significant pressure on services.
- The Early Years Sector is under increased scrutiny. This includes the new registration system, audit requirements connected to administration funding programmes and the quality agenda i.e. national mentoring service and staff qualification requirements which all services must ensure are fulfilled.
- Managing and ensuring various frameworks including Aistear & Siolta are being implemented within services is time consuming and resource heavy for providers.
- Non-contact time- Services receiving no additional supports or funding towards non-contact time despite its importance for administration, staff training/development, parental communication etc.
- Recessionary conditions- have placed significant pressures on services. Increasing numbers of services are reporting falling numbers of children, parents falling behind on fees, leaving without paying arrears and

demanding more from services. Even when subvention is in place the parental contribution element is often not a reliable source of income. This issue has been compounded, in that parental fee contributions are no longer funded by the Community Welfare Officers.

- Stressed families- private and community services reporting increased need to support stressed families and the direct impacts these issues have on children. Community services who are based in areas of disadvantage are working with increasing numbers of vulnerable families which places significant additional pressure on the service, its staff and impacts on children attending.
- Recruitment Issues- the unavailability of suitably qualified people applying for posts and the retention of staff given the low pay levels within the sector. In addition community services find it difficult to fill Community Employment (CE) places. The community sector remains highly dependent on CE to maintain service provision and ratio requirements under the childcare regulations which is cause for concern in terms of recruitment, staff retention and ability to provide a quality service to often times vulnerable children. Some services face the prospect of closure as without labour support programmes such as CE the service would not have the resources to employ direct staff to maintain service provision. A national survey undertaken by the 33 Childcare Committees found that from a sample of 279 community services 1,756 CE places were based within them of which 479 places were vacant.
- Special Needs- the withdrawal of special needs supports has placed significant additional pressures on services in trying to support families and their children. Pobal 2011 Annual Survey of the Early Years Sector found that 47% (1,587) of all services were found to have at least one child with a disability in attendance. A total of 4,679 children with disabilities of varying types were accessing Early Year services nationally.

Recommendations from Dublin City Childcare Committee

Community Sector

Community services need a greater policy focus and further resources are required to support them to maintain service levels.

Community Childcare Subvention- This is one of the main funding streams for Community Childcare providers but turnaround time from completion of parental return to confirmation of funding needs to be addressed. Currently this is taking over 5 months. **DCCC recommends that community services receive confirmation of funding allocations from DCYA within 2 months of them completing the full parental return.** For children whose parents despite subvention are not in a position to pay the balance of fees **DCCC recommends that a further band is introduced within the Community Childcare Subvention Programme. This would ensure that children who are most at risk will have their childcare cost fully covered through the programme.**

Community Employment- the reliance on CE to provide care for vulnerable children needs to be addressed with a mechanism found to allow CE workers to be surplus to staff ratios.

Private Sector

Pay Levels- The level of remuneration is directly connected to fee levels and the ability of parents to pay. Accordingly general pay levels within the sector are very low and in some cases are at minimum wage level. If the sector is to encourage and support the ongoing professionalisation of its members, increasing the quality of services and outcomes for children, **pay/remuneration must be considered within the design of the national funding programmes.**

Tax Relief- DCCC recommends the introduction of tax relief to help parents meet the costs of childcare.

Community & Private Sector

Children with additional needs- services need help to support children with additional needs and require access to accessible supports in order to do so. **DCCC recommends the reintroduction of the measure to allow children with additional needs to avail of 2 full years of preschool rather than the current position where a child can only avail of one full year over 2 years.** This change would significantly help children and their families.

Continued Professional Development for Staff- There is a need for all services to be supported with the ongoing cost connected to the continued professional development of their staff teams. **DCCC recommends that services be allowed 3 days continued professional development within their funding contracts with DCYA similar to other professions.**

Non-Contact Time- Services require additional resources to reimburse them for the additional work they must complete connected to various funding programmes in addition to the supports they put in place and provide to parents. Non-contact time for staff development and training also needs to be resourced. This should be examined and addressed within the current funding programmes.

Quality Supports- DCCC welcomes the additional resources which have been brought forward by DCYA. In order to ensure value for money and the best possible outcomes for children it is important that the additional resources in particular **the National Quality Support Service compliments and supports the existing work of CCCs who are actively engaged with Early Years Services on a daily basis.**