

*Our heads are round so that thoughts can change direction
(Francis Picabia)*

Act Now:

Re-imagining Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

A discussion paper by **INFORM**

About us

INFORM is a group of senior experienced professionals from a variety of areas, both academic and practice, in Early Childhood Education and Care. We have come together to advocate for and assist in, bringing about change in the Early Childhood system. In 2018, **INFORM**, funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), wrote a position paper articulating our concerns about the impact of government policy on young children from birth to six years. Our intention was to contribute to the discussion from a perspective of children's rights, happiness and well-being.

More recently (2019) **INFORM**, hosted by the DCU Early Childhood Research Centre, facilitated the establishment of a working group to examine ways of establishing a Professional Body for Early Childhood Education and Care.

We have no 'mandate' and do not represent or speak on behalf of any organisation or interest group. However, our different backgrounds, experiences, contributions and expertise bring a rich mix of knowledge and understanding to this work. On this basis, we offer our critical and constructive thinking and analysis to achieve sustainable policy reform and urgent system change.

INFORM offers non-partisan, engaged contributions to the process of redesigning the ECEC system, to benefit young children, their families, society, and the professionals who are committed to meeting their needs.

Introduction

The current pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in our social systems in general, and in Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] in particular. Closure of early childhood provision has left already overburdened 'key workers' without vital childcare support, and children from the most marginalised groups deprived of fundamentals like a daily nutritious meal, a safe space outside the home and a nurturing early learning environment.

Unlike in the 2008 financial crisis, the current emergency has triggered immediate state intervention to protect critical infrastructure. Beyond the immediate hardship caused by Covid-19, the crisis response offers an opportunity to reconceptualise and reclaim ECEC as a common good and public responsibility. Policy choices can be taken now to ensure both children's rights and wellbeing, and the functioning of society in and beyond the crisis.

Early Childhood Education and Care: a vital public infrastructure

A sustainable, high quality ECEC system is critical to the development and wellbeing of young children and will be key to reactivating the economy, supporting families, contributing to long term social cohesion, wellbeing, and more equitable outcomes for all. In considering ECEC we are guided by the internationally accepted definition of this universal system as one that includes ***all arrangements for children from birth to compulsory school age (birth to six years in Ireland) regardless of setting, formality, funding, opening hours, or programme content***¹.

In adopting *First5. A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families*², Ireland has joined a global trend towards holistic policies, public responsibility³, and much more ‘hands-on’ government involvement in the provision of ECEC as a vital public service. The emergence of discussion on the transition of ECEC to a public service in a post-covid world is welcomed.

Within a public model, the State would contract existing services (community and private) to be part of an essential infrastructure, allowing for central strategic management, mediated through local supports. This would enable a focus on strengthening the quality, security, availability and accountability of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland, by facilitating monitoring of practice, enhancing data collection; providing security of employment, inspiring confidence in parents that their children are safe, happy and well cared for, across the country.

Why System Change?

Despite persistent ‘rapid change’⁴ the development of the present Irish ECEC system has been characterised by a general lack of strategic forward planning based on a shared vision starting from the rights, needs, and experiences of children. Rather, the current system is the result of:

- Forty years of committed but *patchy endeavours* to provide ECEC
- Incremental changes arising from generally *reactive* policy decisions
- A public and policy discourse that places *childcare* needs (of working parents) over *children’s* rights to education and care from birth
- A value system rooted in the belief that individual private providers (including voluntary and community based) and businesses (the ‘market’) can and should provide what is fundamentally a common good and public responsibility.

Analysis⁵ has long identified four *systemic challenges* that persist despite unprecedented attention to services for the youngest children and their families in recent years:

- I. *Governance*, including regulation and evaluation
- II. *Resourcing* of the overall system and supports
- III. *Fragmentation* of services and support structures
- IV. *Marketisation* and over-reliance on private enterprise for provision of a public service

¹ OECD, 2001

² DCYA, 2018

³ Think20, 2019; Urban, 2019; Urban, Cardini, & Flórez Romero, 2018; Urban & Guevara, 2019

⁴ Wolfe, O’Donoghue-Hynes, & Hayes, 2013

⁵ European Commission, 2015; National Economic and Social Forum, 2005; OECD, 2004, 2006; Urban, Robson, & Scacchi, 2017

The combination of problems arising from these four interconnected systemic challenges has resulted in a system that fails children, families, the early childhood workforce, and society as a whole. We want to be clear: to point out that the system is dysfunctional does not mean to lay the blame for systemic failure on individuals, services, and organisations in ‘the sector’. Commitment to children, families and communities is high throughout, and the vast majority of practitioners and services aspire to deliver the best possible experience for children, based on increasingly high levels of professionalism. However, a persistent lack of focus on the ‘big picture’—the overall ECEC system—makes it difficult to realise the professional aspirations and values. A *Competent and effective System* is more than the sum of its parts. It rests on the relationships between all its elements, individuals and organisations, and their ability to come together in a framework of shared values, practice and knowledge⁶.

Now is the time to re-imagine and re-design the system

In 2019 and 2020 we have encountered a rapid succession of crises for ECEC in Ireland reflecting the *systemic challenges*:

- Failure to safeguard infants and young children in early childhood services, exposed primarily by investigative journalism
- Breakdown of an unsustainable tension pitching *affordability* for parents against *quality* for children and *decent working conditions* for early childhood educators
- Existential threat to early childhood services dependent on a quasi-monopoly of private insurance companies

As the Covid-19 pandemic has begun to affect all aspects of Irish society, it has led to the closure of all early childhood services in the country. This has foregrounded the critical role that ECEC plays in the lives of children, parents and society as a whole. Many highly qualified and experienced early childhood educators will lose their jobs, and many providers of services will struggle to save their business through the Covid-19 pandemic. Laudably, government has introduced emergency measures to ensure staff can avail of unemployment payment or illness benefit. Other measures have been put in place that aim at reducing the financial stress for employers.

This immediate crisis will have long term impact, reaching far beyond ‘peak-Covid’ and this challenge, alongside the earlier realities cannot be adequately addressed by applying ‘yesterday’s solutions’ to current and future problems.

INFORM believe that the current crisis should be seen as a warning sign for us all to recognise the crucial role that Early Childhood Education and Care has in a successfully functioning Irish society. *First5*, the *whole of government strategy for babies, young children, and their families* aims to build an ‘effective’ early childhood system that benefits ALL children and families. It is an ambition we take seriously and, most importantly in the area of ECEC, we believe now is the time to take some crucial decisions.

The starting point should be a commitment by the incoming government to move to a fully public, universal system of ECEC provision in Ireland, tied to an agreed timeframe with achievable

⁶ Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012

milestones and goals. All major parties are already committed to increasing public funding for ECEC. This should now be written into government policy and conditional to system change.

Cornerstones for the transition to a public system

Policy decisions will have to be taken now, in order to set in motion a process that leads from the current unsustainable and dysfunctional system to a sustainable, high-quality public system. Such a transition may take time and it could be challenging to bring divergent groups and dissenting voices together. However, we believe that the likelihood of success would be greater if a number of key commitments are articulated by those in leadership roles, widely communicated, and promoted in public, as soon as government is formed.

These include:

- A commitment in the programme for government to *a public system of ECEC for all*
- A commitment in the programme for government to strengthen the existing guiding frameworks of *Aistear and Síolta*, and the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines* to inform and enhance professional practice with children
- A clear vision of the constituent elements, roles and responsibilities, which are integral to a public ECEC system.

Effectiveness and ‘competence’ in any ECEC system unfolds in the relationships between its actors and elements. Therefore, it will be crucial to explicitly map out the parts of the system and their roles and responsibilities in relation to each other and to the whole. We believe the following elements are indispensable:

- *Public policy and resourcing*, under the auspices of one government department, which directly draws on the expertise of professionals involved across all ECEC setting types
- *Support structures at local level*, to lead and enable joint planning, accessible professional development and opportunities for sharing learning
- Provision to be based on the *needs of local communities*, defined through *mandatory participatory short-, medium, and long-term planning*
- *An active, cohesive monitoring and evaluation system* that sets standards and systematically documents perspectives of all stakeholders, including children, families, and educators and replaces the current differentiated inspection regimes
- *An autonomous, inclusive professional body* to regulate and represent the ECEC workforce, responsible for overseeing training, qualifications, and continuous professional development, in collaboration with relevant local and national organisations.

The challenge presented by the current crisis provides an opportunity to reflect on the current shortcomings of the Irish ECEC system and put in place strategies to support a more robust, sustainable, equitable and high-quality system. Members of **INFORM** look forward to working towards this over the coming months.

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Jenny Bernard | Emma Byrne-MacNamee | Nóirín Hayes
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We are INFORM

Jenny Bernard, B.A.(Hons) Dip. Ed. MSc, is an independent advocate in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care. Jenny has over 40 years practice experience, having held key positions in both the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. In her statutory role she managed Early Years Inspections and was responsible for designing and implementing high quality ECEC services and supporting practice change. Jenny values working collaboratively to figure out the best way to improve children's lives and futures. Upholding children's rights is at the core of her work.

Emma Byrne-MacNamee B.A.; AMI Diploma(3-6); M.A. has worked for thirty years in early childhood settings, projects and initiatives, focused on transforming experiences and outcomes for children and families. Her main experience is in supporting and developing professional practice, in services for young children; however, she has worked across the child and family field, engaging with evidence based and evidence informed interventions and approaches, in partnership with professionals, parents, community and statutory organisations. Emma has lectured and supervised students of Early Childhood Education and Care, in several Higher Education Institutions and is currently engaged in research and consultancy.

Professor Nóirín Hayes PhD is a developmental psychologist and educationalist. She is Visiting Professor at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin and maintains her affiliation to the Technological University, Dublin. Her specialist field is early childhood education and care with particular focus on early learning, curriculum and pedagogy, and ECEC policy. She has an active research portfolio working with postgraduate students and researchers and convenes the Researching Early Childhood Education Collaborative [www.ealignment.ie].

Nóirín is the author of a number of books, reports and research articles on practice and policy in early childhood and her most recent book [co- authored] is *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Early Childhood Settings and Primary Schools: Relationships, Reciprocity and Reflection* (Routledge, 2020). She has served on a number of government working groups and is currently a member of the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Advisory Council. Nóirín is a founder member of the Children's Rights Alliance, a member of NESET II [Network of Experts on the Social dimension of Education and Training], an Honorary Member of OMEP International and Patron of OMEP Ireland.

Winifred Jeffers B.Soc.Sc., Dip. in Mediation Studies, M. Litt. (Education) has worked as a trainer, facilitator and researcher with adult education providers, youth and community development organisations for many years. Since 1998, she has also worked with FETAC/QQI registered adult and further education providers as an external authenticator, external evaluator and trainer.

As a conflict mediator she has engaged with private, public service and community organisations both mediating interpersonal workplace disputes and providing training in positive communications.

Her role as an external authenticator of learners' portfolios is to ensure that education providers adhere to National Standards at Levels 1 - 6 so that the resulting qualification is one that inspires confidence. Winifred's has a particular interest in education programmes for Early Childhood Education and Care and Social Care. She also provides continuing professional development for adult education tutors assisting them develop their practice.

Colette Murray has more than 30 years' experience in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in both national and international contexts. She has worked as practitioner, trainer, lecturer, advocate and researcher. She has advocated for a comprehensive Diversity and Equality approach in ECCE practice, training and policy, introducing the Anti-bias approach to the Irish ECCE sector. She is

the founder and coordinator of the Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network (EDeNn). She is a founding member of the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) European Network. She is a board member of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and a member of the steering committee of the International *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* network. Colette currently lectures on the Technical University Dublin ECCE degree programme. She has written and published primarily on diversity and equality issues in early childhood.

Professor Mathias Urban, PhD, is Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education, and Director of the Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) at Dublin City University. He works on questions of integrated early childhood policy, evaluation and professionalism in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Before joining DCU Mathias held the position of Froebel Professor of Early Childhood Studies and Director of the Early Childhood Research Centre at the University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom.

Mathias has 20 years' experience in designing and leading international collaborative research projects. He has a well-established track record of publications in international peer-reviewed journals; his work has been classified as 'world leading' and 'internationally excellent' in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) of the United Kingdom. In 2018, Mathias was awarded the 'Marianne Bloch Distinguished Career Award' by the international *Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education* network.

Mathias is the lead author of the 2018 (Argentina) and 2019 (Japan) and 2020 (Saudi Arabia) G20/T20 early childhood development, education and care policy briefs, and a member of the European Commission expert working group on Early Childhood Education and Care.