Early Childhood Education and Care

Significant progress has been made towards the establishment of high quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provision in Ireland in recent years. Unlike other European countries, Ireland does not have a long tradition of young children attending pre-school services. Early years’ education is provided by trained teachers in infant classes in primary schools. The compulsory school age in Ireland is 6 and all forms of pre-primary education are optional. However, children from the age of 4 can be enrolled in infant classes in primary schools. Nearly 40% of 4-year-olds and virtually all 5-year-olds attend primary school, where early education is provided in infant classes.

In the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures [1], the Government committed to continue to increase investment in high-quality early years care and education for all children, prioritising families on low incomes.

A ‘free’ Pre-School Year scheme (Early Childhood Care and Education, or ECCE scheme) was first introduced in January 2010 and is being administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs [2] (DCYA). Under the terms of this initiative, all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September of the relevant year are entitled to a maximum of two free-of-charge pre-school years of appropriate programme-based activities in the year/s prior to starting primary school. While participation is voluntary, there has been a very positive response to the scheme. Approximately 104,441 or 95% of eligible children were enrolled in pre-school services in the 2015/2016 school year.

The ECCE universal programme (otherwise known as ‘free pre-school’) is available to all children within the eligible age range. It provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. Childcare services taking part in the ECCE scheme must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education [3]. The Department of Education and Skills has a key role in supporting quality within the sector and works closely with the DCYA.

In addition to the provision for children in the infant classes in primary schools, the Department of Education and Skills funds some specific pre-primary services. These include:

- Early Start Programme: a pre-primary initiative in designated areas of urban disadvantage, for children who are most at risk of not succeeding in education. The total number of spaces provided by the existing 40 Early Start centres is over 1,650.
- Rutland Street Project: a programme in a Dublin inner city community. Although not part of Early Start, it was used to pilot many of the approaches later incorporated in the Early Start project.

With the exception of the above, early childhood education and care services in Ireland are delivered
outside the formal education system, by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary interests and are described variously as crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, naíonraí (Irish language pre-schools), playgroups and daycare services. Government investment in such provision is primarily implemented by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCYA. In 2015/2016, 4,178 early years’ service providers were contracted to offer the ECCE programme nationally. 75% of these were private and 25% were community service providers (Pobal 2016).

The Department of Education and Skills operates a split system of governance and regulation with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the implementation of early childhood education. DCYA is responsible, in the main, for pre-primary education, while the Department of Education and Skills has responsibility for primary education. While the compulsory school age for primary school is 6 years, children as young as 4 years may enroll in primary schools. All forms of pre-primary education are optional.

The early childhood education and care sector is supported by Síolta [3], the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, and by Aistear [4], the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [5].

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme is a schedule of clearly defined steps including self-assessment, action planning, quality development and evidence collection, portfolio building and validation. A mentor supports the early years’ service through the Síolta QAP while the quality ratings are further validated. The NCCA has also published an Aistear-Síolta practice guide to better support children’s learning and development. Better Start [6] is a support service which provides advice and training to enable centres to apply and implement the frameworks.

The Programme for Government commits to prioritising early years’ investment to reap a host of positive outcomes, including higher secondary school completion, employment rates and higher lifetime earnings. These measures underpin a targeted investment approach based on international best practice for young children.

Early-Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEIs) are carried out in early-years services participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. They are part of a range of steps being taken by both Departments to improve quality and standards in the broad range of early-years settings delivering the ECCE programme. They are carried out by specialist early-years inspectors in the DES Inspectorate on behalf of both departments. As well as reporting on the quality of the provision in the pre-schools, the early-years’ inspectors advise staff in the pre-schools about how to improve their work with children. These education-focused inspections complement the regulatory inspections carried out by TUSLA [7], the regulatory body for early-years provision. The first inspections began in mid-April 2016 and the first reports of 182 pre-schools inspected were published by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills on 30 June 2016.

In 2015, an Early Years Advisory Group was established to address issues arising and relating to early years education including to:

- Advise the Department of Education and Skills on, and inform future policy development;
- Provide a forum for exchange of ideas and best practice;
- Advise on strengthening the quality of early years education;
- Advise on the integration of early years education into the overall education continuum.

An Early Years Education Forum was held in December 2015 to give stakeholders in the Early Years sector an opportunity to inform the development of future policy. The conference was called “Transforming Vision into Future Practice” to reflect the fact that there have been significant policy
developments in the sector and the next steps involve implementing these new policies on the ground in partnership with stakeholders.