



Early Years Leading Education in Ireland

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PLÉ submission to the consultation on the DES Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2018

Introduction

PLÉ welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the DES Statement of Strategy 2016- 2018. We note the eight areas of priority which are set out in ‘*A Programme for a Partnership Government*’, and welcome the acknowledgement of the importance of the first five years of life, and the concomitant commitment to prioritising the Early Years through a series of measures including access for children with special educational needs; additional paid parental leave in the first year of a child’s life; review and reform of the inspection regime; reduction in class sizes; family friendly childcare, and support and expand the provision of quality afterschool care for school age children. PLÉ also wishes to acknowledge the following values which underpin the DES strategy 2015 – 2017:

1. We value **learning** as a public good and recognise its role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of society
2. We value **quality** and are committed to the principle of continuous improvement and being open to external ideas, challenges and debate
3. We recognise the **learner’s** place at the centre of policy development
4. We value **relationships** and working in collaboration within the education sector and with the wider community (DES Strategic Statement 2015-2017).

The following submission to the consultation process on the DES Statement of Strategy 2016- 2018 is primarily focused upon the following priority areas identified within ‘A Programme for Partnership Government:

- **Early Years**, i.e., children aged from birth to six years in both pre-school and the infant classes of primary school
- **Special Educational Needs** (in the context of the early years)
- **Making better use of Educational Assets within Communities** (in the context of the provision of after school care for school aged children)
- **Meeting the skills needs of the future** (in the context of the early years)

How well does the Education service meet the needs of children and students?

In terms of present education provision for children in the birth to six age cohort, in whom PLÉ has a particular interest, the following initiatives must be acknowledged:

1. **Curriculum Review and Reform**, the *Draft Primary Language Curriculum: Junior infants to second class* (report on consultation and engagement, NCCA, 2014); *Mathematics in Early Childhood and Primary Education* (3-8 years): Definitions, Theories, Development and Progression (NCCA Research Report No. 17, 2014) and *Mathematics in Early Childhood and Primary Education* (3-8 years): Teaching and Learning. (NCCA Research Report NO 18, 2014)
2. **Quality Levers** including *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009)¹ and the establishment of Better Start the Early Years Specialist Service
3. **Early Years Education Focused Inspections**². The recruitment of Early Childhood Education and Care Graduates to the inspectorate is a welcome development
4. **Ongoing consultation and collaboration** with external stakeholders, e.g., *Consultation for the Review of Education and Training Programmes in Early Years* (DES, 2016)
5. **Introduction of a minimum qualification level** for early childhood educators³

¹ The implementation of Aistear is discussed more fully later in this submission

² We preface these inspections by highlighting the need for adequate resources and supports. We return to this later in this submission

³ Qualification requirements are discussed in detail later in this submission

6. **A model to Support Access to the Free Pre-School Year for Children with a Disability** (DES/DCYA, 2015) and associated funding
7. **Appointment of a National *Aistear* Coordinator** (imminent)

What improvements can be made within existing resources?

Given the considerable underinvestment in early childhood education and care provision, PLÉ believes that it is not possible to effect improvements within the early years sector in the absence of increased funding. According to Start Strong (2015) public investment in Ireland's ECEC services is 0.2% of GDP, while the average across OECD countries is 0.8%. It is critical that any strategy which aims to enhance the education and life chances of children in Ireland is not just underpinned by good intentions. Rather, as noted in *'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, The National Policy Framework for children and Young People'* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, (DCYA) 2014) investing in children is a social responsibility' (p. 14) that requires a medium to long-term perspective. Likewise, *'A Programme for Partnership Government'* asserts that the political system in Ireland, continues to focus upon the short-term and 'does not easily accommodate long-term thinking' (p.12). Consequently, in the spirit of *'A Programme for Partnership Government'*, PLÉ considers the proposed DES Statement of Strategy 2016- 2018 as a short term measure, that is insufficient to build upon the positive initiatives that are now underway in relation to the early years in particular.

We recommend that the DES should:

- **Develop and publish a vision for the early years that is cognisant of both the pre-school and the early years of primary school.**

Furthermore, in order to meet the ambitious objectives proposed within *'A Programme for Partnership Government'*, such as reducing class sizes in primary school, introducing a robust model for subsidised high quality childcare for children aged 9-36 months, investing in the professionalisation of the workforce (p. 77-78), a fully costed and funded long-term vision and strategy for early childhood education and care is imperative. PLÉ welcomes all measures that are intended to enhance the quality of education and care provision for children from birth to six years, however, any such measures must be matched with sufficient resources.

What improvements can be made through new provision?

The concept of new provision is ambiguous. PLÉ understands this to mean increased investment, and in this context, we suggest that in addition to reducing class sizes in primary school, the following improvements directed towards the early years (birth to six years) as a whole could be made on a phased basis over the lifetime of a long-term statement of strategy:

- **Appropriate implementation of *Aistear*** the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) across the pre-school and primary school (infant class) sectors. This would include the provision of equitable and accessible *Aistear* training to both primary and early years educators, taking account of early childhood development, play as primary vehicle for children's learning in the early years, pedagogical strategies, observations, documentation of learning and so on. In this way, the much debated and discussed continuum of education proposed within the White Paper on Early Childhood Education: *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999) and reinforced through a range of OECD reports could be realised
- **Fully resourced time for early years educators to engage in cycles of observation, planning and evaluation** as envisaged within the practice frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear*
- **Consultation on what constitutes school readiness** and the development of clear guidelines detailing the roles and responsibilities of early years educators and infant class teachers in this regard
- **Introduction of a 60% degree led early years workforce**, and the development of clear career pathways for early years educators with salaries commensurate with qualifications and experience.
- **Introduction of pay parity** between early years educators and primary school teachers where both hold an honours degree
- **Expansion of the Learner Fund** to support early years educators to upskill to QQI Level 7/8
- **Extension of the capitation associated with the ECCE programme** from 38 to 48 weeks of the year to redress 'the problems caused by the increased casualisation of work that prevents workers from being able to save or have any job security' (*A Programme for Partnership Government*, 2016 p.40). PLÉ believes that the casualisation of the early years work force is an unintended consequence of the ECCE

programme, particularly for those working with settings that are open all year round. This casualisation undermines both the quality and the long-term sustainability of the early years (Moloney and Pettersen, in press)

Comment on work currently being undertaken by the Department in your area of interest and/or expertise. (What are we doing well, what could we do better)?

As mentioned PLÉ is focused specifically upon early childhood education and care prior to school entry. Following repeated calls for the introduction of a minimum qualification level for those working or intending to work with young children aged birth to school going age, the requirement that all early years educators must hold a QQI Level 5 qualification by December, 2016 is a welcome development. We further acknowledge the requirement that pre-school leaders delivering the ECCE programme must hold a QQI Level 6 qualification. While welcome, these developments are also a cause for concern. It is widely recognised that young children's learning and development is dependent upon the qualifications of their educators. In settings where educators have at least a bachelor's degree, the quality is more likely to be of higher quality, including richer language environments, enhanced literacy environments, and better teacher-child interactions (Barnett, 2003; IOM & NRC, 2015) all of which are highlighted as critical in the early years (see the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*, DES, 2011). Yet in Ireland, a basic QQI Level 5 qualification has been established as standard across the early years sector. Until recently, the exception to this requirement was in relation to the ECCE programme where educators with a QQI Level 7 or 8 (Bachelor's Degree) qualification attracted a higher capitation rate. It is worrying to note in relation to the second free pre-school year that somebody with a QQI Level 6 qualification can also avail of the higher capitation rate. These contradictory qualification requirements are problematic on a number of fronts:

- Devalues the importance of the birth to three age cohort which is associated with simply 'caring'. The most highly qualified educators are required to work with the children aged three years plus in the ECCE scheme. Yet a child's brain develops rapidly during the first five years of life, especially the first three years during which rapid cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional and motor development occurs. Early experiences in the first three years establish either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for

all of the learning, health and behavior that follow (Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, 2007).

- Reinforces a care/education divide where care is associated solely with younger children aged from birth to three years, and for which little education and training is required

Notwithstanding an EU recommendation that 60% of the early years workforce should be trained to degree level (CoRE, 2011) no such target has been set in Ireland. Educators in the ECCE programme are ostensibly educating children, and are therefore required to hold at least a QQI Level 6 qualification, while those working with children from birth to three years require a QQI Level 5 and could be viewed as simply caring for children for which a minimum basic qualification is considered sufficient. Alongside this, PLÉ is concerned at what appears to be a weakening of the position of educators who hold a QQI Level 7 or 8 Bachelors degree vis a vis the ECCE programme. Paying the higher capitation to educators with a QQI Level 6 qualification is a worrying development for ECEC graduates that considerably undermines previous policy of linking Higher Capitation with graduates

This approach to qualification requirements is at odds with the EU recommendation with regards to establishing a degree led early years workforce, and it sends the wrong message about the need for highly qualified and skilled educators to work with children before school entry

Are there opportunities (e.g. new areas of work) which the Department should consider when developing the 2016 - 2018 strategy which would advance the achievement of our mission, vision and objectives across the continuum of education and skills?

In 1999, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education: *Ready to Learn* proposed that ‘early childhood providers in receipt of State funding for developmental places would be subject to inspection’. It further proposed that ‘the purpose of inspection will be to determine whether provision meets the developmental and education standards set by the DES’. Additionally, it was noted that ‘the Child Care Regulations cover matters of health and safety, and standards do not extend to the developmental or educational component of services or the training and qualifications of staff’ (DES, 1999). Much has changed since the publication of *Ready to Learn*; and today, the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016* focus upon both the training and qualifications of staff, and the developmental/educational

component of services. PART V: Care of Child in Pre-School Service, Health, welfare and development of child, section 19. (1) States that a registered provider shall, in providing a pre-school service, ensure that—

- (a) Each child’s learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the pre-school service through the provision of the appropriate activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child, and
- (b) Appropriate and suitable care practices are in place in the pre-school service, having regard to the number of children attending the service and the nature of their needs (Government of Ireland, 2016, p.18).

In relation to staff training and qualifications, the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016* requires that a registered provider shall ensure that...’each employee working directly with children attending the service holds at least a major award in Early Childhood Care and Education at Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework, or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent’ (DCYA, 2016, p.12).

The involvement of the DES in Education Focussed inspections of settings participating in the ECCE programme is perceived as a positive and progressive development that ‘validates the work of early years educators by adopting a strengths- based approach to inspection’ (Moloney, 2015). It is especially heartening to note that the main focus of these inspections “will be on the quality of the dynamic processes that facilitate children’s learning in the early years setting... [and the] ongoing development of quality through co-professional dialogue between practitioners in early years settings and DES Early Years inspectors” (DES, 2015). This approach signals a new departure for the ECCE sector where early years educators and inspectors are seen as co-professionals, and where the inspectorate is interested in what these educators are doing well, in encouraging self-evaluative review processes, and supporting them to enhance quality provision. The recruitment of Early Childhood Education and Care Graduates who must also have at least 5 years’ experience within early years settings (birth-6 years) is a particular strength of the education focused inspections. However, in the context of the multiple inspections to which the early years sector is subjected (i.e., DES, TUSLA, POBAL, Health and Safety), it is apparent that the present inspection regime should be reviewed and reformed. Although the proposed DES education focussed inspections are primarily a positive development, they none-the-less reinforce the emerging care-education divide discussed earlier. The decision to focus solely upon settings participating in the ECCE

programme, as well as the increased qualification requirements for Leaders working in the scheme, implies that this programme is the only aspect of provision that is educational. The DES is taking increasing responsibility for the early years sector as evidenced through the introduction of education focused inspections of the ECCE programme. In many other jurisdictions (e.g., the UK, Denmark, New Zealand, Finland), the early years are governed by a single Ministry, usually the Ministry of Education, and early years education is conceptualised and funded as part of a continuum of educational provision from age one upwards, with a single unitary inspection model. In other words early years education from birth is seen as a public good and its role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of society is fully recognised.

There is emerging anecdotal evidence of some early years educators receiving contradictory advice and recommendations from the DES and the Tusla Inspectorates. There are indications also of overlap in terms of the documentation required by both inspectorates, as well as conflicting advice and recommendations from DES/TUSLA inspectors and the Better Start Specialists. Coupled with the concerns outlined above with regards to a care-education divide, and in light of this emerging evidence, PLÉ recommends that:

- **TUSLA and the DES collaborate** and agree upon a robust unified single inspection regime
- **A common inspection framework** that takes account of both the health and safety aspects of the the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016*, and the educational aspects of early years provision be developed
- **The common inspection framework be used across the early years sector** (pre-school and infant classes in primary school) to ensure a continuum of provision for children in the birth to six years cohort

Comment on any issues relating to the continuum of education and skills, in addition to your particular area of interest and/or expertise

Ideologically at least, the practice frameworks *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) are intended to bridge the care-education divide, and to establish a continuum of educational provision for children in the birth to six years age cohort. In reality, neither framework has been implemented due to a distinct lack of resources. The establishment of Better Start has been a step in the right direction towards supporting the early years sector to

implement these frameworks. However, the approach to the implementation of *Aistear* in particular differs in terms of training and resourcing between primary school and early years settings. Although the importance of play for young children is emphasised in the primary school curriculum, research in Ireland suggests that children are required to sit for long periods of time in infant classrooms (Murphy, 2004; Hayes, 2004; McGettigan and Gray, 2012). In their 2012 study, McGettigan and Gray describe how a sample of children attending primary school (n=22) aged between four and six years reported that they were expected to sit for long periods of time, to be quiet, to solve math problems, to write, to know their letters and to complete their homework. In relation to using play as a teaching methodology as envisaged through *Aistear*, infant teachers conceptualise and operationalise play primarily through ‘station teaching’ or through the ‘Aistear hour’. This is a misinterpretation of *Aistear* and a misrepresentation of how this curriculum framework is intended to be used in the infant classes of primary school. On the other hand, to date, there has not been a comprehensive implementation plan for early years educators working with children from birth to school going age. Yet, settings participating in the ECCE programme are now being inspected upon this framework in the absence of capacity building or resources. At a minimum, a continuum of educational provision implies progression from one setting to another, and a sharing of information between settings. It is widely acknowledged that there is a dearth of information sharing between pre-school and primary school settings, and that in many instances, pre-school programmes are underpinned by primary school academic activities where children spend much of their time indoors, learning letters and numbers in preparation for primary school (OECD, 2006; Pantazis and Potsi, 2012; Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), 2013).

PLÉ therefore recommends:

- **Joint training, and continuous professional development of infant class teachers and early years educators** in order to develop a shared understanding of the importance of play as a pedagogical tool in the early years, and how each can best support children’s learning through this methodology

Any other observations that you would suggest the Department should consider in the formulation of our strategy for education and skills 2016 – 2018

The early years sector has repeatedly advocated for the removal of rates from early childhood settings. In response, various Governments have stated that such settings are not educational establishments, and therefore commercial rates apply. It is evident that early childhood settings can no longer be considered ‘non-educational’ nor commercial. This change in status has been driven by the expansion of the childcare subvention scheme to the private sector and the roll out of the ECCE programme (both of which now determine the fees charged by settings). In addition, the DES through its education focussed inspections clearly recognises those settings participating in the ECCE programme as educational.

We note the focus within ‘*A Programme for Partnership Government*’ on various measures to address the issue of commercial rates specifically as they apply to the tourism sector. PLÉ considers it timely, to now address this issue in the context of the early years. Therefore, we recommend **the phased removal of rates from all early childhood settings over the life time of a long-term strategy for the early years as proposed within this submission.**

Prioritising Early Years

The details relating to the Government’s intentions towards prioritising the early years as set out within ‘*A Programme for Partnership Government*’ focus upon the following areas:

- Review and assess the quality of the first pre-school year and the application of the Aistear curriculum and also include a review to ensure children can avail of a full two years
- Conduct and publish an independent review of the cost of providing quality childcare in private and community settings, consistent with the principle of ongoing professionalisation of the sector. We will continue to support quality and professionalisation initiatives and reforms such as Better Start, Síolta and the Learner Fund
- Monitor the implementation of new quality regulations and standards and work towards further paediatric first aid training for staff

- Review and reform the inspection regime, and withdraw funding from providers that do not meet quality standards (*A Programme for Partnership Government 2016*, p.76).

In considering these objectives, PLÉ asks how they will enhance and support a) the quality of education and care provision in the early years, and b) the professionalisation of the early years sector? In terms of reviewing the quality of the first pre-school year, we are concerned about how this will be undertaken. The ECCE programme has been in operation since 2010, and is now in its sixth year. The opportunity to review the programme has been missed. What will now be achieved, what assessment tool will be utilised, and how will the findings be benchmarked given that we do not have any baseline information for comparisons.

We welcome the proposal to conduct and publish an independent review of the cost of providing quality childcare in private and community settings, and believe that this is an essential action that is key to determining how best to support the early years sector to provide quality experiences and opportunities for young children.

We also welcome the commitment to continue to support quality and professionalisation initiatives and reforms such as Better Start, Síolta and the Learner Fund. However, we are interested in what this proposal looks like, and drawing upon our submission thus far, we recommend that the following actions should be prioritised:

- **Provision of fully resourced time** for early years educators to engage in cycles of observation, planning and evaluation as envisaged within the practice frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear*
- **Introduction of a 60% degree led early childhood workforce**, and the development of clear career pathways for early years educators with salaries commensurate with qualifications and experience.
- **Introduction of pay parity** between early years educators and primary school teachers where both hold an honours degree
- **Expansion of the Learner Fund** to support early years educators to upskill to QQI Level 7/8
- **Extension of the capitation** associated with the ECCE programme from 38 to 48 weeks of the year to redress ‘the problems caused by the increased casualisation

of work that prevents workers from being able to save or have any job security' (*A Programme for Partnership Government*, 2016 p.40).

- **Development of a robust unified single inspection regime**
- **Development of a common inspection framework** that takes account of both the health and safety aspects of the the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016*, and the educational aspects of early years provision
- **Use of the common inspection framework across the early years sector** (pre-school and infant classes in primary school) to ensure a continuum of education and care provision for children aged from birth to six years
- **Provision of joint training, and continued professional development** of infant class teachers and early years educators in order to develop a shared understanding of the importance of play as a pedagogical tool in the early years, and how each can best support children's learning through this methodology

PLÉ is concerned about the list of recognised/acceptable qualifications for working with children in the early years. It is interesting to note the integrity of the primary school profession where one qualification only, i.e., A Bachelor of Education is required. Naturally, while we recognise that the diversity of the early years sector requires a number of entry requirements, it is disconcerting to find that no less than **407** different qualifications, including nursing and teaching are acceptable for the purposes of meeting the requirements of the Regulations and DCYA Childcare Programmes Contracts (DCYA, 2016). We recommend that:

- **The vast array of acceptable qualifications should be reviewed, and that clear and comprehensive selection criteria for determining the suitability of qualifications should be developed and published.**

PLÉ is concerned about an emerging trend within the Higher Education Sector of the development of one year QQI Level 7 Early Childhood Degree Programmes. Currently somebody who holds a QQI Level 6 qualification and has three years' experience working in the sector can access such a one year 60 ECTS programme. This suggests that work experience is being afforded significant recognition for prior learning (RPL), but on what basis is being done, and what method of RPL is being utilised? Moreover, it is our understanding that QQI Level 6 awards do not equate to two years of a HETAC (QQI Level 7/8 degree programme). We are therefore concerned that a one year programme will lower

the training requirement in order to achieve a Level 7 award, and also devalue other B.A programmes offered by HEIs at Level 7 and Level 8. Potentially, somebody can now undertake a one year QQI Level 6 programme and a one year Level 7 programme and graduate with a Level 7 B.A in Early Childhood. This matter requires attention.

Making Better use of Educational Assets within Communities

We note the proposal within the both the interdepartmental group report: *Future Investment in Childcare In Ireland* (2015) and *A Programme for Partnership Government* (2016, p.78) ‘to utilise our primary school buildings for afterschool care provision for school age children to offer more options and flexibility to parents’. Although there is no universal definition of afterschool care, in an Irish context, it is understood as the ‘need to provide a childcare facility to meet the care needs of children whose parents’ work or educational timetables are incompatible with school timetables’ (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), 2005, p. v111). Consequently, services may be required to provide for the care needs of children before school starts in the morning, after school finishes in the afternoon and during school holidays and pre-planned school closures (Ibid, p. viii). This model of provision works well in other jurisdictions such as the Scandinavian countries. Likewise in New Zealand, such programmes known as OSCAR (Out of School Care and Recreation) are located in or near schools. However, given the present configuration of early years provision in Ireland, and the distinct lack of focus to date upon the provision of afterschool care, the proposals contained in the reports outlined above give rise to a number of concerns:

- **Quality of provision.** In the absence of regulations for the afterschool sector in Ireland, how would the quality of provision be guaranteed? Who will operate the proposed afterschool settings in school premises? What qualification requirements, if any, will be put in place? Bearing in mind, that children availing of after school care will have spent their day in a highly structured environment, it is vital that careful consideration is given to age-groupings, and to the nature and type of programme/activities that will be facilitated within these settings. PLÉ proposes that after school provision must be underpinned by Article 31 of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets out the child’s right to play: ‘Parties recognise the rights of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts: parties shall respect and promote the rights of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall

encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity’

It is noteworthy that public funding will be provided to establish afterschool provision in school premises, and consequently, PLÉ asks in what way funding will be linked to the quality of provision.

- **Competitive advantage.** The establishment of afterschool provision in school premises may create a competitive advantage for new entrants to the sector vis a vis cheaper rent and overheads. Rather than a quick fix solution to the provision of afterschool provision, a comprehensive strategy is required. The proposal contained within ‘*A Programme for Partnership Government*’ is to ‘link additional capitation to the provision of buildings for afterschool care, where demand exists’ (p. 78) is of particular concern to PLÉ. Consideration must be given to how this will impact upon existing afterschool providers. It should not be possible for anybody to expedite afterschool provision simply because of the availability of capitation. The quality of children’s experiences must be paramount.
- **Funding mechanism for cash strapped schools.** Schools may potentially this as a money making venture and seek commercial rent, thus adding to the cost of afterschool provision for families. PLÉ therefore recommends expanding the proposal to conduct and publish an independent review of the cost of providing quality childcare in private and community settings to include the cost of afterschool provision. This review would provide a blueprint for the development of a comprehensive afterschool infrastructure that is matched by the allocation of appropriate resources, supports and training
- **Suitability of school premises.** By its nature afterschool provision is a year round service that incorporates care before school starts in the morning, after school finishes in the afternoon, and during school holidays and pre-planned school closures as highlighted earlier. Careful consideration must be given to the suitability of primary schools for this purpose, such as flexibility of usage in terms of access, provision of meals, use of equipment and materials, and the risk of prolonging/replicating the school day.
- PLÉ recommends that:
 - **The DES commission a working group to review *Developing School Age Childcare* published by the DJELR in 2005 as a matter of priority, with a view to redrafting and publishing a set of standards, principles and guidelines for the afterschool sector**
 - **The working group scope the development of draft regulations for the afterschool sector.**

Special Needs Education

The publication of the Interdepartmental Group Report: *Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability* (DES/DCYA, 2015) represents a pivotal point on the journey towards creating inclusive early years provision in Ireland. We especially welcome the focus upon developing an inclusive culture, and the need for a qualified and confident workforce ‘that can confidently meet the needs of all children wishing to participate in the ECCE programme’ (DES/DCYA, 2015, p. 7). It is heartening to see that the proposed model of inclusion has not only been costed, but that funding has been set aside to ensure that it becomes reality in practice. We recognise the ambitious targets associated with the QQI Level 6 training programme associated with this model, whereby it is estimated ‘that an average of 20% of ECCE settings might seek to participate in this training each year for the next four years’ (DES/DCYA, 2015, p. 29). Additionally, the DES/DCYA suggest that ‘every pre-school service should be encouraged to appoint an Inclusion Co-Coordinator’ (p.29). The inclusion coordinator must have a special interest in disability and be undertake the QQI Level 6 training programme outlined above. Following completion and award of this training, the early years setting will be ‘recognised for its commitment and capacity to cater for children with a disability through additional capitation’ (Ibid., p.28). As yet the role of the inclusion coordinator is unclear; but it appears that this person will assume a role of significant responsibility within the early years setting. While the development of career pathways within the sector is a positive and progressive step, the continued emphasis upon a Level 6 qualification for a role of responsibility is disappointing. PLÉ understands that a system of RPL is currently being developed to enable early years educators who hold a QQI Level 7 or Level 8 to avail of the proposed inclusion training at Level 6.

We recommend that:

- **The DES undertakes further work on the development of a job description and clear roles and responsibilities for the inclusion coordinator.**

8. Meeting the Skills Needs of the Future

An important area of change in the ECEC sector in Ireland has been the increased attention to the need for formal qualifications for early years educators, and as mentioned previously, the

competences of the ECEC workforce is a predictor of quality early childhood education and care (Lumsden, 2010; Urban et al, 2012). Throughout this submission, we have highlighted the anomalies in relation to the training and qualification requirements for working in the early years sector. We wish to reiterate our welcome for the establishment of a minimum qualification level for the sector, and the provision of the Learner Fund which has enabled many in the sector to attain the basic minimum QQI Level 5 and Level 6 qualifications required through the ECCE programme and the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016*. The many recommendations with regards to qualifications and CPD for early years educators earlier in this submission are highly pertinent in terms of meeting the skills needs of the future as it relates to the early years.

The journey to become an early years educator involves the mastery of particular knowledge and skills that form the basis for quality practice (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005). Traditionally, early childhood educator preparation programmes provide opportunities for pre-service educators to practice new pedagogical skills in the field, as a critical factor for promoting and enhancing their ability to influence children's development and learning in a positive way (Hyson, Tomlinson & Morris, 2009). Moreover, educator preparation cannot be "adequately addressed through standard, content-focused training" but must take place in a real life setting (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 46). For this reason, it is important to develop learning processes that prepare pre-service educators for interactions with the supervising tutor, the child and the family, that allow knowledge to be jointly constructed and specifically crafted for young children (Recchia and Shin, 2010). The EU (2011) posits that early years educator skills and competencies must be based upon a well-balanced combination of theory and practice (practical experiences in early years settings) which are central to enabling students to translate theory into practice, develop the key competencies required to work in the field of ECEC, and in shaping their personal philosophy of working with young children. While most Universities/Colleges/IoTs offer a professional practice component as part of their degree programmes, concerns about the nature of placements (across the FE and HE sector) have been raised at a number of national fora. Currently, there is no available empirical data with regards to the nature, extent and experience of the professional practice component of ECEC degree level programmes across HEIs in Ireland. Against this backdrop PLÉ is currently engaged in a research study which seeks to examine the practices and perspectives related to the professional practice (PP) component of undergraduate ECEC degrees (QQI Level 7/8) across the PLÉ membership. In line with the proposal to 'drive quality throughout the sector

by investing in the professionalisation of the workforce, through continuous professional development within programmes of further and higher education' (*A Programme for Partnership Government*, 2016. P.78). PLÉ seeks to enhance their own knowledge and skills with regards to how to best to organise, deliver, support and assess this aspect of their work with ECEC students. We are open to working collaboratively with the DES in terms of sharing the outcomes of this research, and the development of a national framework to guide professional practice placements.

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