

**Submission by the National Voluntary Childcare  
Collaborative (NVCC) to Mr. Brian Power, Early Years  
Education Policy Unit, in relation to the development of a  
National Childcare Training Strategy.**

## **Introduction**

The National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, (NVCC) is a body comprised of eight national non-governmental \*organisations in Ireland, each of which works with children, and each with a special interest, and a very considerable amount of experience and expertise in childcare and early learning for children. NVCC brings together the diverse range of experience and expertise of its member organisations to work towards the development of excellence in childcare in Ireland.

**\* Barnardos, *Childminding Ireland*, Children in Hospital Ireland, Forbairt Naíonraí Teo, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association, National Children's Nurseries Association, St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland**

## Background

The introduction of the current National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 earlier this year brings with it a transition from an EU labour-market childcare policy to a broader child and family-centered programme. NVCC welcomes and lauds this re-direction of primary focus towards the child and family.

NVCC feels that it is significant also to note that the ESRI Medium Term Review 2005-2012, records the fact that today, the biggest cohort of the population is those in their twenties with no dependants. Over the coming years the majority of that cohort are likely to be parents of small children, a consequence of which will be a significant increase in the demand for childcare services. The said Review predicts an increase in births, of around one sixth, over the coming decade and notes a reduction in the traditional suppliers of childcare, resulting in a predicted increase in the cost of childcare outside the home.

This will present challenges for *parents*, for *employers* and for *government*. Coupled with other factors, including firstly, the launch in June 2006 of the Government's new strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation, the goal of which is to help Ireland become a world player in research and achieve the Government ambition of developing a knowledge –driven economy. This is in accordance with the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, which can be achieved by way of doubling the number of PhD graduates and increasing private-sector investment in research and development to €2.5billion by 2013. Therefore it is imperative that parents are facilitated in contributing to the achievement of this ambition, by way of having access to quality affordable childcare.

Secondly, the European Social Model, which was adopted by the EU Parliament on Wed, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2006, expresses its '*disappointment that many Member States are far from achieving the Lisbon Strategy objectives and calls on Member States fully to implement the revised Lisbon Strategy which is the only sustainable way to achieve growth, increase competitiveness and create more and better jobs*' **and** '*calls on Member States to achieve, in particular, the specific targets set for employment, R&D, investment **childcare**, and lifelong learning*'.

Thirdly, the National Workplace Strategy, the Government's blueprint for transforming Irish workplaces into '*workplaces of the future*', highlights, as a **critical action area, to 'improve childcare access, affordability and choice'**.

Furthermore one of the priorities for public investment highlighted by the ESRI in its Report to the Department of Finance in its input into the National Development Plan 2007-2013 was to improve and expand early childhood education

In consideration of each of the above factors in the next National Development Plan, the government will require focus on the childcare issues to under-pin the positive development, by the High Level Implementation Group of the National Workplace Strategy, to facilitate the Government Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation, thus taking steps to comply with the terms of the Lisbon Strategy and ensuring in relation thereto a positive move in positioning for Ireland within the EU member states, whilst also representing a positive move in facilitating the current government focus on 'joined up framework'.

In terms of placing the child at the centre, it is worth taking on board Professor James Heckman's research on the economic gains from investing in childcare as set out in the NESF Report No. 31. Professor Heckman demonstrates that '***by placing the child at the centre, and thereby promoting fairness and social justice a direct correlation is the promotion of productivity in the economy and in society at large***'. The most recent Report to the Government, by the Expert Working Group on Future Skill needs, recommended an increase of 1% (an extra €1.7bn) in the educational spend to increase it to 5.5% of GDP, with a focus on amongst other areas, pre-school education, another factor which adds to the absolute necessity for a successful National Childcare Training Strategy.

*Who is the Sector?*

Currently in Ireland the childcare sector workforce has a male/female ratio of no more than 1:99, being comprised of a mix of graduate workers, experienced workers with certified training, experienced workers with no training, experienced workers with uncertified training, and community employment scheme participants, all working within a system which currently has **no** formal requirement for training or

qualifications. *(the new regulations change this to a person who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare)*

*Who is coming into the Sector?*

Currently the childcare workers who are entering the sector are young people from plc's, second-level school leavers, qualified workers from other countries, unqualified workers from other EU countries, graduates, mature people entering the sector, people returning to the sector, Community Employment Scheme participants (which can be problematic depending on the level of interest of the respective participants.)

## **NVCC position**

In considering all of the above, the NVCC wishes to state that it is essential to note that the National Childcare Training Strategy is pivotal to the current National Childcare Investment Programme which seeks to place the child at the centre and to deliver education and care services centred on the needs of the child. Getting the National Childcare Training Strategy ‘right’ now, will facilitate all concerned, whilst keeping the interests of the child to the centre, in dealing with the increased demand for childcare services, against whatever backdrop/environment accompanies that demand at any given time in the coming years. This will add value to the ongoing progression of the NCIP aim of ‘delivery of **quality early childhood education and care services centred on the needs of the child**’ whilst all the time ensuring the placement of the child at the centre.

NVCC fully endorses the vision for Early Childhood education and care as set out in the NESF Report No. 31 (June 2005) as under-noted:

*‘All young children will have access to, and participate in a range of quality education and care services and supports of an internationally accepted standard through a plan implemented over the next ten years (2005-2015)’*

and in support of the NESF vision, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative is of the view that

- i the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy will be the most crucial element in the configuration of the combination of elements which simultaneously interact in the childcare sector, and
- ii the level of effectiveness of the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy will form a direct correlation with progress in terms of achieving the NESF vision set out above.

The said NESF Report also contains an endorsement of the view set out in the National Children’s Strategy that achieving its goals and objectives will require changes to the way the delivery of services for children are planned and managed. The National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative sees the development of an **effective** National Childcare Training Strategy as an opportunity to commence major positive change in the said planning and management in the delivery of services for children.

NVCC is of the view that, to ensure a quality childcare experience for children, it is imperative that childcare is provided by an adequately trained and qualified childcare workforce. Goal 4 of NVCC Policy calls for

***“training, professional development (and quality employment conditions) for those engaged in childcare”***

The experience of the member organisations of the NVCC is that comprehensive training and continuing professional development opportunities are both essential for provision of quality services and it firmly believes that a commitment to high training standards and continuing professional development for childcare practitioners must be underpinned by national policies, investment and infrastructure.

NVCC, whilst welcoming the development of a National Childcare Training Strategy and in order to ensure maximum efficiency, and to ensure the achievement of appropriate training outcomes, is of the view that such a strategy should take into account each of the under-noted criteria at each stage of its development:

**That the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy will value and support:**

- Children and childhood
- The primacy of the family in children's lives
- Parental partnership in early years education

- Childcare provision based on children's needs and rights
- The important role of play

**That the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy will contribute to the development of:**

- Services which are inclusive and responsive to their communities
- Holistic support
- Diversity of philosophy in provision of childcare services
- An overall strategy for children in Ireland
- Trained and qualified staff
- Ongoing professional development including pedagogical support
- Good employment practice and pay and conditions
- Evidence based quality in childcare initiatives

**That the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy will be:**

- Meeting a real need for quality childcare
- Likely to contribute to long term sustainability
- Non-threatening to existing services
- Supporting childcare service provision equitably – across service type
- Encouraging childminders into the formal economy
- Linked to the achievement of quality indicators
- Supportive of professional development and good employment standards
- Setting appropriate training and qualification standards
- Rewarding training achievement at an appropriate level
- Mainstreaming childcare training as a recognised 3<sup>rd</sup> level/vocational pathway with all the related financial and other supports at this level
- Defining clear progression paths

**That the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy will :**

- Support managers and providers in the sector

- Ensure that childcare providers are mentored and supported in the provision of services to children
- Ensure Garda/Police vetting for all childcare practitioners

The National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative believes that comprehensive training and continuing professional development opportunities are essential for the provision of quality services, and believes that a commitment to high training standards, continuing professional development to include pedagogical support, together with good working conditions will collectively drive quality standards in services.

The National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative aspires to childcare services having clearly defined roles for their respective staff members, with clearly defined training for each of the roles as defined, following an examination of the relevant factors to include inter alia; what facilitates training, the barriers to training, progression paths, funding, training currently available, and gaps in training currently available.

The NVCC advocates for versatility in the provision of training, e.g. part-time, evening, on-line, training for early school leavers, \*a ‘user-friendly’ structure to facilitate the childcare practitioner with anything up to 20 years or more experience, to access training(\*currently very difficult- definite requirement to be addressed urgently), and to access funding for that training. Under the above category of ‘barriers to training’ and ‘user friendly structures’, NVCC feels that it must recommend the provision of support to services to facilitate the release of existing staff for training, one method by which this could be achieved would be by way of selection of relief staff from a designated ‘panel of qualified staff’

Factors, which NVCC feels must be given consideration in designing the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy, include :

- accreditation of prior learning when accessing training
- continuing professional development
- clear progression paths
- funding for all childcare courses, as occurs with other 3<sup>rd</sup> level courses
- philosophies/methodologies
- pedagogy

- practical/academic skills balance
- management skills
- observation skills
- reflection skills
- diversity awareness skills(nine grounds)
- training of trainers
- minimum qualification required to work in a childcare service
- support for organisations through the process of accreditation of training programmes

The NVCC is of the view that an adequate funding policy is essential in order to facilitate acceptable follow-through of the proposed National Childcare Training Strategy. One of the priorities of the NVCC Policy is the pursuance of a commitment of an acceptable, adequate and appropriate level of funding to invest in training and continued professional development ensuring that funded childcare courses are available **free of charge** where appropriate. Funding policy should also encompass the provision of all childcare training courses, as is the case with other 3<sup>rd</sup> level provision, e.g. in the case of Montessori and Steiner, currently not funded. The forecast in the ESRI quarterly review, Spring 2006 of GNP growth rates of 5.1% and 5.3% for 2006 and 2007 respectively would indicate that, certainly in the short term, the strength of the economy should allow for major significant resources to be committed and allocated to training in the early childhood education and care sector, thus going some way to endeavouring to achieve the benefit/cost ratios set out in the previously mentioned NESF Report no. 31. Perhaps consideration could be given to matching some or all of the '1% of GNP' which is currently being set aside to fund the National Pensions Reserve, and using same as a 'National Childcare Training Strategy –ECCE Fund', taking on board Professor James Heckman's research on the economic gains from investing in childcare as set out in the NESF Report No. 31. The NVCC feels very strongly that the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations should be facilitated in continuing, and expanding their respective childhood education and care training by way of provision of increased funding within an agreed structure. The NVCC endorses the view/experience of each of its individual members, that in the pool of stakeholders involved in training in early childhood education and care, they are best placed to influence **quality** (the maker or breaker in

terms of added value to outcomes for children in childcare services), in training provision within the said early childhood education and care sector.