National Childcare Strategy

Report of the Partnership 2000
Expert Working Group on Childcare
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Foreword


The working process of the Expert Working Group was guided by the "spirit" of the Partnership 2000 agreement:

• "Partnership through this national agreement involves, in particular, a shared understanding of the key mechanisms and relationships in the formulation and implementation of policy.
• The partnership process reflects interdependence between the partners.
• The partnership is necessary because no party can achieve its goals without a significant degree of support and commitment from others.
• Partnership is characterised by a problem-solving approach, in which various interest groups address joint problems. Partnership involves trade-offs both between and within interest groups.
• The partnership process involves different participants on various agenda items, ranging from principles of national macro-economic policy to specifics of local development.
• All Social Partners accept that the benefits of economic growth be shared by all citizens in a manner that reflects this country’s commitment to social solidarity and a better quality of life for all our people.” (Partnership 2000, Ch.11).

This spirit enabled the Expert Working Group to work through the many tensions which arose when it became clear that devising a National Strategy for the development of the childcare sector was a complex matter.

I would like to thank all the organisations who agreed to participate in the process and in particular all the members for their time and patience. Particular thanks is due to the chairpersons of the eight policy subgroups without whose dedication the task would have proved nigh impossible.

The work of the Expert Working Group could not have run so smoothly without the excellent service provided to it by the Secretariat which was supported by Area Development Management Limited and the Centre for Social and Educational Research, DIT.

Finally, I would like to thank John O’Donoghue, T.D., Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, for his personal interest in and support for the activities of the Expert Working Group.

Sylinda Langford
Chairperson
EXPERT WORKING GROUP ON CHILDCA RE

Sylinda Langford
Executive Summary

Introduction

Childcare provision in Ireland has, until now, been left entirely to parents to arrange for themselves. There is now a virtual crisis in childcare supply. As female labour force participation increases, childcare places are dropping, partly because childminders are opting for alternative employment in the formal economy, partly because of the impact of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and partly because larger childcare centres are experiencing difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified childcare staff.

The Expert Working Group was established under Partnership 2000 to develop a strategy which integrates the different strands of the current arrangements for the development and delivery of childcare and early educational services. The Group, chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, had wide ranging terms of reference and over seventy members, representing the relevant Government departments, social partners, statutory bodies, non-governmental organisations and parents. The term 'childcare' (See full definition section, p.xvii) as used by the Group means services providing care and education. The large membership of the Group required a multi-level working process involving plenary sessions attended by all members, eight subgroups, each focusing on a particular issue and a steering group.

The Expert Working Group was faced with a complex and challenging task. Its terms of reference were wide ranging and multi-faceted. Among the key considerations which shaped the Expert Working Group report were:

- agreement that the needs and rights of children should be a primary consideration;
- recognition that the terms of reference of the Expert Working Group were not directed to parents who choose to care for their own children and that the needs of such parents may require a different policy solution;
- the need to meet EU requirements for Employment Guidelines and Structural Funds;
- the desirability of building on existing structures and services for delivery of childcare services, in a cost efficient partnership approach; and
- the need to develop childcare as a legitimate business and the consequent concept of “receipted expenditure” which is fundamental to the Expert Working Group’s recommendations for development of the sector.

Chapter 1: Social Context of Childcare Provision

The Expert Working Group has examined the social context of childcare provision, ie:

- Pressure for the development of childcare has been on the national agenda for the past two decades and this is reflected in the number of national reports, legislation and initiatives since the early 1980s.
- Parents use childcare for a variety of reasons.
- Demographic, social and economic changes in Ireland, in particular the increased participation of women in the workforce, have resulted in increased demand for childcare services.
- The availability and cost of childcare and the difficulties around reconciling employment and family lives are the most significant barriers to women accessing and participating in the labour force.
As the number of employed parents increases there is a need for a public policy to help parents reconcile employment and caring for their children in a way that ensures quality of life for children, parents and families and equality of opportunities for women.

Childcare is one of several family-friendly policies which can ensure a stronger balance between work and family life.

The Expert Working Group considers that such policies should not be seen solely as a ‘women’s issue’ but should be advanced from a broader perspective to include benefits that accrue to men and children.

The rights of children to equality of care and education are also part of the childcare debate and there has been strong recognition, both nationally and internationally, of the benefit of quality childcare for children, families and communities.

Chapter 2: Childcare in Ireland: Current Provision

Childcare provision is unco-ordinated, variable in quality and in short supply. State expenditure on childcare is largely targeted at children in need or in disadvantaged circumstances and much State expenditure arises as a by-product of other activities. Childcare services take a variety of forms including sessional services (e.g. pre-school playgroups, naíonraí, Montessori schools), full-day care (e.g. nurseries, crèches), childminders, drop-in centres and after school care.

A survey of childcare arrangements indicates that:

- 17% of all children aged 0-9 years avail of paid childcare.

- 58% of mothers in full time work avail of childcare as compared with 16% of mothers on home duties.

- the most commonly based form of childcare is a formal arrangement (sessional services and full-day care).

- childminding in the minder’s home is the most common arrangement among women with paid jobs and the second most common overall.

- on average childcare prices are in the range of £44 to £71 per week for full-time care.

- the prices to parents of childcare (as a proportion of average earnings) are amongst the highest in the European Union. Average full-day care prices in Ireland are 20% of average earnings.

Chapter 3: Regulations, Training, Qualifications and Employment

The Expert Working Group has a number of concerns about the Child Care (Pre-School Services Regulations, 1996. The notification system under the Regulations is of limited effect and should be replaced by a registration system; there is confusion about the recommendations on qualifications of childcare personnel; the implementation process is not satisfactory and the Regulations seem to have had an adverse effect on the availability of childcare places.

Childcare training has developed on an ad hoc basis, resulting in a diversity of training courses and qualifications. Many childcare workers have gained skills and knowledge through experience rather than through formal training processes. The Expert Working Group proposes the development of a national framework of qualifications in childcare which could encompass formal and informal training programmes and the accreditation of prior learning.

Childcare as an occupation is generally not well paid or well regarded. The low occupational status accorded to childcare not only deters male participation in the sector, but has implications for the quality
Low pay has also led to difficulties in the recruitment and retention of childcare staff. There is a wide range of pay in the sector with rates of pay being best developed where there is public funding for projects and lowest among childminders who are paid as little as £1.50 per hour. Many community based childcare services depend on Community Employment Schemes to supply staff, as a source of income to meet running costs and to meet adult/child ratios. The Expert Working Group recommends that a Joint Labour Committee be set up for the industry.

Chapter 4: Childcare Provision in urban disadvantaged and rural areas

In urban disadvantaged areas, childcare services are constrained by lack of financial resources and lack of childcare infrastructure and support systems. Barriers include: prohibitive costs, inability of services to employ trained staff, lack of information and restrictive opening hours. In rural areas, barriers to childcare provision include isolation, transport problems, staff costs and the absence of training programmes adapted to the needs of rural provision. Urban disadvantaged and rural areas require childcare strategies and policies which recognise the diverse range of functions and obstacles which childcare services must address in these environments.

Chapter 5: The National Childcare Strategy: Guiding Principles

The Expert Working Group has agreed a statement of principles which are intended to underpin the National Childcare Strategy and guide all childcare services. There are 12 principles in total which have been organised under the following headings: (1) needs and rights of children, (2) equality of access and participation, (3) diversity, (4) partnership and (5) quality. The Expert Working Group sets the needs and rights of children as the primary consideration in the strategy of childcare.

Chapter 6: Rationale for a National Childcare Strategy.

Quality childcare benefits children, their parents, employers and communities in general. Studies show the social benefits of early education in children’s cognitive and social development, particularly for children from disadvantaged areas. The positive impact of out of school programmes on the social and personal development of children has also been demonstrated. Quality childcare also benefits parents and the wider community and has an important role in combating family stress and social exclusion, particularly within families experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Economic benefits of investing in quality childcare are shown at a number of levels: social benefits to children leading to gains in human capital, increased employability of parents combating skill and labour shortages, improving the capacity, profitability and sustainability of childcare provision and job creation in the childcare sector. Demand for childcare is likely to increase by between 25% and 50% over the period to the year 2011. Future demand for childcare is also relevant to the national strategy.

Chapter 7: Stimulating supply and supporting demand

The Expert Working Group recommends six supply side measures and five demand side measures which will improve the availability and affordability of childcare in Ireland. These are interconnected measures, all of which need to be implemented as a package in order to be successful. The concept of received expenditure features in most of these recommendations as the Expert Working Group considers it essential that childcare be brought out of the informal economy and developed as a legitimate business within the services sector. A seven year time frame is envisaged for the development of childcare as a sustainable sector.
The recommended measures are:

**SIX SUPPLY SIDE MEASURES**

- Capital grants/relief for providers
  To upgrade premises to increase quality and quantity of supply
- Tax allowance for childminders
  To support private childminders in transition to formal economy
- Employment encouragement grants
  To encourage increased employment of trained childcare staff
- Tax relief for employers investing in childcare
  To support and stimulate employer involvement
- Funding for local level measures
  To develop after school and childcare networks
- Improve local authority planning guidelines
  To ensure consistency in local authority planning permissions for childcare services.

**FIVE DEMAND SIDE MEASURES** *

- Childcare subsidies
  To support low income families not in tax net to access quality services
- Improvements to FIS
  To support low earners who would not benefit from tax relief measures
- Increase ceilings for lone parent Payment
  To remove disincentives for lone parents earning over ceiling
- Personal Tax relief
  To support parents in tax net at standard rate based on receipts
- Remove treatment of childcare as Benefit in Kind
  To support and stimulate employer involvement

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**Chapter 8: Local Planning and National Co-ordination**

The Expert Working Group recommends local planning and national co-ordination mechanisms to deliver childcare policies. It proposes the establishment of county childcare committees, a national childcare management committee and an interdepartmental policy committee on childcare. The County Childcare Committees would comprise local childcare providers, the NGO/childcare sector, statutory bodies, social partners and parents. Each Committee would develop a seven year county childcare plan which would be submitted to the National Childcare Management Committee for approval.

The National Childcare Management Committee would support, appraise, resource and monitor the county childcare plans, co-ordinate national developments in the childcare field and inform national policy development. The Committee would reflect the same cross sector representative as the County Childcare Committees and would have independent status.

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform would be the designated lead department for the National Childcare Strategy and would chair the Interdepartmental Policy Committee on Childcare which would act as a link between Government and the National Childcare Committees.

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* These measures relate to receipted childcare expenses
Recommendations of the Expert Working Group on Childcare

The Expert Working Group believes that it is essential for Government to take a strategic role to secure high quality services which will be accessible to all children, to secure an adequate childcare workforce, and to develop the conditions which will optimise their work. The development and implementation of a National Childcare Strategy is recommended as the first step in such a process. The National Childcare Strategy should consist of a seven year integrated strategy comprising the recommendations contained in this Report.

**RECOMMENDATION 1 (p.24):**
- The present system of notification should be developed and lead to an amendment of the Child Care Act, 1991, which would provide for a system of registration of facilities and childcare workers.
- All those providing childcare services for one or more children, in addition to their own, including persons employed by the parent/s of the child, either in the child's home or in the childminder's home, should be required to register.
- Relatives (parent, grandparent, siblings, uncles, aunts and step-parents) and guardians or foster parents should be exempt from the requirement to register.
- All childcare providers who offer services to children aged 0 to 12, as defined by the Expert Working Group on Childcare, should be obliged to register under the proposed system of registration.

**RECOMMENDATION 2 (p.26):**
The existing notification system and the proposed system of registration should require adherence to national minimum standards, encouraging 'best practice' which will be developed in consultation and partnership with the NGO sector.

A common induction and training programme should be provided for inspection teams to ensure that there is standardisation of implementation.

In addition, it is recommended that one member of the inspection team should be trained in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education.

**RECOMMENDATION 3 (p.27):**
A Garda clearance procedure at central level, which communicates effectively with local levels, should be put in place to provide clearance information in respect of all personnel working in childcare in whatever capacity.

**RECOMMENDATION 4 (p.29):**
- An occupational profile (such as the model in Appendix 3.2) and appropriate qualifications should be agreed by the proposed National Childcare Management Committee within 12 months.
- A national framework for qualifications in childcare should be developed in consultation with the proposed National Childcare Management Committee.
- The national qualifications framework for childcare should provide progressive pathways of awards, which can be achieved through formal and informal education and training programmes or through the accreditation of prior learning.
- The future development of the childcare sector should aim to achieve the following target:

  A minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services should have a grant eligible basic training of at least three years at a post-18 level, which incorporates both the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development. All training should be modular. All staff in services (both collective and family day care) who are not trained to this level should have right of access to such training including on an in-service basis. (Target 26 of the European Commission Network on Childcare action programme-Quality Targets in Services of Young Children, 1996).
RECOMMENDATION 5 (p.30): The Expert Working Group considers it desirable that children should have contact with both men and women in childcare services and that the childcare sector should aim to achieve the following target: Twenty per cent of staff employed in childcare in collective services should be men (Target 29 of the European Commission's Network on Childcare action programme, Quality Targets in Services for Young Children, 1996). Measures for achieving this should be examined by the National Childcare Management Committee.

RECOMMENDATION 6 (p.30): Employment procedures should be guided by the following target: Services should adopt employment procedures which emphasise the importance of recruiting employees who reflect the ethnic diversity of the local community (Target 36 of the European Commission Network on Childcare Quality Targets in Services for Young Children, 1996).

RECOMMENDATION 7 (p.32): A national pay scale should be established to reflect the social and economic value of the work undertaken by childcare workers. The mechanism proposed is a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) which will be required to set a JLC rate for the industry.

RECOMMENDATION 8 (p.33): • FÁS should prioritise its Community Employment resources towards providing a dedicated childcare training and work experience initiative. • FÁS should continue to develop childcare training initiatives within Community Employment in consultation with the National Childcare Management Committee. • The proposed National Childcare Management Committee should explore and support the development of other routes for those who wish to work in the childcare sector.

RECOMMENDATION 9 (p.40): Within the National Childcare Strategy, the needs of children and families experiencing poverty, disadvantage or social exclusion should be prioritised and resources targeted accordingly.

RECOMMENDATION 10 (p.59): • The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme should be expanded so that the supply of quality childcare in disadvantaged areas can continue to be physically upgraded and have enhanced staffing support. • An additional £3.5m budget should be allocated to the Programme for each of the first three years of the National Childcare Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 11 (p.59): Enhanced capital allowances should be provided to group-based childcare services/businesses.

RECOMMENDATION 12 (p.59): • A new grant scheme should be established for small scale private providers and self-employed childminders not eligible for other supports, towards the capital upgrading of premises to comply with the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996. • This scheme would operate through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. • A budget of £2 million should be allocated in 1999 in order to respond immediately to the demand.

RECOMMENDATION 13 (p.60): • A special tax allowance in respect of childminding earnings should be provided. • Childminding income should be disregarded when eligibility is being determined for social welfare and ancillary benefits, for example, medical cards. • These measures would be subject to review after three years.
RECOMMENDATION 14 (p.61):
- Employment grants of up to £5,000 for each additional new staff member employed in private and community childcare facilities, including social economy initiatives, to be operated through County Enterprise Boards.
- A budget of £5m per annum should be devoted to this purpose which would be ringfenced specifically for childcare.

RECOMMENDATION 15 (p.62):
- Employers should be allowed to offset in their tax returns expenditure incurred in relation to childcare for their employees. This expenditure could take the form of provision of childcare facilities, vouchers for childcare, or direct subsidisation of childcare places for their workers.

RECOMMENDATION 16 (p.62):
In 1999 and subsequent years, the Government should allocate £1 million:
- towards the development of after school childcare provision at local level which would include a specific training dimension, and
- towards the setting up of local childcare networks which would offer educational and training support and advice to childcare providers at local level.

RECOMMENDATION 17 (p.62):
- The Department of the Environment and Local Government, in consultation with the proposed National Childcare Management Committee, should set and publish national guidelines for the granting of planning approval for childcare facilities.
- As a matter of urgency, planning Authorities should include in their Development Plans, Planning Control Guidelines for the provision of a range of childcare facilities. These Guidelines should take account of such matters as the changing pattern of work, family structure and the range of childcare facilities that are now necessary. The Guidelines should also take account of the desirability of having such facilities located in the areas, including housing developments, close to where the users of such facilities live.

RECOMMENDATION 18 (p.65):
- A scheme to support the childcare costs of low income parents participating in all training or education programmes provided by State agencies should be put in place, on the lines of the existing pilot scheme applicable to VTOS, Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Programme. The subsidy would be administered by the relevant training or education authority.
- A childcare subsidy on similar lines should be also paid to parents on development and adult literacy and community education courses. The guidelines and eligibility for such subsidies should be developed by the National Childcare Management Committee, and the subsidy should be administered locally on the basis of receipted expenditure provided to the Local Childcare Committees or its agents.

RECOMMENDATION 19 (p.65):
In recognition of the value of quality childcare provision, the Expert Working Group recommends that the current practice of subsidising childcare for disadvantaged children under the current Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme be broadened to enable parents, who cannot afford childcare and who are undergoing training and do not qualify for any of the above subsidies, to purchase childcare places for their children.

RECOMMENDATION 20 (p.66):
The specified income limit for Family Income Supplement should be raised on a case by case basis where families incur receipted childcare costs.

RECOMMENDATION 21 (p.67):
The One Parent Family Payment scheme should be expanded to increase the ceiling of earnings to £16,000 on a case by case basis where lone parents incur receipted childcare costs.
RECOMMENDATION 22 (p.68):
A tax relief measure at the standard rate is proposed which would grant:
- relief on receipted childcare expenses of up to £4,000 per child to all family units in respect to children aged 0 to 12 years.
- allowances in respect of each child, with the allowance for first child under 5 years at £4,000 per annum, and subsequent children at £3,200.
- allowances for children 5 years and over (school going children) at £2,000 per annum.

RECOMMENDATION 23 (p.69):
Free or subsidised workplace childcare should no longer be treated as benefit in kind for income taxation purposes.

RECOMMENDATION 24 (p.70):
If a tax credit system is introduced, the Expert Working Group’s recommendations in relation to tax, FIS and other demand side subsidies should be replaced by Refundable Tax Credits.

RECOMMENDATION 25 (p.75):
- County Childcare Committees, consisting of representatives from all the relevant cross sector local stakeholders be established.
- The primary focus of the Committees would be the development, implementation and monitoring of a seven year County Childcare Plan.
- The County Childcare Committee should co-ordinate the new and existing services within the area and monitor implementation of the Plan against agreed targets, which should be set by all the stakeholders.
- A budget of £2 million should be allocated for the establishment, development and implementation of county structures.

RECOMMENDATION 26 (p.76):
- A National Childcare Management Committee be established with the same cross sector representation as the County Childcare Committees.
- The key objective of the Committee would be to support, appraise, resource and monitor County Childcare Plans in addition to the co-ordination of existing national developments in the childcare field, and informing national policy development.
- A budget of £0.5 million should be allocated for 1999 for the establishment, research and development costs of the National Childcare Management Committee.
- A budget of £0.5 million should be allocated for 1999 for national/regional childcare organisations of a voluntary nature, who can demonstrate a capacity to support the implementation of the National Childcare Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 27 (p.76):
- The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, should be the designated Lead Department with respect to the National Strategy for Childcare.
- This remit would be to facilitate the co-ordination of the range of childcare services across departments, to strengthen and enhance the interface between all departments with a direct and indirect role in childcare.
- An Interdepartmental Policy Committee on Childcare be established which will operate as a link between Cabinet and the National Childcare Management Committee.
Achoimre Feidhmiúcháin

Réamhrá
Go dtí seo, fágadh soláthar chúram leanaí in Éirinn faoi na tuismitheoirí, go huile is go hiomlan. D’fhéadfá a rá go bhfuil gearthúil anois ann i dtaic le soláthar chúram leanaí de. Ar na cúiseanna atá leis sin tá méadú ar lucht saothair ar mná iad, malairt fostalochta á lorg ag feithlithe leanaí sa gheilleagar foroirí, an éifeacht a bhí ag na Rialúcháin um Chúram Leanaí (Réamhiscole),1996, agus deacrachtaí a bheith ag mórianaid chúram leanaí foirne cáilithe chúram leanaí a earcú agus a choineáil.

Bunaíodh an Sainghrúpa Oibre faoi Chompháirtíocht 2000 chun straitéis a fhorbairt a dhéanfadh comhtháthú ar na codanna difriúla a bhaineann faoi láthair le forbairt agus le soláthar chúram leanaí agus seirbhísí luathoideachais. Feidhmionn an Grúpa faoin Roinn Dlí agus Cirt, Comhionannais agus Athchóirithe Dlí (cathairí leac); tá táirme leanthana tagartha aige agus bréis is seachtaí ball. Tá ionad aráisteach ann ag na rann Rialtais cuí, na compháirtíochtí sosialta, comhlachtaí reachtúil, eagraíochtaí naomhrialtais agus tuismitheoirí. Baineann an Grúpa feidhm as an tárarma ‘cúram leanaí’ chun seirbhísí cúram agus oideachas a chur in aghaidh leis an chéad cheann de réidhí móra. Tá idirnáisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta ina raibh seisiún iomlánacha agus deacraíochtaí a bhí ar fáil i lárthair, ocht bhoghrúpa agus a chúram féin orthu go féin agus grúpa stiúrtha.

Ba chasta agus ba bhúshláinach an tasc a bhí le déanamh ag an Sainghrúpa Oibre. Ba leanth agus ba lighnéitheach iad na táirmeí cheartar aige. Measc na bpriomhmithe a mhúlaigh tuairisc an Sainghrúpa Oibre bhí:

• go n-aithneofaí nach dírithe ar thuismitheoirí a thugann aire dá bpáistí féin iad táirmeí tagartha an tSainghrúpa Oibre agus go bhféadfaidh ríteach polasai eile a bhéthdhe dhíth ar na tuismitheoirí sin;
• gur gá teacht le forálach an AE máidir le Treoirínte Fostalochta agus cistí struchtúracha;
• go mba inmhínaíthe é tógáil ar na struchtúir atá an cheann chun seirbhísí chúram leanaí a chur ar fáil agus sin ar bhonn na compháirtíochtí costéifeachtaí agus
• an gá atá le cúram leanaí a fhorbairt mar ghnó dísteachtaí agus an coincheap a leanann é, is é sin “cai(teachas agus admháil”.bunmoladh de mholtain an tSainghrúpa Oibre máidir le forbairt na hearnála seo.

Caibidil 1: Comhthéacs Sóisialta Chúram Leanaí

• Tá iníushiú daonta ag an Sainghrúpa Oibre ar chomhthéacs sóisialta sholáthar chúram leanaí,
• Le scór bliain anuas tá brú ar an gcónaí gnó náisiúnta chun cúram leanaí a fhorbairt agus is léir sin ó lón na dtuairiscí agus náisiúnta, ón reachtálaíocht agus ó thionscnamh eile ó thús na 1980.
• Baineann tuismitheoirí leas as cúram léanaí ar chúiseanna eagsúla.

• Tá éileamh breise ar seirbhísí chúram leanaí in Éirinn de bharr atá rud, dílimenachta, sóisialta agus eacnamaíocht go hárithite breis den bhántacht a bhéith sa lucht saothair.
• An rud is mó atá ag cur isteach ar mhná atá ag iarraidh teacht ar an lucht saothair agus a bhéith páirtíeach ann na mhuifhachtacht agus costas chúram leanaí agus na deacrachtaí a hbhainean le cúrsaí fostalochta agus cúrsaí an teaghlach na thabhairt le chéile.
De réir mar atá líon na dtuismitheoirí fostaithe ag dul i meid tá gá le polasaí poiblí a chabhródh le tuismitheoirí chun fostaioacht agus cúram leanáin a thabhairt le chéile ar shíl a dheimheodh cáilíocht na beatha do pháistí, do thuismitheoirí agus do theaghlach agus comhhdheasaanna do mháinéad.

Polaisi amháin de pholasaithe atá caidriúil le teaghlach is ea cúram leanáin agus d’fhéadfadh sé cothro míc anáil le cúrsaí oibre agus cúrsaí an t-ionad an t-áta an mháthair a bheith fáilte i gcomhair do chúram leanáin.

Ní dóigh leis an Sainghrúpa Oibre gur cheart féachaint ar na polasaithe sin mar “cheist do no mhána” amháin; ba chóir bonn níos leithne a bheith fúthu chun na sochair a bhainfeadh fir agus páistí a chur san áireamh.

Cuid den diospóireacht i leith chúram leanáin is ea cearta na leanaí chun a sciar cothrom féin de chúram agus ‘o idéad a fháil agus tá aitheantas tugtha ar bhonn náisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta ar a o n d’oideachas.

Léiríonn suirbhé a rinneadh ar shocruithe chúram leanáin:

- go bhfuil 17% de leanaí uile na tíre idir 0-9 mbliana d’aois a n-loctar as cúram leanáin dóbh.
- baineann 58% de mháthreacha atá ag obair go lánaímsí theas le cúram leanáin i gcomparáid le 16% de mháthreacha atá i mbun dualgas sa bhailte.

- an cineál chúram leanáin is coitianta ná scror fórmuil (seirbhísí seisiúin agus cúram lán lae).
- an scror is coitianta a dhéanann mhána a bhíonn ag obair agus a fhaighneann iocaíocht ná an cúram leanáin ag tarlú i dtéacht an fheighlí agus is é in an scrorú atá sa dara háit san iomlán.

Caibidil 2: Cúram Leanáin in Éirinn: An Soláthar Reatha
Is neamh-chomhordaithe é soláthar chúram leanáin, ní d’aon choidheáin amháin agus is tearc a lión. Díirtear caiteachas an stáit i leith chúram leanáin ar pháistí atá i ngach nó faoi mhíbhuntaíste agus esclraith a lán an chaitheachas sin as seachtáirge d’imeachttaí eile.

Tá saothar gan eáisúla seirbhísí churramaí agus seirbhísí seisiúin san áireamh (mar shampla grúpaí súgarta, náomar, scoileanna Montessori), cúram lán lae (e.g. naoinianna, crúiteanna), feithlithe leanáin, an t-ionad buail isteach agus cúram iarscoile.

Caibidil 3: Rialúchán, Oiliúint, Cáilíocht agus Fostaiocht
Bheadh roinnt ceisteaná ag Sainghrúpa Oibre i dtábhacht aon fáil leis an Rialúchán um Sheirbhísí Chúram Leanáin (Réamhshcoile), 1996. Ní lánnéachtach é an cáir an féidhmís féin agus an t-áthar sa chúram leanáin.

Is ar bhonn ad hoc a forbraidh oiliúint chúram leanáin agus dá dheasca sin is iomai saothar an bhfáití agus cáilíocht atá.
Caibidil 4: Soláthar Chúram Leanaí i gceanntair uirbeacha faoi mhíbhuntáiste agus i gcéantair faoin tuath

I gcéantair uirbeacha faoi mhíbhuntáiste, bhíonn bac ar sheirbhísí churam leanaí toisic na hachmhainní airgeadsa a bheith in easonamh nó bonneagar churam leanaí agus córais tacaíochta a bheith in easonamh.

Meas ná mbacanna tá: costais ró-ard, ná seirbhísi gan a bheith in ann fearainn oile a fhostú, easpas eolaí agus uaireanta oscailte a bheith srianach. Ar na bacanna a áirithe i gcéantair faoin tuath tá: iaruglacht, fadhanna limpaur, costais foreir agus easpá claír oiliúna a oireann do thimpeallacht na tuathse. Tá gá le straitéis agus le polaisithe i leith churam leanaí a d'athraíodh an réime sin eagsúil feidhmeanna agus bacanna is gá do na seirbhísí churam leanaí díriti orthu sna ceantair uirbeacha faoi mhíbhuntáiste agus i gcéantair faoin tuath faoi seach.

Caibidil 5: Straitéis Náisiúnta i leith Chúram Leanaí: Treoirprionsabail

Tá an Sainghrúpa Oibre aontaíte sa ráltaes prionsabal a bheadh mar bhonn le Straitéis Náisiúnta i leith Churam Leanaí agus mar threoir do na seirbhísí churam leanaí go léir. 12 prionsabal ar fad atá ann agus iad eagrath faoi na ceannteidil a leanaí: (1) riachtanais agus cearta leanaí, (2) infháinteacht agus rannpháirtíocht ar bhonn cothrom, (3) eaúsáileacht, (4) compháirtíocht agus (5) caighdeán ard.

Caibidil 6: Réasúnn i leith Straitéis Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí

Baineann páistí, a dtuismitheoirí, fostóirí agus an pobal i gcoitinne tairbhe as cúram leanaí den scoth. Léiríonn staidéir na buntáistí sóisialta a bhaineann le lucht oideachais agus le lucht oideachais go háirithe leanaí ó ceantair faoi mhíbhuntáiste. Léiríodh freisin an tionscadanna go bhfuil anghais aige mar bhall i gcúram leanaí den scoth agus tá ról na sráide a bhíonn ag plé le cúram leanaí don scoth. Léiríodh freisin an tionscadanna aos i bhfoireann foirne leis an gceantair leanaí den scoth.

* intro etc.a/w 18/6/99 6:29 pm  Page xiv
an bhliain 2011. Baineann an t-éileamh seo a shamhlaitear leis an straitéis náisiúnta chomh maith.

Caibidil 7: Soláthar a spreagadh agus tacú le héileamh
Molann an Sainghrúpa Oibre sé cinn de sheach-chéimeanna soláthair agus cúig cinn de sheach-chéimeanna éilimh a chuirfidh feabhas ar inhaighteacht agus ar shaoire chúram leanáin in Éirinn. Tá na céimeanna seo fíte fuait ina chéile, agus ní móid iad go léir a chur i bhfeidhm mar phacáiste chun go n-éireodh leo. Mar chuid de na moltaí seo go dtí seo, nach móid, tá coincheap iontu de charaice ar sheirbhísí chumhachtach agus an t-áirítear a chuir mo leannán in Éirinn.

Samhlaitear frámaíocht ama seach tionsúchán na bhfásanna leannáin mar seanadóireachtaí. Is mó chistí a bhaineann leis an straitéis náisiúnta a thabhairt chun go bhfostófa í nóis mó foirne oileánchúram leannáin.

Sé Sheach-Chéim Soláthair
• Deontais chaptitul/foiseamh do sholáthróirí.
• Liúntas Cánach d’Feighlithe Leanaí.
• Deontais chun Fostaiocht a Spreagadh.
• Faoiseamh Cánach d’hostóirí a inheitifionn i gcuirme leannán.

Caibidil 8: Pleanáil Áitiúil agus Comhordú Náisiúnta
Molann an Sainghrúpa Oibre do na meánlochtaí sin a bhíonn ag plé le pleanáil áitiúil agus comhordú náisiúnta polasaíthe chúram leanáin a chur ar fáil. Molann sé go mbunóthaí coisí churram leanáin ar bhuscaí contae, coiste bainisteoireachta náisiúnta ar chúram leanáin agus coiste polasaí idir-ranna ar chúram leanáin. Is é a sheadh sna Coisí Contae um Chumhrá Leanáin ná soláthróirí áitiúla chúram leanáin, an earnáil.

• Foirodheontais Chumhrá Leanáin.
• Feabhsú a theoiríntse pleanála an údaráis áitiúil.
• Faoiseamh Cánach Pearsanta.
• Gan déileáil le chúram leanáin mar slaithreachta.

Cuig Sheach-Chéim Éilimh
• Fóirdheontais Chumhrá Leanáin.
• Liúntas Cánach d’Feighlithe Leanaí.
• Deontais chun Foisteoirí a spreagadh.
• Faoiseamh Cánach Pearsanta.
• Gan déileáil le chúram leanáin mar slaithreachta.

Bainearann na bearta seo le costais chúram leanáin le hadhhalachtach.
chúram leanaí/NGO, comhachtaí reachtúla, na comhpháirtithe sóisialta agus tuaismitheoirí. Dhéanfadh gach coiste pléan chúram leanaí seacht mbliana don chontae a fhobairt a chuirió faoi bhráid an Choiste Bhainisteoireachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí le faoi dhath. D'éinmneofaí an Roinn Dlí agus Cirt, Comhionannais agus Athchóirthe Dlí mar phearróin maidir leis an Straitéis Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí agus is í a dhéanfadh cathaoireachta ar an gCoiste Polasaí Idir-Ranna um Chúram Leanaí a bheadh ina nasc idir an Rialtas agus na Coistí Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí.

Moltaí an tSainghrúpa Oibre i leith Chúram Leanaí
Measann an Sainghrúpa Oibre gur den riarthasas é ró straitéiseach a bhíodh ag an Rialtas chun seirbhísí d’ardaighdeán a dheimhniú agus fáil orthu ag ar gcuid leatain go lèir, i dteor is go mbeadh lion saoltaí sásúil ann agus chun tosca a fhobairt inar féidir liom an obair sin bheitheacht a bhaint amach. Moltar mar chead chéim sa phríomhheasa sin go ndéanfai Fréamhocht Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí a fhobairt agus a chur i ngniomh. Ba cheart straitéis chomhfháilteach seacht mbliana, a chuimaíidh moltar na Tuairiscíla seo, a bhíodh leis an bhFhréamhocht Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí.

MOLADH 1:
- Ba chóir forbairt a dhéanamh ar an gcóras fógra atá ann faoi láthair chun go ndéanfai leasú ar an Acht um Chúram Leanaí (1991) a chuireadh córas ar fáil chun áiteanna agus oibre chuimhneachtaí a chlárú.
- Is iad na daoine a chaithfeadh clárú ná iad sin go léir a chuirtear seirbhísí chuirfeadh a dhéanamh ortu, chomh maith le leirt níos mó, sa bhreábh, agus san áireamh leis sin bheadh daoine atá fostaithe ag tuaismitheoirí i mlinbh, biodh sé sin i dteach an linbh nó i dteach an feinéile.
- Is iad na daoine nach mbeadh orthu clárú ná go faoi láthair tuaismitheoirí, seannathair, seannmháthair, sibhíní, uncaíl, aíntí agus leas tuaismitheoirí nó tuaismitheoirí altrama.

MOLADH 2:
Ba chóir go mbeadh an córas fógra mar atá faoi láthair agus an córas clár chuimhneachtaí atá a mholadh ag teacht an chéad roinnt éagsúil nó a chomhghreadh leis an Albiricíocht leis an gCoiste. Ba chóir clár comónta ionduchtaí a bhíodh ortu gur ndéanfai forbairt air i gcomhar agus i gcomhpháirtíocht leis an gCoiste. Ba chóir clár leis an gRámaíocht a bhíodh ortu gur ndéanfai forbairt air i gcomhar agus i gcomhpháirtíocht leis an gCoiste.

Anus air sin, moltar go mbeadh traenáil faighte ag duine den hfhóireann chigireachta sa réimse Luathoideachais agus Chúram Leanaí.
MOLADH 3:  
Ba chóir próiseas faofa a bheith ag na Gardaí sa leibhéal lár agus a dhéanann cumarsáid éfheachtaí leis an leibhéal áitiúil chuig chun eolas a chaí duine atá ag obair sa réimse churam leanaí i ról ar bith.

MOLADH 4:  
• Ba chóir dom Choiste Bainistéireachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí atá á mholaadh aontú laistigh de 12 mí faoi phróifíl ghairme (dála na léirshamhla in Aguisin 3.2) agus faoi na cáilíochtaí cuí.
• Ba chóir Frámaíocht Náisiúnta i leith cáilíochtai i gcúram leanaí a fhorbairt i gcomhar leis an gCoiste Bainistéireachta Náisiúnta.
• Ba chóir go gcúirfi an Frámaíocht Náisiúnta i leith cáilíochtai i gcúram leanaí slíte forásacha cáilíochtai ar fáil agus teacht orthu trí oideachas formhóil nó neamhfoirmhóil trí chreidhliúnú a fháil ar fhoghlaim roimhe seo.
• Ba chóir an sprioc a leanas a bheith ann agus forbairt a déanamh ar an earnáil churam leanaí:

Ba chóir go mbeadh Íosmhéid de 60% den fhíoireann a bheith ag obair go díreach le leanaí i gcomhshíirbhísi i dtíreál deontais le haghaidh bunóiluána an leibhéal lair-thiar, ina meabhadh roinnt agus cleachtadh na pídealoilocha agus hforbairt an linbh. Ba cheart an oiliúint ar fad a bheith ar bhonn modulach. Ba chóir dom fhíoireann go lór a fhostaíochtaí (comhshíirbhísi agus cúram lae teaghlach) nach bhfuil an leibhéal seo oiliúna orthu a bheith i dtíreál na hollóiluána sin ar bhonn inseirbhís. (Sprioc 26 de Líonra Choimisiún na hEorpa ar Spriocanna Cáilíochta Chúram Leanaí i Seirbhísí do Pháistí Óga, 1996).

MOLADH 5:  
Tá an Sainghrúpa Oibre den tuairim go mbeadh sé inmhianaithe teagmháil a bheith ag leanaí le fhoireann agus mná araon a bhaint amach.

Ba chóir don Choiste Bainistéireachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí a ní an leibhéal oiliúna a bheith in dteideal na hoiliúna sin ar bhonn inseirbhíse.

MOLADH 6:  
Ba chóir an sprioc a leanas a bheith mar threoir agus nóscanna imeachta fostaíochta a gcur i ngniomh:

Ba chóir do na seirbhísí glacadh le nóscanna imeachta fostaíochta a dhuireann an bhéim ar fhostaithe óga a earcú agus a dhuireann san áireamh éagsúlacht eileach an fhostaíocht a bheith ar bhonn san chumhachtain.

MOLADH 7:  
Ba chóir scála pá náisiúnta a bhunú a bheith ag teacht le luach sóisialta agus a bheith éagsúlacht eileach an phobail áitiúil.

MOLADH 8:  
• Ba chóir do FÁS tosaíocht a thabhairt d’acmhainní Fhostaíocht Phobail ar mhaithe le tionscnamh taithí obair agus oiliúna a chur ar fáil sa réimse churam leanaí.
• Ba chóir do FÁS leanúint le forbairt na dtionscnamh oiliúna sa réimse churam leanaí laistigh den Fhostaíocht Phobail agus i gcomhar leis an gCoiste Bainistéireachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí.
Ba chóir don Choiste Bainistíeoirí Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí atá á mholaigh inúichadh tacaíochta a dhéanamh ar bhealaí eile a thabhairt dóibh siúd a dtéastaíonn uathu a bheith ag obair san earnáil chúram leanaí.

MOLADH 9:
Laistigh den Fhrámaíocht Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí ba chóir tosaíocht a thabhairt do ríachtanais na bpáistí agus na dté a hi l a ch úd a dtéann an bhocadtaí i bhfeidhm orthu agus ba chóir acmhainní a dhíriú ina dtreo.

MOLADH 10:
- Ba chóir an Clár Comhdheiseanna Chúram Leanaí a leathnú i dtreo is gur féidir leanúint le huasghrádú fisiceach sholáthar chúram leanaí den scoth agus tacaíocht mhéadaithe ó thaobh fíorfeiceach de a chur ar fáil.
- Ba chóir £3.5m a dháileadh ar an gClár agus an túsadh de £3.5m a bheith ann g a ch bliain tosaigh den S traitéis Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanaí.

MOLADH 11:
Ba chóir liúntais bhreise chpaisiltí a chur ar fáil do sheirbhísí/ghnólachtaí chúram leanaí atá bunaithe ar ghrúpa.

MOLADH 12:
- Ba cheart Scéim Dheontas nua a bhunú do sholáthróirí príobháideach a chéadú, agus an dóigh leis an bhfoireann a fhostalaigh in áiseanna chúram leanaí, príobháideach agus an bhfeighileacht oideachais roinnt roinnt oideachais eacnamaíochta san áireamh, iad a ndíriú trí Bhoird Fiontraíochta Contae.
- Buiséad de £2m a dháileadh in 1999 d’fhéadfadh an agaidh na bliana ar mháthair leis an gcuspóir sin agus é d’ríthe go sonrach ar chúram leanaí.

MOLADH 13:
- Ba chóir liúntas speisialta cánach a bhíteach is íomhúár in úine den hioncamscaidh go mbeidh a fhoclú ar chúram leanaí.
- Moltar nach bhfuil ioncamar a fhéighighíocht leanaí agus dhíriú eacnamaíochta san áireamh, iad a ndíriú trí Bhoird Fiontraíochta Contae.

MOLADH 14:
- Deontais fostaíochta go dtí £5,000 do gach ball breise ar an bhfoireann a tháinig air in áiseanna chúram leanaí, príobháideach agus an bhonn pobail ar aonadh, agus tionscnamh shóisialta eacnamaíochta san áireamh, iad a ndíriú trí Bhoird Fiontraíochta Contae.
- Buiséad de £2m in aghaidh na bliana ar mháthair leis an gcuspóir sin agus é d’ríthe go sonrach ar chúram leanaí.

MOLADH 15:
Beidh fostóirí in ann caiteachas ar chúram leanaí a bhfoistáite ar dhisreacht ar na forimneacha cánach. D’fhéadfadh an caiteachas sin a bhíteach is íomhúár in áiseanna chúram leanaí a chuirfeadh tacaíocht oideachais agus oideachais roinnt roinnt oideachais eacnamaíochta san áireamh, iad a ndíriú trí Bhoird Fiontraíochta Contae.

MOLADH 16:
Molann an Sainghrupa Oibre go ndáilfeadh an Rialtas £1m in 1999 agus sna blianta ina dhiaidh sin:
- Ar fhoclaíocht chúram leanaí ar seirbhise Írisce is íomhúár ina bhfuil iomad níos fearr san iarthar, agus
- ar leith de churfeadh tacaíocht oideachais agus oideachais eacnamaíochta san áireamh, iad a ndíriú trí Bhoird Fiontraíochta Contae.

xviii Straitéis Náisiúnta i leith Chúram Leanaí
MOLADH 17:
- Ba chóir don Roinn Comhshaoil agus Rialtais A i t i ú i l, i gcomhar leis an gCoiste Bainisteoirí eanachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai atá á níosdháil, Treoirínte náisiúnta a leagan slois agus a fhoclóir maidir le faomhadh a dheanamh agus pleannáil ar siúl le haghaidh áiseanna chúram leanai.
- Ba chóir do na hÚdaráis Phleanála fáilte chugtuineiscipe go práinneach go mbeadh Treoirínte i leith Pleanála, mar chuid d'ápheannanna Forbartha, ar mhaithe le réimsse áiseanna chúram leanai a chur ar fáil. Ba chóir do na Treoirínte sin an chur gan áireamh ar nós príomh-nó a híosda na hoibre a bheith ag athrú, structúr an teaghlailse, agus an réimsse áiseanna chúram leanai a bhfuil gá leo anois. Ba chóir do na Treoirínte a chur san áireamh chomh maith le haghaidh a úsáid le linn na n-áiseanna sine, eithte in dhátháir.

MOLADH 18:
- Ba chóir scéim a chur i bhfeidhm chun a suíomhacht le costas chúram leanai i gcás tuismitheoirí ar ioncam íseal atá a pháirteach i ngach clár oideachais nó oideachais a chur ar fáil ag an gCoiste Bainisteoirí eanachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai.

MOLADH 19:
- Chun aitheantas a thabhairt don luach a bhaineann le dea-chúram leanai a sholáthar, molann an Sainghrúpa Oibre go ndéanann leacht a n-áiseanna chúram leanai a bheith ag teacht faoin Scéim Liúntas Leasa Forlontach chun cur ar chumas na dtuismitheoirí sin nach ndéanadh leacht a n-áiseanna chúram leanai, agus atá i mbun oideachais agus nach bhfuil i dteideal na bhfórdhreactas thuas, áiteanna chúram leanai a cheannach dá gclann.

MOLADH 20:
- Ba chóir an teorainn ioncaim shonraite i gcás Fhorlíonadh ar Ioncam Teaghligh a bhíte ar dtháinse, ag féachaint ar gach cás ar leith ina bhfuil costais a bhfuil costais a bhfuil costais i dteideal na bhfóirdheontas thuas, áiteanna chúram leanai a cheannach.

MOLADH 21:
- Moltar beart faoi mhíniúchán an ráta caighdeánach a thabhairt:
  - faoiseamh ar chaitheamh a bhaint as chúram leanai, le hadmháil, suas go dtí £4,000 in aghaidh an pháiste do gach aonad tuismitheigh i dtaca le leanaí idir 0 agus 12 bliain d’aois de.
  - liúntas i dtaca le gach páiste de, an liúntas don chéad leanbh faoi 5 bliana ar £4,000 in aghaidh na bliana agus £3,200 i gcás gach páiste eile.
  - liúntas do pháistí 5 bliana agus os a chionn (páistí scoile) ar £2,000 in aghaidh na bliana.
MOLADH 23:
Ná meastar cúram leanai sa látair oibre feasta - pé acu saor in aisce nó le fórdheontas - mar shochar le hábhar maidir le cúrsaí cánac.

MOLADH 24:
• Má chuirtear córas ch reidmheas cánach ar fáil ba chóir Creidmheasanna Cánach In-aisíoctha a chur in áit mholtaí an tSainghrúpa Oibre maidir le cáin FIT agus fórdheontais láithreán éilimh eile nach iad.

MOLADH 25:
• Go mbunófaí Coistí Contae um Chúram Leanai ar a mbeadh ionadaithe ó na coiméadaithe gaalta áitiúla cuí trasearnáilcha go léir.
• Fhíomhfhócas na gCoistí ná forbairt, feidhmiú agus monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar Phlean Chúram Leanai 7 mBliana don Chontae.
• Ba chóir don Choiste Contae um Chúram Leanai na seirbhísí atá ann faoi láthair agus na seirbhísí nua a chomhordú laistigh den cheantar agus feidhmiú an Phlean a iníuchadh ar bhonn monatóireachta agus na spriocanna a bheith ar aigne i gcónaí, spriocanna a leagfaidh síos na coiméadaithe gaalta go léir eatarthu.
• Ba chóir buiséad de £2m a dháileadh ar mhaithe le struchtúir chontae a bhunú agus a chur i ngriomh.

MOLADH 26:
• Go mbunófaí Coiste Bainisteoireacht Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai agus an iodaíocht chéanna trasearnáilca is a bheadh ar na Coistí Contae um Chúram Leanai.
• Príomhfhéidhm an Choiste ná tacú le Phleannach Chúram Leanai na gContaetha, iad a mheas is a acmhainní agus monatóireacht a dhéanamh orthu chomh maith le comhordú a dhéanamh ar a bhfuil d'hórbaírthí náisiúnta cheana féin ar an réime oibre leanai agus faisnéis a chur ar fáil ar mhaithe le forbairt ar pholasai náisiúnta.
• Ba chóir buiséad de £0.5m. a dháileadh in 1999 ar chostais bhunú, thaidhde agus fhobhairt an Choiste Bainisteoireachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai.
• Ba chóir buiséad de £0.5m a dháileadh in 1999 ar eagraíochtaí náisiúnta/réigiúnda chúram leanai a fheidhmionn ar bhonn deoch agus a chruthaíonn go bhfuil siad in ann tacú le cur i bhfeidhm na Frámaíochta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai.

MOLADH 27:
• Ba chóir go n-aimmeofaí an Roinn Dlí agus Comhionannais agus Aithchóirithe Dlí mar Phríomh-Roinn maidir leis an bhFrámaíocht Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai.
• Is é an dualgas a bheadh uirthi córdú a dhéanamh ar réime oibre na Rann atá ann cheana, an comhádádan idir na Ranna go léir a neartu agus a mhéadú, na Ranna sin a bhfuil ról díreach nó indireach acu i leith chúram leanai.
• Go mbunófaí Coiste Polasai Ídir-Ranna a d'fhéidhmíodh mar nasc ídir an Chomh-Airíacht agus an Coiste Bainisteoireachta Náisiúnta um Chúram Leanai.
• Ba chóir don Choiste Polasai Ídir-Ranna machnamh a dhéanamh chomh maith ar na moltai a fuarthaíós Thuarascálaíochta ábhartha eile a mheas agus a bhfuil d'éineachta dhéanamh chomh maith leis an Tuarascaíochta Dheiridh ó Choimisiún an Teaghláigh (1998) agus an Tuarascáil ar Phóram Náisiúnta an Luathóideachais Óige (1998).
INTRODUCTION

Why Ireland needs a Childcare Strategy

The approach taken to childcare in Ireland up to now has been to leave it almost exclusively to parents to arrange for themselves. This approach worked while we had a high rate of unemployment and while the majority of women opted to leave the workforce to care for their own children.

Changed social and economic conditions and expectations have resulted in more women opting to combine work and family responsibilities at a time when the availability of childminders and places in childcare centres are contracting. The bulk of childminding has been carried out in the informal economy, mainly by women who left the workforce to care for their own children. With the growth in job opportunities many of these women are opting for alternative employment in the formal economy, where they command higher rates of pay than can be earned through childminding in the informal economy. This change has resulted in a significant drop in the availability of childminders.

The second reason for the drop in the availability of places is the impact of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996, under the Child Care Act, 1991, which commenced in January 1997. Health boards have been carrying out inspections of childcare centres. Many childcare centres are not meeting the standards required under the Regulations and are opting to close rather than make the investment required. Their profit margins are often too narrow to meet the costs of increased staff ratios and of the physical improvements required. The majority of these are small scale providers who provide the service in their own home.

The third reason for the drop in places is the difficulty which the larger childcare centres are experiencing in recruiting and retaining qualified childcare staff. Childcare staff have traditionally been low paid workers and in a buoyant economy these are being attracted away from childcare to higher paid employment.

Fourthly, parents in need of childcare for babies and parents in need of childcare places on a part-time basis have difficulty accessing childcare. This is largely due to the fact that the Regulations require higher staff ratios for babies, which increases the cost for the provider. Likewise, a part-time place increases cost for the provider when the place could be allocated to a parent seeking full-time care.

Finally, many parents are not entirely happy with the quality of the childcare service they use for their children but continue to use it because of lack of alternative provision.

The interactions of the increase in the number of women with children choosing to combine work and family life with the decrease in the availability of childcare places has caused a virtual crisis in childcare. The crisis is further exacerbated in that with the improvements in the quality of childcare, the price of childcare is increasing. As a result, many women who would like to combine work and family life cannot afford to work except those in higher income groups.

Expert Working Group on Childcare

The Expert Working Group on Childcare1 was established in July 1997 as a result of a commitment in Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness, to devise a national framework for the development of the childcare sector in Ireland. In placing the development of a national framework within the context of gender equality it is recognised that “childcare is clearly an important issue in promoting equality for women and especially in promoting equal opportunities in employment”.

(Partnership 2000, par. 5.6.)

1 Throughout the report, the term ‘Expert Working Group’ will be used to refer to the Expert Working Group on Childcare.
The aim of the Expert Working Group, as set out in Partnership 2000, was to develop a strategy which integrates the different strands of the current arrangements for the development and delivery of childcare and early educational services.

Responsibility for chairing the Group was assigned to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department also provided the Secretariat. In addition, Area Development Management Limited (ADM) provided technical, operational support and advice to the Department on the implementation of the process and the Centre for Social & Educational Research (CSER) were engaged for editorial support. While Partnership 2000 refers to the development of a national childcare framework the Expert Working Group has decided to refer to a national childcare strategy, as the word ‘framework’ could be interpreted as meaning the delivery mechanisms only.

Terms of Reference
The terms of reference of the Group were drawn from Partnership 2000 and were as follows:

“The Group will consider the conclusions of the Working Group on the Job Potential of Childcare, and the ESRI survey of childcare arrangements currently being undertaken on behalf of the Commission on the Family, as well as the following specific issues:

• quantification of the job potential of the childcare sector;
• implementation of Part VII of the Child Care Act, 1991 which provides for the introduction of regulations governing safety and health standards in preschool services and accompanying guidelines;
• the establishment of a national registration system for childcare providers;
• the establishment of a nationally recognised system of certification and accreditation for childcare workers providing for an appropriate minimum qualification;
• subject to the evaluation of the current pilot project, the implications of the phased extension of the Early Start Programme to all areas with continuing priority being given to areas of disadvantage;
• the financing of childcare provision by a variety of means in the interest of affordable and accessible childcare.” (Partnership 2000, para. 5.7).

Membership of the Expert Working Group
The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform decided that membership of the Expert Working Group should be as inclusive as possible, representing all the stakeholders with an interest in the development of childcare. This strategy was adopted to ensure the development of a comprehensive national strategy which would meet the needs of all children and parents and take into account the views of as many childcare interests as possible. The 80 members represented the relevant Government departments, social partners, statutory bodies, non-governmental organisations and parents. A full list of the membership can be found in Appendix 1.1.

Definition of childcare
The Expert Working Group agreed that the term ‘childcare’, as used by the Group would refer to services providing care and education, which are viewed by the Expert Working Group as being complementary and inseparable. This is to distinguish the use of the term from its use within the wider health sector, where the term ‘Child Care Services’ refers to the variety of services for children up to the age of 18 years in need of the care and protection of the State.

The following was agreed:

• the term childcare is used by the Expert Working Group to describe daycare facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours.

2: The Evaluation of the Early Start Programme carried out by the Educational Research Centre, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, although complete, was not made available to the Expert Working Group.
it includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, national, daycare services, créches, playgroups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded.

The Expert Working Group also agreed that the age-group to be considered would be children aged 0 to 12 years inclusive.

Submissions
The Expert Working Group sought written submissions from the public on their views as to what should be considered as essential elements in the development of a national strategy for childcare. A total of 135 were received and the common issues arising are represented below in order of frequency:

- High quality training of childcare workers is essential 34%
- Need for State support for childcare provision 24%
- Quality childcare provision must be available and affordable to all 16%
- Equality of access and participation for all children 16%
- Registration of childcare workers and facilities 16%
- Need for co-ordination of policy 16%
- Recognition of accredited prior learning (APL) 10%
- Needs and rights of children must be foremost consideration 7%
- Needs and rights of children with special needs 5%
- Call for involvement of men in childcare services 5%
- Employers have responsibilities in providing for childcare 5%

Terms of reference and detailed objectives were agreed for each subgroup (see Appendix 1.3).

Working Methods
The large membership and work process required that the Expert Working Group operate at three levels. These were:

- Plenary sessions attended by all members,
- Eight subgroups, each focusing on a particular policy issue,
- A Steering Group which comprised the Chairperson, Secretariat, chairpersons of each of the subgroups, and representatives from ADM and the Department of Education and Science.

The following subgroups were established:

- **Group 1** considered the financial and employment implications of an integrated approach to the provision of childcare facilities in Ireland.
- **Group 2** considered the registration, training and qualifications of childcare workers.
- **Group 3** considered the resourcing and sustaining of childcare within urban disadvantaged areas.
- **Group 4** considered the resourcing and sustaining of childcare within rural areas.
- **Group 5** considered regulations and standards.
- **Group 6** considered the educational aspects of childcare services.
- **Group 7** considered the needs and rights of children in relation to a national framework.
- **Group 8** considered equality of access and participation in relation to a national framework.

Two of the subgroups had particular links with other initiatives. Group 5 had been established by the Department of Health and Children to monitor the implementation of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and was incorporated into the Expert Working Group. The aim of the Early Education Subgroup (Group 6), was to coordinate the views of all members of the Expert Working Group in relation to early childhood.
education and to make these known at the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, which took place in March, 1998. A copy of the Expert Working Group’s statement to the National Forum is at Appendix 1.4.

Appendix 1.5 presents a diagrammatic representation of the working methods of the Expert Working Group.

The Expert Working Group also commissioned a number of research projects, the results of which have informed this report (see Appendix 1.6).

Other developments

Contemporaneous with the work of the Expert Working Group on Childcare during 1997 and 1998, was the work of the Commission on the Family (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs) and the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science).

Some considerations which shaped the Expert Working Group’s Report

The Expert Working Group was faced with a complex and challenging task. Its terms of reference were wide-ranging and multi-faceted and its membership large. It had to address a diverse range of issues including the needs of children, the acute problem of childcare supply, affordability of childcare, regulation and standards, the number of childminders in the informal economy and the particular problems faced by urban disadvantaged and rural areas. Its large membership brought together a wealth of experience and knowledge on childcare but it also showed how disparate the perspectives on childcare can be, depending on the background of the persons concerned. For example, some members saw childcare as being essentially about enabling women to enter the labour market; others were mainly concerned with the needs of disadvantaged areas; and others saw the quality of childcare as being the key issue. There were many complexities and tensions which needed to be addressed and difficulties to be overcome in the development of the strategy.

The Group agreed that the needs of children and their right to access quality services, regardless of their social and economic background, should be the primary consideration in the development of a National Childcare Strategy. Throughout all the deliberations of the Expert Working Group, the needs and rights of children were placed centre stage.

One of the issues which emerged for the Expert Working Group at an early stage was that of support for parents who choose to care for their own children. It recognised that the essential difference between the needs of parents who care for their own children and those who avail of childcare services is that the use of childcare necessarily involves third parties who provide a service for the parent(s) - Parents who use childcare are service users who rely on having an adequate provision of good quality service available to them at a price they can afford. The Group recognised the desirability of bringing forward measures to assist parents who work outside the home as well as measures for parents who choose to care for their own children. It considered that these were two different policy objectives, and therefore two different policy solutions should be applied. If the two situations are treated as one policy issue, e.g. by increasing child benefit for all or by universal tax credits, the impact on the development of childcare services could be negligible. Universal policies, at the level at which the Exchequer could afford them, are unlikely to result in improving either the quality or quantity of childcare services.

The Expert Working Group was, under its terms of reference, directed towards considering childcare for parents in the labour force, or trying to access the labour force. The Expert Working Group did not,
therefore, extend its recommendations to parents who work in the home. Nevertheless, it should be recognised that improving the quality and quantity of childcare will also have a positive impact on parents who choose to care for their children at home since 16% of children with parents who work full-time in the home avail of paid childcare.

An important consideration which influenced the deliberations of the Expert Working Group was the need to develop a childcare strategy to meet European Employment Guidelines and Structural Fund criteria. The 1999 European Employment Guidelines call on Member States “to design, implement and promote family-friendly policies, including affordable, accessible and high quality care services for children as well as parental and other leave schemes”. In its comments on Ireland’s National Employment Plan for 1998, in relation to childcare the EU said that “the policy focus must now shift towards a more effective implementation of the reform process”. Ireland’s childcare infrastructure is much weaker than that of our EU counterparts. The Expert Working Group was conscious that if a national childcare strategy is not developed the result could be criticism of Ireland’s National Employment Action Plans and in addition, forfeiture of Structural Funds for 2000 - 2006 because of failure to satisfy the equal opportunity policy requirements of the regulations for structural funds under a key criterion for childcare infrastructure support.

The strategy put forward by the Expert Working Group represents a consensus of the views of the Expert Working Group. The Group sought to develop a balanced package of measures which would take into account the needs of all sectors of society and would deal with both the supply and demand sides of childcare. The Expert Working Group has developed an interdependent package of measures which it believes addresses all the dimensions of childcare in an appropriate and balanced way.

The Expert Working Group did not seek to put forward an ambitious and costly ‘wish list’. It sought to develop a workable strategy which would not entail extreme costs.

The Group took the view that its strategy should build on existing structures and services. It was felt that it would not be cost-efficient to try to establish an entirely new childcare service. The Group also recognised that childcare could not be compartmentalised (e.g. as a labour market measure, an education measure or a care measure) and agreed that harnessing and co-ordinating of the services which already exist in various Government Departments, State Agencies and the voluntary sector represented the best way forward for development of the sector.

The Expert Working Group recognised that, given the multiplicity of policies and tasks involved, a childcare strategy would take some time to develop. It envisaged that the strategy would have a seven year time-span, which would coincide with the timeframe of the next National Development Plan. It believes that the structures for co-ordination and delivery of childcare at national and local levels could be brought to maturity in that time. A seven year period would be needed to develop a quality workforce. A seven year period would also be appropriate for the operation of tax incentives and schemes outlined in Chapter 7, it is envisaged that such incentives would taper off towards the end of that period.

Central to many of the measures being put forward by the Expert Working Group for the development of the childcare sector is the concept of receipted expenditure. The Group concluded that demand side supports should be tied to receipted expenditure in order to bring childcare out of the informal economy and facilitate its development as a legitimate business within the services sector and contribute to the overall quality of childcare. It was considered that this was necessary in order to give childcare workers and childminders.
the recognition and value they deserved in Irish society. What has been developed, therefore, is a set of interdependent measures, which must be put in place together and which the Expert Working Group considers will not work if implemented in an isolated way.

In conclusion
This report is the culmination of a lengthy consultative process which has been supported by national and international research. It presents a seven year strategy for the development of the childcare sector, including policy recommendations and the structures and mechanisms for a needs-led planning approach at county level, within a national framework. It has been developed in consultation and partnership, and proposes a shared vision for the future of childcare in Ireland.

As a society we will be failing to meet the needs of many children and parents if we fail to develop a strategy for good quality, affordable and accessible childcare. Families are the core of our society, but many of them are under pressure trying to combine work and family life. We must support them in new ways which reflect the new challenges which they face in a rapidly changing society. This Report sets out how this can best be done.