Introduction

In 2015, an Early Years Advisory Group was established by the Minister for Education and Skills to address issues arising relating to early years education. A short note on the group and the outcomes of its initial meetings is attached in Appendix 1. The Group agreed that an Early Years Forum should be held to give all stakeholders an opportunity to contribute to the development of policy across the key areas of the new European draft Quality Framework for ECEC.

The first Early Years Education Forum was held in the Printworks in Dublin Castle on December 15, 2015. It was designed to give stakeholders in the Early Years sector an opportunity to inform the development of future policy. The conference was called “Transforming Vision into Future Practice” to reflect the fact that there have been significant policy developments in the sector and the next steps involve implementing these new policies on the ground in partnership with stakeholders.

A key part of the conference was the exhibition by settings of their work. 15 showcases were selected to participate reflecting the range of settings and highlighting the good practice in the field.

1. The Programme and Speakers

A copy of the programme is attached at Appendix 2. The keynote speaker was Professor Paul Leseman. Professor Leseman is professor of education at Utrecht University. He has advised the Dutch government on day care and preschool education, works with local municipalities to improve preschool education and teacher professionalisation, and supports organisations of child day care to increase the quality of care. Currently he is principal investigator of the Dutch national cohort study Pre-COOL into the effects of early childhood care and education on children’s development and school achievement, starting in 2010.

His intervention at the conference focussed on his recent research on his work on the European funded CARE project involving 11 partners and countries across the EU. The project addresses the quality, inclusiveness, and individual, social, and economic benefits of early childhood education and care in Europe. The central aim of the project is to develop an evidence-based and culture-sensitive European framework of developmental goals, quality assessment, curriculum approaches, and policy measures for improving the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education and care. Professor Leseman presented the latest findings from the research focusing on access and social inclusion.

The remainder of the day was organised around workshops on a range of themes to ensure that conference attendees had a chance to participate fully. The workshops were designed to allow stakeholders to reflect on the Irish policy context relating to the key themes in the EU
Commission’s “Proposal for a European Quality Framework”. The themes are: Evaluation and Monitoring; Access; Workforce Development; Curriculum; and Governance.

The Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan T.D. addressed the conference in the afternoon. In her speech the Minister focussed on the themes explored in the workshops and emphasised how quality supports for pre-school children is a priority across Government and how a number of Departments, including DES in collaboration with DCYA are working together on this.

The Minister’s speech is available at Appendix 3. Professor Leseman’s keynote presentation is available at http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Events/Early-Years-Education-Forum/Early-Years-Education-Forum.html

2. Findings from the Workshops

Before beginning the workshops, participants were given an overview of the EU Commission’s “Proposal for a European Quality Framework” which informed the structure of the workshops.

Detailed information on the feedback from workshops is given below. Notwithstanding the diverse themes there were some common issues arising in all the workshops. Participants across the board highlighted the importance of:

- The need for a national vision;
- Improved communication
- A focus on workforce development

2.1 Findings from the Access Workshop

Participants in the access workshop made a number of clear recommendations which they believed were important for future action. These included:

- Develop a unified vision on inclusion in all national early years policy and ensure that concrete well-resourced implementation plans are also detailed.
- Extend the inclusion model for children with disability in the ECCE programme to all children at risk of disadvantage in all early years settings.
- Review all early years qualifications to audit how well they prepare staff to support inclusion of all children.
- Implement a national research programme to ensure practice, training and policy is informed by reliable, relevant and robust evidence
- Use a collaborative inter-agency approach to support clarity of roles and professional dialogue
- Develop and improve national practice frameworks to include guidance regarding the inclusion of all children in early years settings
- Work in partnership with parents and value their expertise
- Engage in consultation that values all voices and evaluation that provides feedback to all levels of the system.
2.2 Findings from the Workforce Development Workshop

Participants in this workshop voiced strong support for professional recognition. Among the options considered were:

- Tiered system of recognition attached to qualification levels by an independent body (CARU model)
- Linked to terms and conditions of employment/variable scales
- OR aim for fully L8 graduate led workforce with recognition for graduate leaders (Teaching Council)

Participants wanted the Learner fund and CPD to be extended. They wanted to see higher levels of qualifications for those working with the 0-3 cohort and for childminders.

There was very strong support for standardisation of qualifications. Among the issues which the participants identified were:

- A pressing need to revise/modernise Occupational Profiles
- The development of a standard profile for Further Education tutors/all trainers
- An emphasis on quality of provision
- Measures to ensure that all training/qualifications include Aistear/Siolta
- The need for improvements in the student placement which plays a critical role in all courses: participants discussed the possibility of
  - Guidelines for placements
  - Flagship centres to support placements
  - The possible role of internship/apprenticeship models
- A focus in qualifications on diversity and equality

2.3 Findings from the Curriculum Workshop

Participants focussed in particular on transitions and the interaction between infant classes and early years settings.

In the first instance, they said that in relation to information, there needs to be a consistent approach to information sharing. Using an integrated IT system could help but there are strengths and challenges to that. On the process of transition, they pointed out that relationships are critical. The importance of reciprocal visits between school and settings was highlighted. In relation to this, participants emphasised the need to mainstream good practice which already exists.

On curriculum participants focussed on the importance of curriculum continuity between pre-school and primary. They suggested that primary curriculum experiences should be based on Aistear for all children with more play and more choice in activities during the school day. Participants argued that more CPD was required to ensure full implementation of Aistear in infant classes. They also highlighted the possibility of having shared CPD opportunities for teachers and early years practitioners.

Participants also emphasised the importance of relationships. They suggested a lower pupil: teacher ratio in infant classes and more, small group work, more talk and discussion. The group suggested that 5 should be the minimum entry age for school.
2.4 Findings from the Governance Workshop

The participants in this workshop wanted to see greater clarity of roles and responsibilities across Government Departments, Agencies and NGOs. They suggested that a mapping exercise could be a very useful tool. Related to this they saw the need for a clear communications plan and consistent communications from all parties.

Participants also supported the idea of a professional regulatory body for the sector.

They sought a streamlined system for monitoring and evaluation given the range of services now operating in the field. The existence of the operational alignment group should help to begin to address some of these issues.

Participants also suggested that there was a need for greater governance support for individual services which have significant responsibilities to a range of agencies and other bodies.

2.5 Findings from the Evaluation and Monitoring Workshop

Participants stated that there was a need for a single, clearly articulated vision and national policy about early years provision and expectations based on evidence in Irish practice. They asked about the connections between Aistear, Siolta and the new quality framework for evaluation.

They highlighted the need for a unified, governing body with responsibility for the sector. As one participant observed, ‘A Competent System is a unified system – not a split system’

Related to this was an identified need for a co-ordinated approach towards future improvement beyond the existing operational co-operation. The possibility/potential of moving towards a single, unified inspection was also raised.

Participants underlined the importance of alignment of processes supporting EY provision including:

- Initial training of EY practitioners - standards, quality and consistency
- CPD – non-contact time – possibly within the contract for the services
- Regular communication with all stakeholders - ‘Bottom-up consultation critical’

Other important issues included:
- Valuing the professional role of the early-years practitioner
- The role of parents
- Transitions from EY to primary

Specifically, on evaluation and monitoring, participants referred to the following issues:
- Recognition and respect
- Importance of CPD and workforce development
- Inclusion
- The implementation and monitoring of Aistear in primary settings
3 The Showcases
As part of the Forum, a range of early years settings were invited to showcase their practice on exhibition stands that were set up in the foyer. These provided an excellent focus on frontline practice of those working with children in early years education. Many of the participants commented on the quality of the work on display in the foyer. Time was built into the day to allow everyone a chance to speak to the representatives from individual settings.

A full list of the showcase participants is available at Appendix 5.

4 The Panel Discussion
The panel discussion was chaired by Seán Ó Foghlú, Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills. The panel members were Bernie McNally, Assistant Secretary DCYA; Anne Looney, CEO, NCCA; Regina Bushell, Early Childhood Education and Care Provider; Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector, DES and Professor Paul Leseman.

The panel discussion built on the findings emerging from the workshops which were generally acknowledged to have been both valuable and comprehensive.

In the course of the discussion, the issue of terms and conditions of employment was raised, reflecting the messages that had been heard in workshops. The professionalization of the workforce was acknowledged by all members of the panel to be of central importance for future development of the sector and for enhancing quality of practice, particularly given the ongoing upward pressure for improved qualification levels in the sector. There was also discussion of how to ensure that practitioners retained the flexibility, responsiveness and dedication to quality improvement that is the hallmark of Irish settings. It was agreed that the inquiry-based learning approach that is becoming embedded in the early years sector is an exemplar to other levels of the education system.

Early Years Education Policy Unit
February 2016
Appendix 1 - Early Years Advisory Group

Early Years Advisory Group
Information Note

1. Background

The Early Years Advisory Group was established in late 2014 to provide advice to the Minister on education issues in the early years sector (0-6 age group).

Membership of the Group includes organisations such as Start Strong, Early Childhood Ireland and Barnardos. In recognition of the importance of those working in the sector the INTO, IMPACT, and the Association of Childcare Professionals are also represented on the Group.

The intention is that the Group will play an important part in guiding policy in the coming years.

The terms of reference of the Group are, as follows: -

- To provide a forum for exchange of ideas and best practice in relation to early years education.
- To advise on means by which the quality of early years education can be strengthened.
- To ensure that the implications for the early years sector, of policy decisions adopted by the Department of Education and Skills or its agencies, are fully considered.
- To strengthen the integration of early years education into the overall education continuum.
- To advise the Department of Education and Skills on, and inform future policy development in relation to, early years education issues. This could include, but not be confined to, consideration of issues such as the following:
  - Professionalisation of the sector;
  - The review of early years qualifications across the further and higher education sectors;
  - Data collection and measuring educational outcomes in the early years sector;
  - The continued implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme;
  - The continued implementation of Aistear
  - The development of policy in relation to the location of pre-schools and after-school care in primary schools;
  - The inclusion of children with additional needs, e.g. special needs, marginalised children, migrant children

- To plan for an annual Early Years Education Forum.

The Group met twice in 2015, in February and October.
2. Outcomes from 2015 Advisory Group Meetings

February 2015

This was the inaugural meeting of the Group. Among the issues considered was the question of pre-schools located in primary schools. The issues arising included:

- The importance of finalising the proposed early years strategy in order to provide a framework within which issues such as co-location can be discussed.
- The importance of prioritising what is best for children in any decision that is taken.
- The different type of regulations that apply to primary schools and pre-school services.
- The need to include consideration of after-school arrangements, and autism units in the development of any policy in this area.
- The consequences of any decision in this area, for the inclusion of children with additional needs, would need to be considered.

October 2015

At this second meeting of the Group, the following key issues were discussed:

- The impact of budget 2016 on early years education
- Developments in relation to education focussed inspections in Early Years Settings
- Review of Early Years Education and Training Programmes (EYEPU)

In relation to the review of qualification in the early years sector, a discussion paper was circulated in advance of the meeting and this formed the basis for the presentation and discussion; a copy of this paper is in annex. Emerging issues included identified gaps by both employers and practitioners in education and training provision. These included concerns regarding the quality of the practicum/placement; preparedness of practitioners to deal with children in the service with additional needs; and sometimes poor preparedness to implement the Aistear and Síolta frameworks.
Programme – Early Years Education Forum
Dublin Castle 15th December 2015
“Transforming Vision into Future Practice”
Strengthening the Quality of Early Years Education in Ireland

8.00 Tea/Coffee and Registration
9.00 Welcome and Introductory Remarks
9.15 Keynote Speaker – “Quality and Diversity in Early Years Education” Professor Paul Leseman

10.00 Síolta Showcase (Tea/Coffee available)
10.45 EU Commission Proposal for a European Quality Framework – Key Principles and introduction to parallel sessions
11.00 – 12.15 Parallel Sessions

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12.15 – 1.30 Parallel Sessions

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1.30 – 2.30 Lunch
2.30 Address by Minister Jan O’Sullivan, T.D.
3.00 Wrap up and plenary discussion – Next Steps for Early Years Education Panel: All speakers
4.00 Ends
I am delighted to be here today at this inaugural Early Years Education Forum. I would like to thank Professor Paul Leseman for bringing to the event the wisdom derived from the very important research being done at an international level to inform our discussions today.

But of even more importance to the development of Early Years education and care, is the opportunity given today for stakeholders and early years practitioners to make their voices heard. Your collective experience and expertise is what has allowed the sector to come so far already and it will provide the solid foundation for its future evolution.

I am overwhelmed by the numbers that have turned out today from right across the sector. I want to acknowledge also the organisations that have contributed to the shaping of the discussions that have taken place today.

The sheer breadth of engagement is testament to the central role and importance of early years education and care to society.

Early years is an area where my Department has played a much more active role in recent years in close collaboration with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. This is a really welcome development.

To provide the very best outcomes for children, we must work in concert right across Government so that we can develop cohesive and coherent frameworks to deliver better quality services and outcomes for all.

Today has been an opportunity to hear your views on how this can be achieved.

I know that your conference today has been organised around the themes outlined in the proposed European Quality Framework of access; workforce development; curriculum; evaluation and monitoring and governance.

I believe there has been significant progress under all of these headings in recent years.

I want to acknowledge the enthusiasm and the work of those in the early years sector in helping to achieve this progress and in working with partners in Government
departments and agencies to deliver better outcomes for children in early years settings.

Access
- In relation to access, Minister Reilly and I recently launched the IDG Report on supporting access to the ECCE programme for children with a disability.
- This is a really landmark development and demonstrated what can be done through strong collaborative approaches across Government and agencies.
- Implementation is underway and the HEA has already launched a Call for Proposals for a national programme that will provide the necessary professional training for staff working in the Early Years sector so that they can take up roles as Inclusion Coordinators to work with children with disabilities in pre-school.
- I understand that Professor Leseman in his address this morning gave us all much material for further thought in relation to access to quality provision for all children. We need to foster a truly inclusive culture for all our children at this very important stage of their development.
- Notwithstanding the significant progress to date, there is clearly more work to be done.

Workforce Development
- In terms of building capacity in the Early Years sector, I particularly welcome the emphasis on improving the skills and qualifications of those working in early years settings. The launch of the latest learner fund by Minister Reilly to further support this process is very welcome.
- More broadly, to support the ongoing professionalisation of the Early years workforce, further phases of the Review of Education and Training programmes in Early Years Care and Education will take place in 2016 and will be overseen by the Early Years Education Advisory Group, that report to me.
- We all know that quality of the workforce is a key determinant for high quality outcomes for children and the investment in this area is an acknowledgement that this is the case.

Curriculum
- This year has also seen the further development of the Aistear/Siolta Practice Guide by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- This is designed to be an accessible, practical hands-on guide for practitioners drawing from experience and learning in Irish settings.
The greater accessibility of Aistear/Siolta through the Practice Guide is key to promote quality in settings. The quality agenda in our early years settings has been the focus of much work in recent years. Better Start and their team of Early Years support specialists are proving to be an invaluable resource for services who are aiming higher in terms of quality.

My Department and DCYA are currently developing a Siolta-Aistear support initiative for Early Years for 2016 which will boost the reach, impact and coordination of our national quality and curricular frameworks.

**Evaluation and Monitoring**

- Another element of the quality agenda in Early Years Education and Care is evaluation and monitoring.

- I am confident that the education-focussed inspections that will be carried out by the recently established Early Years education inspection unit in my Department’s inspectorate will make a real difference and will complement existing services working in the sector.

- Their establishment marks a major contribution to the development of a high quality learning experience for children in the free pre-school services.

- The new team of inspectors are currently carrying out pilot education-focussed inspections in a range of settings. I understand that there have been a huge number of volunteers to host the pilots. I want to thank you for your engagement and openness to this process as a sector.

- I know that everybody here today had an opportunity to feed into the inspectorate led-session on evaluation and monitoring and I hope as practitioners you made your voices heard!

**Governance**

- Officials from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs organised a workshop on governance for your conference here today.

- This is a tangible example of how both my Department and the Department of Children are working together.

- I think everyone in this room welcomes the increased investment and policy focus on early years education but we must also acknowledge that this brings its own governance challenges.

- I hope that you had an opportunity to share your insights with the officials here today.
Conclusion

- We are mobilising and aligning quality supports for pre-school children and for the dedicated and committed staff working with them right across Government.

- This is one part of the important work that needs to be done.

- Even more important is the work that you do in your settings and in attending a host of national events where you give us your views.

- Without the support of the sector we cannot make progress.

- I welcome your commitment and I am delighted to see you here in such numbers. Your expertise and experience in early years is a resource of immense value as we move in partnership to develop this sector.

- I must also say a word about the impressive showcases just outside the room. They give a real impression of what happens in high-quality settings around the country.

- We are lucky to have such examples of excellent provision, as are the children who benefit from the innovation and dedication of services like these.

- In conclusion, I want to commend you for your work, for your interest and for your commitment. I look forward to receiving more details about your conclusions here today and the results of your discussions.

- We have achieved a great deal in recent years but there is certainly more work to be done.

- As we go forward we will rely on your support and your critical voices in ensuring that we deliver the very best outcomes for children.

Thank you.
# Appendix 4 – List of Showcase Participants

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<th>Service Name</th>
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<td>Curious Minds</td>
<td>Mayo</td>
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<td>Bizzy Bees</td>
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<td>Beverton</td>
<td>Donabate</td>
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<td>The ABC Club</td>
<td>Meath</td>
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<td>Cheeky Cherubs</td>
<td>Cork</td>
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<td>Happy Days</td>
<td>Tipperary</td>
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<td>Cottage Kids</td>
<td>Lusk</td>
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<td>Tir na nÓg Creche Naas</td>
<td>Kildare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Togher Family Centre</td>
<td>Cork</td>
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<td>NABCO - Island Key Child and Family Service</td>
<td>Dublin city centre</td>
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<td>Youngballymun</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language for Life</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barnardos Early Intervention, Finglas &amp; Millbrook</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barnardos Brighter Futures Centre</td>
<td>Cork</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barnardos Early Years Thurles</td>
<td>Tipperary</td>
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<td>Room to Bloom</td>
<td>Tipperary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sesame Preschool</td>
<td>Waterford</td>
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<td>Little and Big Rascals</td>
<td>Co Louth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentstown Montessori</td>
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<td>Grovelands Childcare</td>
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