



South Dublin Community Platform

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Early years briefing - 9th February 2016

Our three top issues

Fair wages and conditions for Early Years staff

Early Years staff are on low wages, with no or little non-contact hours to plan and review work, no funding for staff to undertake training and no time for staff meetings or parents' meetings.

Child centred approach threatened by sustainability issues

Early Years services have no guarantee of funding from one year to the next. The impact of this is that managers and Voluntary Boards of Directors have a constant battle to ensure a quality, child centred approach while also making sure there are sufficient funds to pay wages.

Early Childhood Care and Education – ECCE

ECCE – the free pre-school year – was insufficiently funded from the start, with payments for only 38 weeks of the year. It also assumes a staff:child ratio that cannot be said to be best practice. The introduction of a second ECCE year is simply not viable for community childcare providers.



Some facts and figures

There are 49 community-based Early Years services in the South Dublin County area. Several of these Early Years services are members of the South Dublin Community Platform.

To give you an idea of our situation, six (12% of all services in South Dublin County) of us have come together to write this briefing and make this presentation. Between the six of us we have:

Children availing of CCS	187
Children on ECCE	121
Children on CETS	26
Children not availing of any subvention, i.e. paying the full amount	25
Number of people employed in the services	67
Number of CE, JI, TUS etc. participants	40

Current subsidy situation and its impact on families and services

- We are community-based family support services. Our childcare services are part of the supports we provide for families, many who are vulnerable and struggling with finances, health, parenting etc.
- To provide this support we take children from a young age, we are open more or less all year around, and we strive to have a staff:child ratio that makes it possible for us to offer places also to children with additional needs.
- The amounts we receive in subsidy are topped up by parents/carers. In the areas where we work many people are struggling financially, and we keep our fees as low as we can. This influences wages, and even our capacity to employ the amount of staff we require. We have seen recent examples of staff taking wages cuts and of services having to reduce the number of hours they are open and the number of children they can provide for.
- We regularly receive referrals from PHNs, social workers, occupational therapists, schools etc., but very rarely is there any funding available. We would like to be able to be more flexible to be able to respond to emergency referrals, but if we do not keep a place filled we first have no fee coming in from the parent/s, and we could lose all the funding for that place for the remainder of the funding period.
- It is unrealistic to expect us to be able to plan and operate when the initial year's budget comes in four months after the year has started, and if there are appeals it can be up to ten months before the final budget is known.
- If a child is not of the age a service caters for in October, but turns the correct age in November, we cannot register them. They will have to wait and hope that someone who has qualified for the same subsidy leaves.
- Any child must qualify for the relevant subsidy in October. While we can replace a child who has left with another child qualifying for the same subsidy, they must have proof of eligibility for October, even if e.g. they come to us in April and have been eligible since December. Until the next October there is no subsidy available.
- It might not seem like a problem, but gathering the relevant qualifying information from parents is not easy. First of all some of the information required is very personal. Second, many of our families are in crisis and it can take a lot of effort to get everything in on time.

- When a place becomes available we have four weeks to fill it before we lose that funding for the rest of the period. Again, four weeks might seem like a long time, but if you are dealing with a family where there is a lot going on and where it could take time to win their trust, it is not that long. Especially if after some time you have to move on to the next family on the list. A family could also meanwhile have made other arrangements, e.g. with a child minder, and need to give some notice before moving their child.

Recent changes due to funding restrictions

When asked what changes, if any, have taken place in recent times, the following was said:

1. Due to funding restrictions we have had to cease providing play therapy.
2. We have had to make two members of staff redundant, reduced the hours we are open and reduced the number of childcare places. No salary increases or point increments since 2009.
3. Pay scales were frozen for six years, while at the same time caring for more children and families.
4. Staff have taken cuts in hours to reduce the wages bill.
5. Staff have taken a 5% wages cut and now have to sign on for three weeks during August, equating to a further 5.7% cut to wages.
6. Parents fees were increased.
7. 2014 summer the creche had to close for 2 months. 2015 the creche stayed open, staff were taking holidays and unpaid leave and we still had more than €9000 loss. 2016 summer we might have to close.
8. Reduce to one room due to inability to pay high rent on both rooms and let staff go as a result.
9. We are supporting a large number of children with additional needs with 3 awaiting assessment. We often receive referrals from other agencies etc. Barnardos for children that they feel will benefit from our service and the quality that it provides for parents and children. However we are doing all this without any additional funding. Basically we are operating the same type of service that we would have done in the past when we had HSE funding but obviously this is challenging and there are limits to what we can do in this situation. A lack of resources has an impact on our ability to meet the needs of all the children in the service.

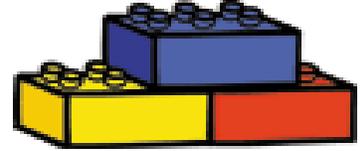
Case studies

To further illustrate the reality of the current funding situation, Early Years services which are members of the Community Platform have provided the following brief case studies:

1. We are recommended as an Early Years service that can provide care for children with additional needs. This year we were able to employ an additional member of staff for three hours per day to facilitate the inclusion of three children with additional needs, (Down Syndrome, autism spectrum and physical disability). We cannot sustain this cost long-term; with a second ECCE year it will be impossible.
2. A mother is parenting alone and in receipt of the Lone Parent Payment. She is also suffering from illness. Her child has cerebral palsy. The child has been referred by the Home School Liaison Officer to our After-School Care Group for support. The mother has a GP only Medical Card and is therefore designated Band B. She cannot afford this fee due to medical bills. They badly need this support but the appeal for Band A was rejected.
3. A family on Social Welfare payment (FIS) re-applied for their Medical Card before October CCS application week. They were paying Band A rates for their children based on previous applications. When we eventually received the list from the DCYA in February only Band B was granted. We could not appeal because the HSE have stated the

application has not been processed yet. The parents cannot afford the Band B fees. They had been paying Band A rates since 1 September.

4. A child with health issues was referred to our Early Years service in January. The mother is a lone parent, but as the October week has been and gone we cannot obtain any subsidy for her until September. The Community Welfare Officer rejected an application for financial support to make up the difference with the comment that she could get CCS.
5. The children of a family in receipt of social welfare where there is an addiction issue were referred to us by Home School Liaison and the PHN as they badly need the support of our service. As it is after October we cannot apply for any subsidy, the family has no money, and there is no money available from the school or the PHN.



The impact of ECCE

While we of course welcome any initiative that enables children to avail of Early Years Services, we question its suitability for young children. A staff:child ratio of 1:11 in a room where some children are under three and some are ready to start school is a difficult task. For a CCS service with the same ages the ratio would be 1:8 at the most, in some cases 1:6. Also, to at all have only one staff member in a room is not to be recommended.

We do not question the educational demands on the staff, the administration needed to be carried out, and the programme we have to provide. We do question the low staff ratio and the budget we are expected to manage on.

Our services are, as previously mentioned, open all year around. Our staff is employed all year around. Often our rooms are mixed ECCE and CCS, with age appropriate activities dividing the group rather than the scheme. Some of our services are small with only one room where we have to keep everyone together.

Eleven ECCE children give an annual income of €26125. Eleven Band A CCS children can give an annual income of up to €52250, plus the additional income we get from the parents' fees, which, while kept low, do contribute.

Financial example of CCS funding

Based on staff:child ratios as determined by the DCYA, and on all children qualifying for Band A, the average salary that can be had from this funding is around the equivalent of €23,000 for a 30-hour week. Every Room Leader must have at least Level 6 in childcare and the rest at least Level 5. The manager and any Room Leader will likely have a higher salary, so other childcare practitioners' salary would be lower. E.g. €25,000 for the manager, €23,000 for the other Room Leader, and €22,000 for the two childcare practitioners. And this is if your staff:child ratio, based on the ages of the children, fits in with the number of children allowed per room. It doesn't always.

This money does not allow for any holiday or sick leave cover, (with four members of staff one can at least assume the need for one more member of staff for four months of the year), nor for any time off for administration, training, planning, meeting parents etc. And it does not allow for any child needing on-going one-to-one support. The ratio cannot be changed so additional staff is needed on top of the four.

These additional salary costs as well as rent, insurance, training, light and heat, food, materials etc. must be covered by the parents' fees. But our parents are already struggling financially.

South Dublin Community Platform: is a membership organisation made up of 40 community and voluntary organisations who have a focus on anti-poverty and social inclusion across the South Dublin county. The Platform is a mechanism through which all of these groups can come together to develop and represent the collective voice of those who are most marginalised in the county.

The main areas of work of South Dublin Community Platform include

- Representative on local government committees
- Networking for social inclusion organisations in the county
- Leading initiatives in the county that promote anti-poverty and equality issues
- Linking national policy to the experience in South Dublin county.

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