

Department of Children and Youth Affairs
-Future Investment in Early Years and School Age Care and Education-



Report on Public and Parent Online Consultation Processes

April/ May 2015

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Section 1: Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from two online consultation surveys concerning future investment priorities in the early years and school-aged care and education sector, including the provision of after-school and out-of-school care. The first online consultation was designed to gather the views of stakeholders with a particular interest in the early years and school-aged care and education sectors; these stakeholders included formal and informal service providers, representative groups, advocacy groups and other special interest groups. The second online consultation was designed to collect the views of parents. The analysis of the online consultation and the writing of this report were completed by the Centre for Effective Services at the request of the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

Both online consultation processes were held during April and early May 2015. The purpose of the consultations was to identify and prioritise areas for future investment and reform, with a focus on improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of both early years and school-aged care and education provision.

In the context of the consultation and the findings emerging from it, the following definitions have been used:

Early years care and education is typically provided for children from birth to the age at which a child starts school, usually four or five years of age in Ireland.

After-school care refers to the care children receive outside of the normal school day during the academic year of September to June.

Out-of-school care refers to the care arrangements put in place for children during the school holidays.

1.2 Background

In January 2015, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced the establishment of an Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) on Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education. The purpose of this group is to identify and assess policies and future options for increasing the quality, supply and affordability of early years and school-age care and education services in Ireland. In order to inform the work of the IDG, three different types of consultation were held with a variety of stakeholders from the early years and school-aged care and education sector.

The first consultation was an Open Policy Debate, held in March 2015. The debate was attended by more than 30 invited participants from a range of statutory, community and voluntary and private sector organisations. The main objectives of this open debate were to propose future policy directions for early years and school-age care and education, to explore issues for policy in this sector, and to explore and prioritise options for future investment. A report summarising the messages from this debate was prepared by the Centre for Effective Services at the request of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

The second consultation was conducted using an online survey with members of the public. The public consultation survey was aimed at all stakeholders with an interest in early years and school-age care and education such as policy-makers, practitioners, providers, advocates and academics. Respondents to this survey were asked to identify:

- Objectives and principles for future investment
- Strengths and weaknesses of current investment
- Options for reform of current investment
- Priority areas for improvement of quality, accessibility and affordability of the sectors in the immediate and future terms
- Lessons learned from international examples of early years and school-age care and education

The public consultation form was available online from the 18th April to the 1st May 2015.

The third consultation was also conducted using an online survey intended to gather the views and opinions of parents and guardians¹ specifically. The parent consultation survey was designed exclusively for this group and aimed to identify:

- The main forms of childcare arrangements used by families with children in early years and school-age care and education
- Their reasons for their childcare choices and their satisfaction with them
- Priorities for future Government investment in relation to quality, affordability, accessibility and choice

The parent's consultation survey was available online from 18th April to the 10th May 2015.

All respondents were provided with access to a Primer document which accompanied the consultation form. The Primer document contained a brief outline of research in relation to both early years and school-age care and education along with an overview of the current investment in both sectors. Respondents were advised to read the Primer document before completing the online survey (see Appendix 1). Copies of the surveys are available on request.

This report presents the findings from the two consultation surveys, summarises the survey themes and integrates common issues and themes emerging from both consultation processes.

1.3 Method

The two consultation surveys for parents and the public were circulated by the DCYA via Survey Monkey, along with the accompanying primer document. As noted above, the closing date for the public consultation process was set as Friday 1st May, 2015, while the closing date for the parents' consultation process, originally set as Monday 4th May, was later extended to Sunday 10th May 2015, in order to facilitate greater participation by parents.

The public consultation survey was mainly made up of open-ended questions, that is un-categorised text responses, while the parents' survey was comprised mainly of closed, tick-box questions. The parents' survey included a small number of open-ended questions regarding priorities for future investment.

¹ For brevity, throughout this report, the term parent(s) is used to denote both parents and guardians

The two consultation surveys were analysed separately using different methods. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data emerging from the public consultation survey. The thematic analysis involved pinpointing, examining and recording patterns or 'themes' within the data.

The parents' survey was analysed quantitatively and generated simple descriptive statistics. The small number of open-ended questions that were included in the questionnaire were also analysed using thematic analysis.

As well as the responses to the online public consultation, a small number of submissions independent of the online responses were submitted directly to DCYA by relevant stakeholders. These submissions were comprised of qualitative information and were analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings from both consultation processes, while reported separately, are considered together in the Discussion section of the report in order to identify similarities and differences between the two cohorts.

1.3.1 Limitations of the data

It is important to note that respondents to these two surveys are ***self-selected samples and are not representative of either the wider parent population*** (with regard to the parent survey) ***or the stakeholder population*** (with regard to the public survey). It is also not possible to know if the same respondent, in either survey, submitted more than one response to one or both of the surveys.

The public consultation survey was largely qualitative in nature. The majority of questions were open-ended free text responses. However, the word count for each question was limited and respondents were unable to build on or elucidate the issues that were raised. As a consequence many of the informants made statements and/or suggestions for which there was limited capacity to provide supplementary or supporting information.

Finally, none of the questions in either the public or parent consultation surveys were compulsory and the level of missing data varied considerably from question-to-question and as a consequence response rates varied question-by-question. The level of 'missingness' has significant consequences, particularly with regard to the respondent type in the public consultation survey. The majority of respondents (61 per cent) did not identify to which category of respondent they belonged, as such it is difficult to conduct any sub-group analysis, disaggregate responses by type of respondent or establish any patterns or trends in the data on the basis of the category of respondent.

Given these limitations and the understanding that the process engaged in was consultation, it is important to note that the findings presented and discussed in the report have emerged from a consultation process and not a discrete research project.

1.4 Profile of Respondents

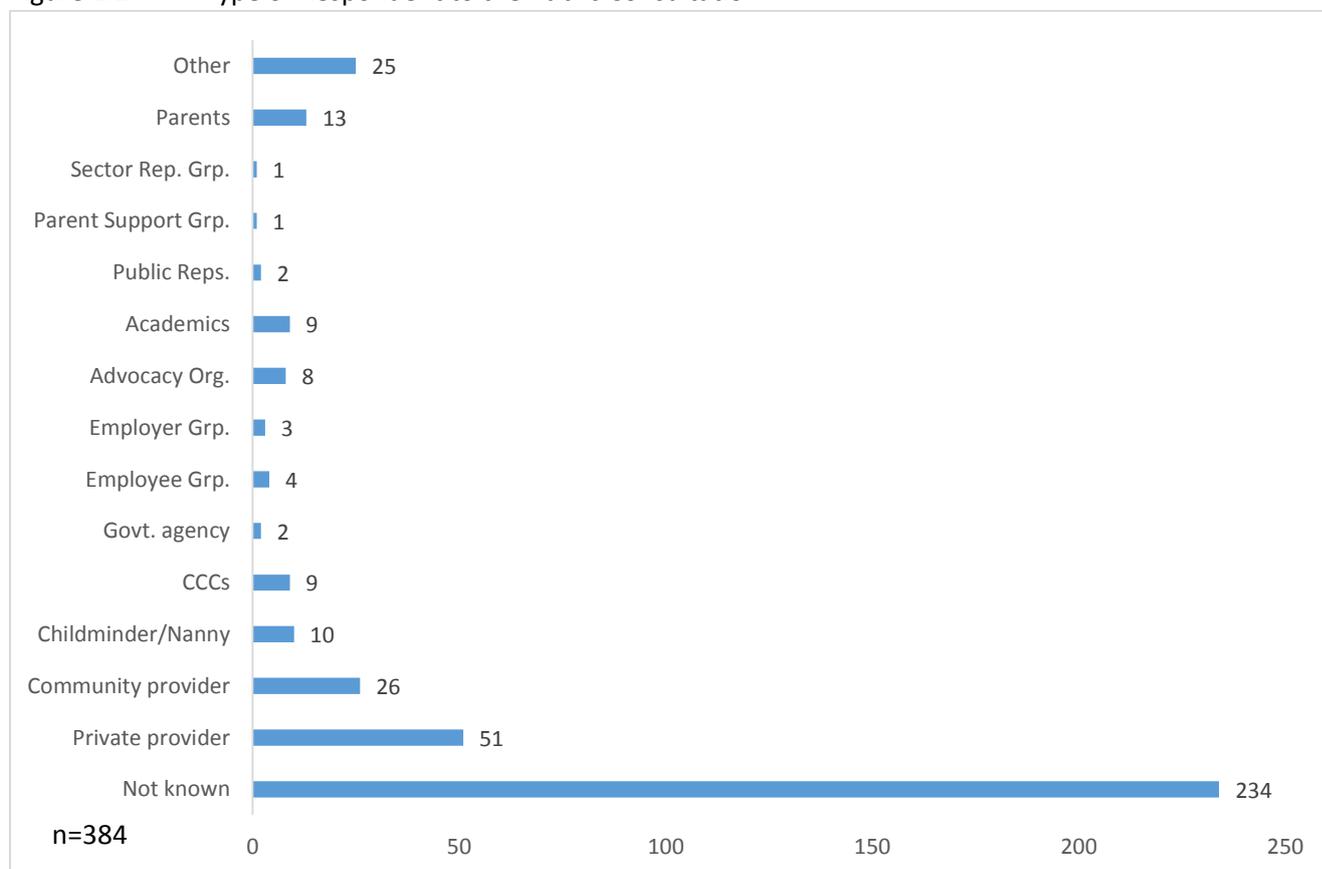
1.4.1 Public Consultation

A total of 384 completed surveys were returned online via Survey Monkey in the public consultation; a further six submissions were received outside of the online format.

As noted above, it is important to stress that the question on ‘type of respondent’ in the public consultation survey was not mandatory and just over a third (36 per cent) of respondents indicated their respondent type. A total of 25 respondents (seven per cent) indicated that they were in the ‘other’ category in terms of type of respondent. However, by far the largest cohort, at 234 respondents (61 per cent), were those who did not answer the question. The majority of respondents to the public survey, where type of respondent was reported, were formal and informal providers of early years or school-aged care and education services. For example, 51 responses were received from private providers, 25 responses from community providers and 10 responses were received from childminders/nannies. A total of 11 responses were received from Statutory bodies including nine from City/County Childcare Committees and two Government departments/agencies. Four employee representative and three employer representative organisations also completed surveys. Seven advocacy organisations and nine academic institutions also responded. Finally, 13 parents also completed this online public consultation survey.

Six responses from relevant stakeholders were also received directly to DCYA. These responses came from three public representatives who between them submitted two submissions; one advocacy organisation, one sector representative group, one parent-to-parent support group for children with additional needs and one community provider. The response from the community provider was originally submitted in Irish and had to be translated into English prior to analysis. These responses have been added to the total number of respondents across the different groups to the public consultation as summarised in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Type of Respondent to the Public Consultation

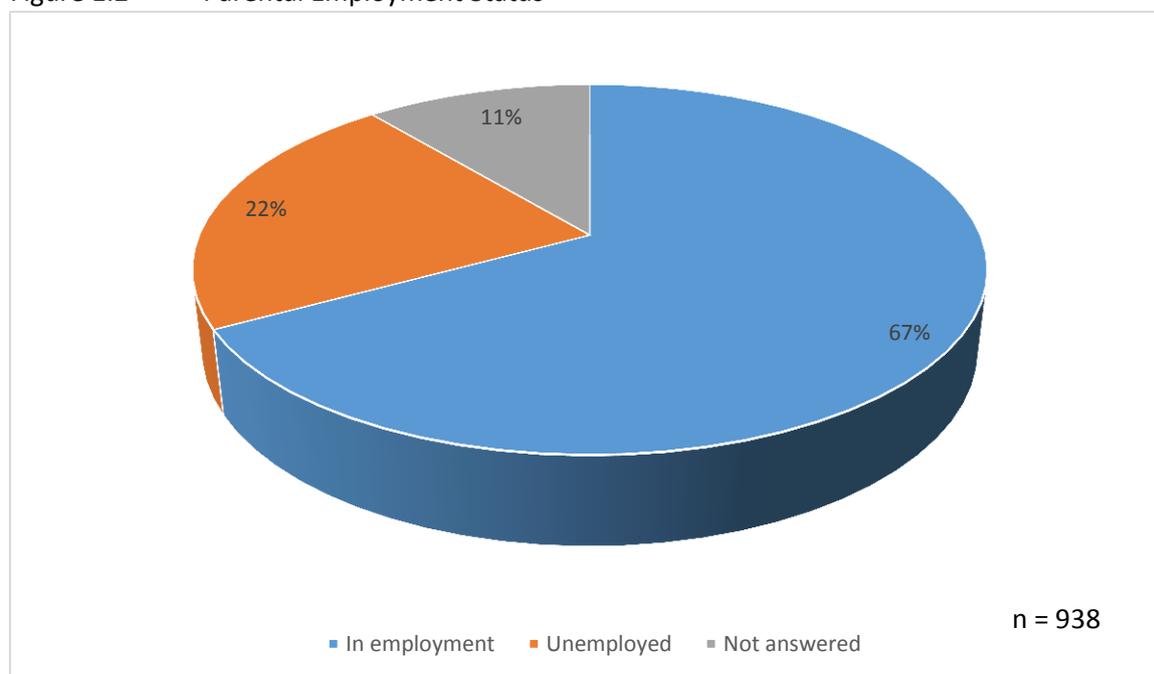


1.4.2 Parents' Consultation

A total of 938 completed responses were submitted by parents to the parents' consultation. Responses came from all over Ireland; 160 responses were received from parents living in the Dublin area including county Dublin; 39 from Cork city and county; 27 from Galway city and county and 13 from Limerick. Parents from outside the main urban centres also responded to the survey, for example there were responses from Carlow (7); Clare (18); Donegal (9); Kerry (8); Kildare (26); Kilkenny (11); Laois (8); Leitrim (5); Mayo (9); Meath (49); Offaly (5); Roscommon (12); Sligo (5); Tipperary (10); Waterford (10); Westmeath (9); Wexford (17); and Wicklow (22). Counties not named individually above received less than three responses from parents.

A total of 429 respondents did not provide address information. A total of 625 parents (67 per cent) reported that they are currently working in paid employment; 203 respondents (22 per cent) report that they are not in employment and 110 parents did not answer the question. Figure 1.2 summarises parental responses to the question of employment status.

Figure 1.2 Parental Employment Status

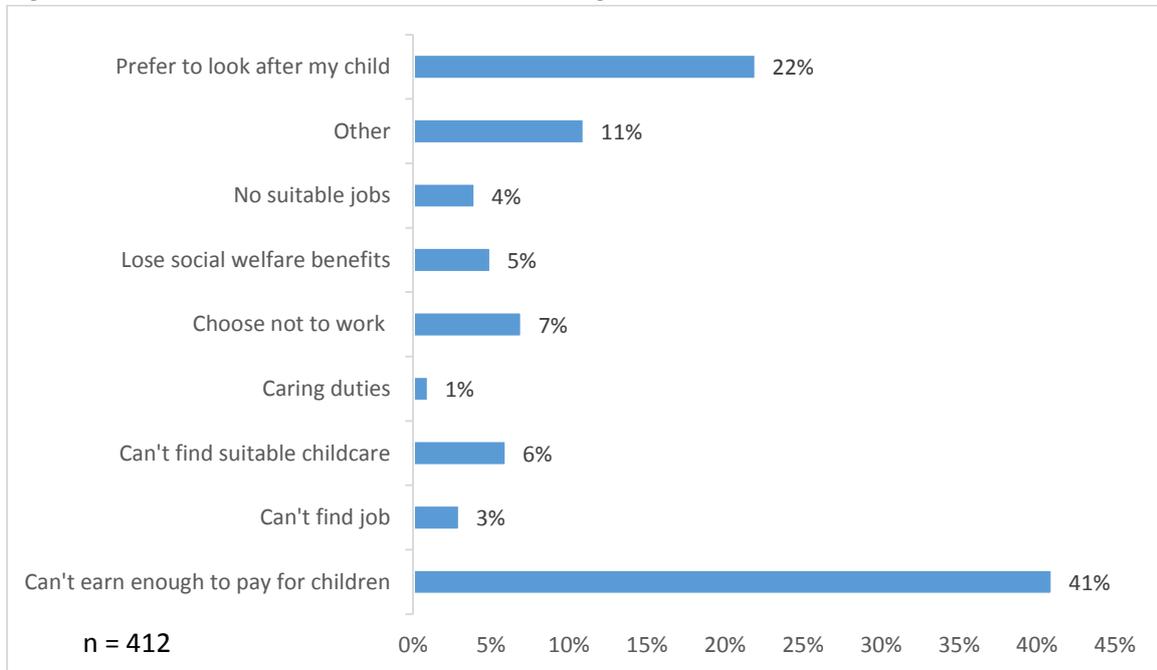


While 625 parents indicated that they were in paid employment, 629 parents responded to the question on the nature of their employment; the latter figure has been used to calculate percentage rates of full-time and part-time employment. Of the respondents who are working in paid employment, 66 per cent (413/629) are in full-time employment, while 35 per cent (216/629) report being in part-time employment.

Parents not working outside the home on a full-time basis in paid job were asked why this was the case. A total of 412 parents responded to this question. These included respondents who reported that they were not working in paid employment, and those who were in part-time employment. The most common reason for not working on a full-time basis outside the home as reported by 41 per cent of respondents to this question was that they 'cannot earn enough to pay for childcare'. This was followed by 22 per cent of parents who reported that they would 'prefer to be at home to look

after their child(ren) themselves'. Other reasons for not working in full-time employment outside the home included having a child with additional needs (two per cent) and being in full time education (two per cent). Only one per cent of respondents reported that 'caring for an elderly or ill relative or friend' prevented them from seeking full-time employment. Figure 1.3 shows the parental responses to this question.

Figure 1.3 Parental Reasons for Not Working Full-time Outside the Home



Section 2: Findings from the Public consultation

2.1 Introduction

As noted previously, a total of 390 online and non-online submissions were received in response to the invitation to respond to the public consultation on early years and school-aged care and education. The following sections provide details of the responses received for each of the questions included in the survey.

2.2 Objectives for Investment

Respondents were asked to rank six common objectives that drive investment in early years and school-age care and education by order of importance from one to six. The most common ranking for each of the investment objectives is presented in Table 2.1:

Table 2.1 Common Ranking for Each Investment Objective

| Investment Objective | Most Common Ranking |
|---|----------------------------|
| Promote child development | 1 |
| Encourage and support parenting | 2 |
| Improve incomes for disadvantaged families or reducing their expenditures | 3 |
| Reconcile work and family life | 4 |
| Remove barriers to female employment | 5 |
| Reduce gender inequalities | 6 |

The objective ‘promoting child development’ was most commonly ranked at number one; with 78 per cent of survey respondents identifying it as the most important investment objective.

The objective ‘encouraging and supporting parents’ was most commonly ranked at number two, with 42 per cent of all survey respondents ranking it as their second most important investment objective.

Improving incomes of disadvantaged families was most commonly (27 per cent) ranked as the third most important objective.

Reconciling work and family life was most commonly ranked as the fourth most important investment objective for the sector, with 26 per cent of all survey respondents ranking it fourth.

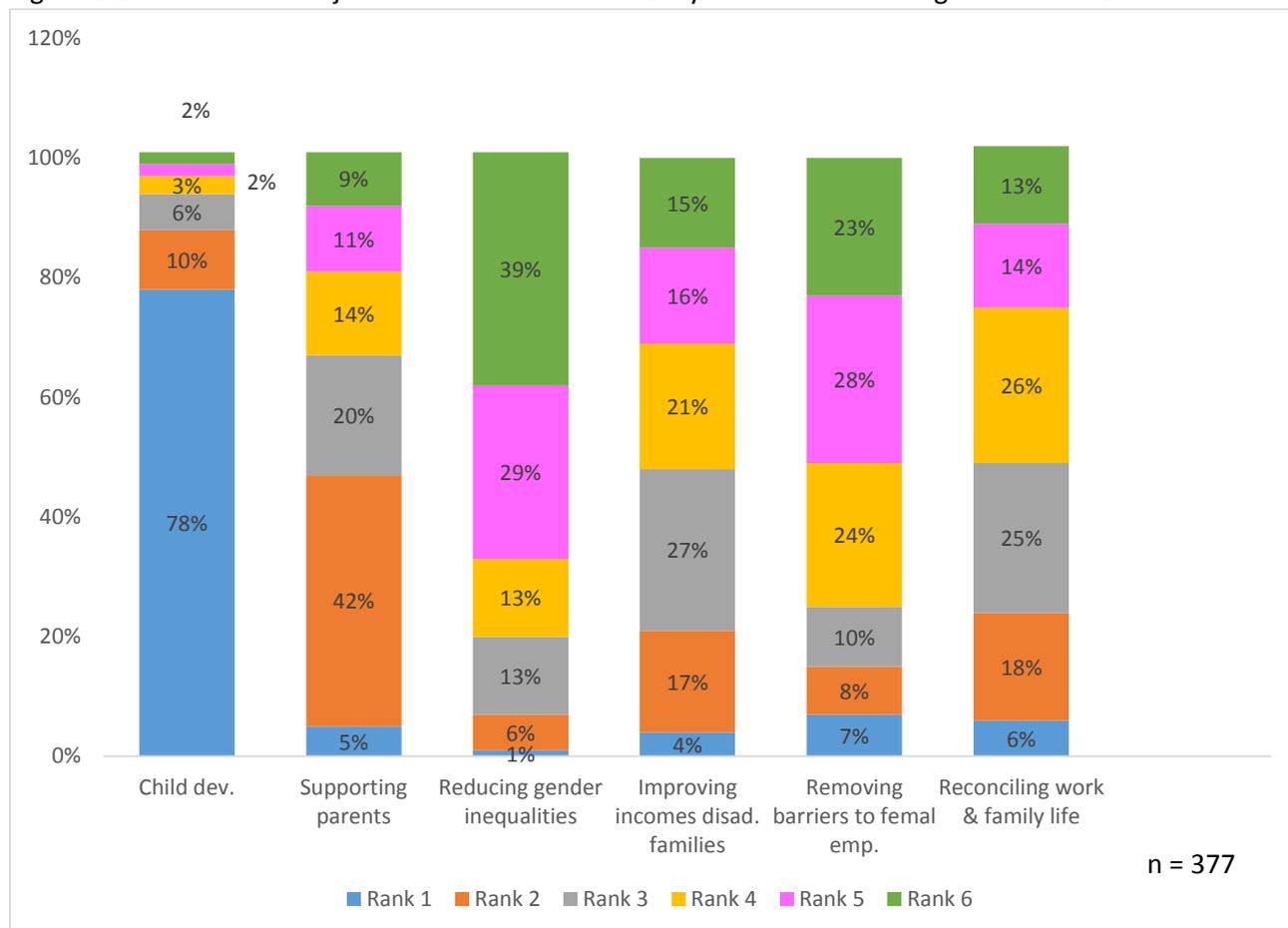
The objective of removing barriers to female employment was most commonly (28 per cent) ranked as the fifth most important objective for investment in the early years and school-aged care.

Finally, the objective of removing gender inequalities was ranked as the sixth most important objective associated with investment in the sector, with 39 per cent of all respondents ranking it in sixth place.

While the majority of ‘known’ respondents identified as either private or community care providers the significant majority of respondents who did not identify themselves means that any sub-group analysis or interpretation of the data is limited.

Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of rank scores for each investment objective included in the survey.

Figure 2.1 Ranked Objectives for Investment in Early Years and School-aged Care and Education



2.3 Core Principles for Investment

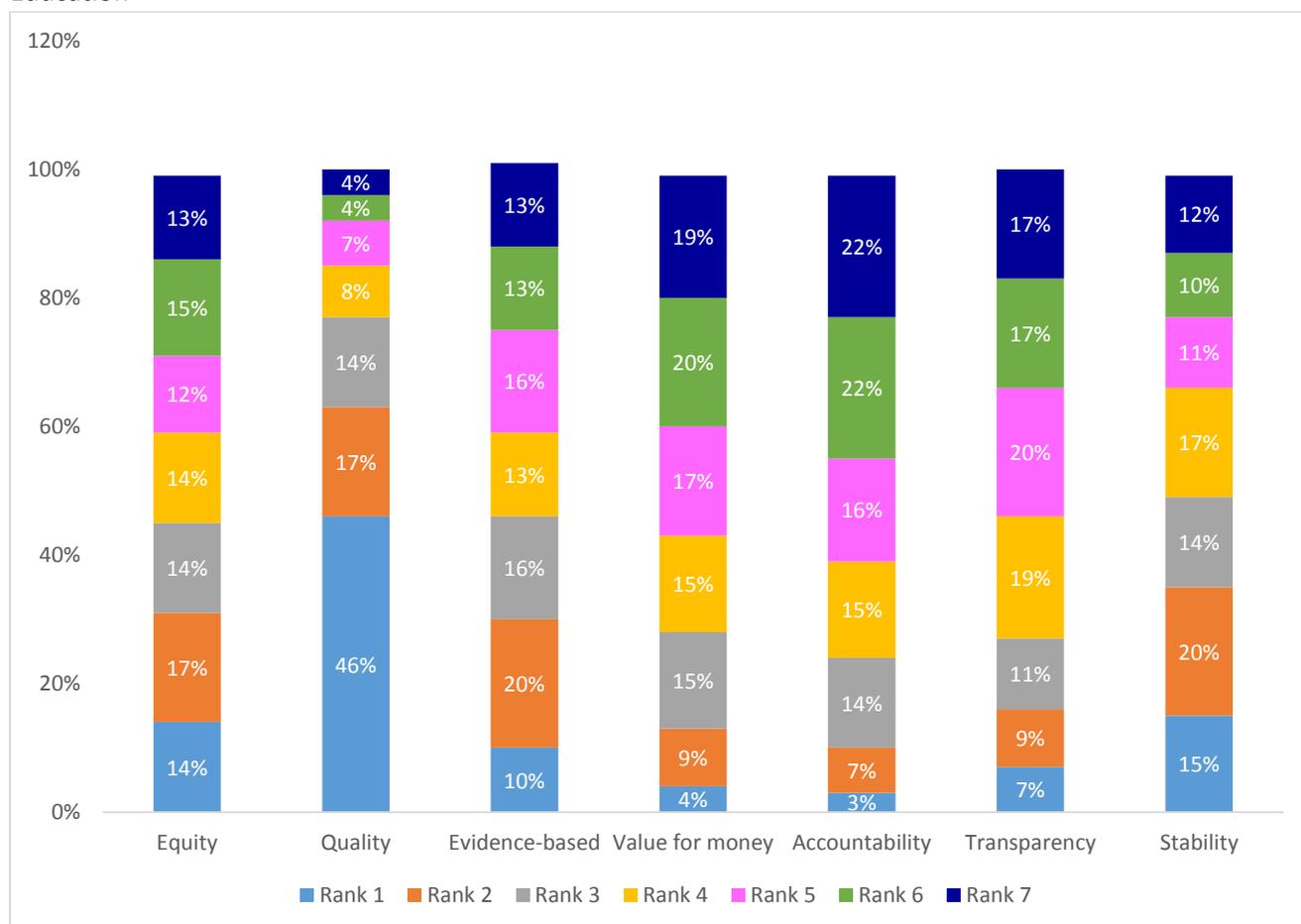
Respondents were also asked to rank seven core principles to drive the allocation of investment in early years and school-age care and education by order of importance from one to seven. The rankings were more evenly distributed across each of the principles for investment as can be seen by the most frequently occurring ranks for each of the investment principles.

The principle of equality was most commonly ranked as the most important investment principle for the sector. The principles of evidence-based services, stability of funding and equity were all most frequently ranked as the 2nd most important investment principle. Transparency of funding was most frequently ranked as the fifth most important principle; and value for money was most commonly ranked as the sixth most important principle for investment. The most common ranking associated with each of the principles for investment is presented in Table 2.2:

Table 2.2 Common Ranking for Each Principle for Investment

| Investment Principle | Most Common Ranking |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Equality | 1 |
| Evidence-based | 2 |
| Stability | 2 |
| Equity | 2 |
| Transparency | 5 |
| Value for money | 6 |

Figure 2.2 Ranked Core Principles for Investment in Early Years and School-aged Care and Education



While the type of respondent was not known in nearly two-thirds of cases, it is perhaps not surprising given that the remaining third of respondents is largely made up of service providers and other interest groups that quality is ranked as the number one principle for investment. However, establishing definitive links between ranking and respondent type is not possible given the high level of unknowns for the type of respondent.

2.4 Review and Reform of Current Investment

The following section deals with the views of respondents with regard to current Government investment, both direct and indirect, in the early years and school-age care and education sector. The Irish Government currently provides approximately €260 million annually directly to early years and school-age care and education services. The majority of this funding, approximately €246 million, is directed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) towards three programmes:

- The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, which aims to make early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children in the year before they commence primary school
- The Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme, which provides funding to community/not-for-profit childcare services to enable them to provide quality childcare at reduced rates to disadvantaged and low-income working parents

- The Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) Programmes, which aim to support parents on eligible training courses and eligible categories of parents returning to work, by providing subsidised childcare places.

The remaining €14 million is directed towards funding all City/County Childcare Committees (CCC's), the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, and various quality development and training initiatives such as the Learner Fund, Better Start's Early Years Specialist Service, and Annual Capital Grants.

The Irish Government also provides more than €2.5 billion annually in indirect investment to families with children of pre-school and school-going age, through the universal Child-Benefit Payment i.e. currently €135 per child per month and Maternity and Adoptive Benefit i.e. €230 per week for a maximum of 26 weeks in the case of Maternity Benefit and 24 weeks in the case of Adoptive Benefit.

2.4.1 The direct investment programme

Respondents were asked to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the current programme of direct investment; each is discussed in turn below, starting with the strengths of the current direct investment.

2.4.1.1 Strengths of the direct investment programme

Respondents were asked to reflect on and identify the strengths of the current programme of direct investment into the early years and school-aged care and education sector. Overall, responses suggested that the strengths of direct DCYA investment falls into two categories:

- What the direct investment 'buys' in terms of programmes and their associated strengths
- The system benefits of direct investment

With regard to programmes, the universal ECCE Programme was communicated as a major strength of direct investment by respondents, followed by more targeted programmes such as the CCS and the TEC Programmes. The system benefits of direct investment that were reported by respondents included direct payments to service providers in advance, accessibility and affordability of programmes and services, and the quality of provision and professionalisation of the workforce. The results below are reported in descending order, with the ECCE Programme being the most commonly mentioned strength among respondents, followed by other targeted programmes and so on. However, a small number of responses to this question were negative. One respondent believed that there was "*very little*" in terms of the strengths of direct DCYA investment, while two respondents believed that there was none at all. Another respondent remarked that they were "*all good programmes but a lot of overlap*".

ECCE Programme/Free Pre-School Year

The main strength of direct DCYA investment that was communicated by respondents was the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme (i.e. free pre-school year). The strengths of the Programme identified were its' accessibility/universality, in that the service is available to all children and families, regardless of ethnicity, social class etc., ensuring that there is no stigma or label attached to availing of the Programme. According to one respondent, the high number of services funded under this Programme also means it is generally readily accessible in terms of geography, ensuring a high uptake of the Programme, with some respondents quoting a take-up rate of 95 per cent. The capitation grant was mentioned by a number of respondents as important for the professionalisation of, and retaining qualified graduates in the sector. The introduction of training

requirements as part of the ECCE Programme was seen as recognition of the importance of quality provision and qualified staff. As one respondent noted *“the quality of the workforce plays a huge part in the quality of the provision”*. However, according to one of the submissions independent of the online responses, it is only in the last two years that there has been any recognition given in this country to Continuous Professional Development (CPD). This submission recommended expanding the eligibility criteria for accessing the Learner Fund² and having national CPD training days. Affordability of the Programme was highlighted as a strength. According to respondents, the fact that the Programme is free relieves some of the financial burden on parents, while also allowing children from disadvantaged backgrounds to avail of early education which may not have been possible for many before. Many respondents talked very positively about the Programme. For example an advocacy organisation suggested that *“The programme is contributing to tackling inequalities in childhood by improving their school readiness and social and emotional development”*, while an Early Years Practitioner reported that *“ECCE provides all children with an essential year of building relationships, skills and knowledge before entering primary education”*. Another respondent also suggested that the Programme contributes to the promotion of English communication skills development in children from different countries. A small number of respondents made reference to the evidence base that underlies this programme, stating that research shows that children from all social backgrounds who have positive and high quality early years education have better outcomes in the rest of their education, which in turn promotes greater returns in adulthood.

However, as well as discussing the strengths of the ECCE Programme, some respondents to this question also noted a number of shortfalls to the Programme. These included service providers having to use a large amount of their own time each week to be able to deliver the programme; chronic underfunding of the programme; insufficient hours for full time working parents; and lack of provision for children with additional needs.

Other Targeted Programmes

Respondents also highlighted the CCS (Community Childcare Subvention) and the TEC Programmes i.e. Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS), After-School Childcare (ASCC), and Community Employment Childcare (CEC) as strengths of direct investment. The CCS Programme is viewed as beneficial as it enables those *“from the lower social economic backgrounds whose developmental needs may often be greater to access early education from 3 months upwards and this then enables parental support for a better start”*. The main strength of the TEC Programmes are that they support parents to return to education, training or employment while keeping childcare costs relatively low. This was viewed by one respondent as a means of supporting families *“to have a second chance.....and rebuild and strengthen their circumstances”*.

Funding/Direct payment to service providers in advance

A number of respondents believed that paying the funding directly to the service providers (of ECCE, CCS and TEC Programmes) in advance allows the providers to undertake forward planning which helps create sustainability in the sector. Respondents also suggested that direct payments means that the funding directly benefits the child, and cannot be used for any other purpose. Another key strength of direct investment programmes such as ECCE, CCS, and TEC that was reported by respondents, is that as they subsidise places directly rather than trying to reduce costs through the

² The Learner Fund provides funding in the form of a training subsidy to assist existing staff working directly with children in registered early years services to attain the mandatory minimum qualification requirements.

tax system, it is possible to improve quality at the same time as affordability. However, one private provider expressed dissatisfaction with this system of funding, stating that funding should instead be available as needed as the needs of each early years setting can change over time.

Accessibility and Affordability

The fact that all children can have access to a pre-school year and that cost is not an issue was seen as a strength of direct DCYA investment. This allows many children who would not have been able to benefit from early years care and education to now do so. One respondent noted that one of the benefits of this is that *“early intervention can be provided for families in need and could possibly prevent families going into crisis and needing further interventions”*.

Quality of service provision and trained workforce

Many respondents referred to the quality of the sector and of the move towards professionalisation of the early years workforce. Investment in the Learner Fund to help childcare workers upskill, and in quality development initiatives such as the Better Start Early Years Specialist Service are seen as a strength of direct DCYA investment. Some respondents also spoke of how such investment is increasing awareness among parents, child care workers and the general public of the importance of early childhood education: *“parents are beginning to understand that learning, and the development of their child does not begin when they go to school. People are talking about child development”*.

2.4.1.2 Weaknesses of the direct investment programme

Respondents were also asked to reflect on and identify weaknesses of the current direct investment programme into early years and school-aged care and education. It was noted by one early years specialist that *“there are more weaknesses than positive”*. The main weakness of direct DCYA investment that was communicated by nearly all respondents was that it is insufficient to cover the running costs of services and to ensure quality provision, especially with regard to the funding of the ECCE Programme. As with the strengths of direct investment, the results below are placed in descending order, with insufficient funding being the most commonly communicated weakness of direct funding among respondents, and so on.

Insufficient Funding/Investment

According to respondents, the capitation payments are not enough to pay qualified staff a decent wage which can lead to a high staff turnover in the sector, thereby undermining the sustainability of such services. One respondent suggested that *“you would earn more money at ALDI”*. Holiday pay and bank holidays are not provided for in the funding structures, and there is also no allowance for resources or non-contact hours (e.g. staff training, paperwork, planning etc.). Much of the planning and recording that is required to provide a quality service is therefore done by the staff outside of working hours. It was suggested by respondents that the financing of the ECCE Programme indicates a lack of respect for practitioners in this sector, with one respondent stating that *“I am passionate about what I do but I constantly feel disrespected by the system. My skills, talents and abilities are not valued in the same way as other professionals”*, while another suggested that this also *“implies a lack of value for very young children”*.

It was also reported by respondents that the current level of capitation per child in the CCS Programme may not be sufficient to meet the cost of childcare and allow low-income families to take up full-time employment. TEC programmes were also criticised for not paying sufficient fees to the provider to cover the cost of the provision.

Some respondents believed that there is “*consistent inequality of funding favouring community run services over private run providers*”. For example, independent providers cannot apply for capital grants for building maintenance. One respondent reported that marginalising private providers with regards to funding will serve only to “*deepen the rift within the sector further*”.

Inequality of provision and support

The inequality of provision and support for some individuals was mentioned as a weakness of direct DCYA investment. Programmes were reported by respondents to not take account of the levels of deprivation in different communities, instead utilising a blanket approach. For example, respondents report there is not enough investment and support for children with additional needs and their families, or training and mentoring for those working directly with this group, particularly in the ECCE Programme. It was also expressed by many that the CCS Programme should be extended to include middle income/working families as the current high cost of childcare provides no incentive for parents to stay in full time employment. CCS is also only available where there is a community based service which discriminates against families who qualify but have no such service in their area. It was suggested that it be extended into privately run services to improve access and choice. This would also reduce any stigma attached to availing of CCS. Other groups who were mentioned as being unsupported by direct investment included childminders, parents and children from birth to 3 years (as an extremely vulnerable age group), and private early years services, many of which have been forced to close.

Variable Quality of Services

Another weakness of indirect investment as communicated by respondents is that there appears to be no vetting of the quality of those offering the ECCE Programme. Funding should be linked in some way to quality improvement with one respondent suggesting there should be a grading system to help parents know the quality of a service and also to give services an incentive to strive for a better rating. According to some respondents, currently providers are given no support or acknowledgement when they provide a high quality service. Similarly, areas such as childminding and school-age provision are unregulated and current investment in these areas is not evidence based or linked with standards or inspections, which raises questions of accountability, transparency and value for money. There is also a major lack of professional development across the sector with one of the submissions independent of the online survey proposing that investment in trainers is required to ensure and assure the quality of training for those entering or upskilling in the early childhood sector. The same respondent notes that the gap between training and practice is well acknowledged and inconsistencies in the quality of training delivered is a fundamental weakness within the current system.

Inadequate time for ECCE Programme

A number of respondents suggested that the current time allocated for the ECCE Programme (38 weeks) was insufficient to support parents’ participation in the workforce, and for children with no English communication skills to develop self-help, self-esteem, confidence, and social and independence skills. It also results in staff being let go over the summer months. The sessions at three hours per day were not thought to be family friendly. Some suggested that it should therefore be extended to 48 weeks or 52 weeks. It was also suggested by some that it be increased to two years provision to allow children additional time to develop emotionally and socially. However, one respondent reported that “*Five days per week is too much for some children, parents should have the option to choose two days one year and three the nextThis scheme does not give parents choice*”.

Other

Other weaknesses of direct investment identified in the public consultation include:

- Programmes are administration heavy (“*paper over people*”) - poor administration in the CCS Programme means that funding levels are often not approved until the middle of the year which can cause cash-flow problems. The plethora of Programmes under the TEC umbrella creates confusion and administrative barriers
- Lack of control over amount of ECCE centres opening which is causing over saturation and leading to quality services closing down
- No national strategy for the after-school care sector
- Focus is on education not on care- why is care subservient?

2.4.2 Indirect investment

Respondents were asked to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the current programme of indirect investment; each is discussed in turn below, starting with the strengths of the current indirect investment.

2.4.2.1 Strengths of the indirect investment

The two main strengths of indirect investment as communicated by respondents were the universal Child Benefit payment and maternity leave arrangements, both of which were praised for their beneficial impact on families in Ireland. However, a small number of respondents were not as positive, with one stating that they were unable to think of any strengths of indirect investment, another believing that the strengths were “*minimal*”, and the other responding that they couldn’t think of any other positives other than it gives people money.

Universal Child Benefit

The Child Benefit payment was seen by a majority of respondents as one of the main strengths of current indirect investment as this is universal ensuring equality and fairness for all. Some respondents suggested that it is especially beneficial for lower income families, although “*the lack of health, education and social care services which are available and affordable impacts negatively on young children as those in disadvantaged families often do not receive the care they need when they need it*”. Most respondents viewed the consistent and direct payment as “*a critically important payment to all families for the rearing of their children*”, as it allows parents to provide basic provisions. One respondent mentioned that many families use the payment to help subsidise childcare costs, thereby directly benefiting the child. Some respondents mentioned Child Benefit as a vital step in combating child poverty, while others spoke of its commitment to all children and acknowledgement of the value of children. However, one respondent warned that the economic downturn may see more families using this payment to pay bills rather than invest in the child. It was suggested by a CCC that the “*government should address how this payment could be tied to other family supports and services to ensure each child has opportunities and access to high quality services in their community*”. This links with another respondent’s comment that there should be no more increases to Child Benefit and that the money should instead be targeted at increasing quality for children by funding services directly. According to an academic institution, while Child Benefit contributes to families financially, it does not contribute to the “*quality of care*”.

Maternity Leave and Benefit and Adoptive Benefit

The second major strength of current indirect investment identified by respondents was maternity benefit and leave. Around a third of respondents were of the opinion that maternity leave in this country was positive as it allowed mothers time to bond with their children, while maternity benefits

offered them financial security to do this. A number of respondents also highlighted how fathers should also have the opportunity to stay at home. However, one advocacy organisation communicated that *“while leave beyond the first six months should be open to either parent (through paid parental leave), the first six months should remain for mothers. This is important to ensure that mothers are not put under pressure to return early to work, and also as a positive support for breastfeeding for the first six months”*. It was also suggested by one private provider that there should actually be less money for maternity leave but that it should be available for a longer period of time. One parent suggested that while maternity leave cover in Ireland is adequate, the government could do more to encourage businesses to pay full maternity leave.

Other

Other payments named by respondents as positive aspects of the indirect investment approach included Family Income Supplement (FIS) and the One Parent Family Payment. With regard to the former, one employer representative group observed that FIS is *“an important measure to encourage employment among long-term unemployed households and people in receipt of low pay”*. The latter was praised for acknowledging the particular financial challenges that come from being a single parent.

2.4.2.2 Weaknesses of the indirect investment

While the two main strengths of indirect investment were identified as the universal Child Benefit payment and maternity leave and benefit, it is interesting to note that aspects of these were also identified by respondents as weaknesses of current indirect investment. The majority of respondents were of the opinion that there is insufficient leave arrangements in Ireland for both parents following the birth of their child. The second most common weakness of indirect investment that emerged from analysis of the results was in regard to the Child Benefit payment, which many respondents believe does not adequately target those who need it most.

Insufficient Leave Arrangements for Both Parents

The main weakness of indirect investment identified by respondents includes the insufficient leave arrangements for both parents following the birth of their child. Many respondents, most of whom fell into the category of private providers, report that the lack of paid parental leave puts pressure on parents to return to work when their child is too young, which is a major strain on families as *“fathers are forced to be less involved in their newborn’s lives and women struggle to balance child rearing with their careers”*. One advocacy organisation pointed out that *“adding together maternity leave, parental leave and other childcare-related leave, on average European countries offer 19 months of paid leave for parents after the birth of a child”*, which is significantly longer than the six months paid leave available in Ireland. The same organisation also pointed out that current provision in Ireland is also significantly shorter than the 12 months paid leave that is recommended by UNICEF as a minimum standard. Maternity and adoptive benefit was also criticised by respondents for being too low, with some respondents also highlighting that there is no support for stay-at-home mothers or mothers who are self-employed. A number of respondents therefore recommended that maternity benefit be increased to one year as the current timeframe is too short compared to the European average and there is little support for parents after six months in terms of affordable and quality childcare. It was also suggested that extending maternity and paternity benefit would benefit childcare providers too, as currently the child: staff ratio is high for under ones.

In contrast to the advocacy organisation who recommended in the previous question that the first six months of paternity leave should remain exclusively for mothers, a number of respondents to this question suggested that parents should be able to share parental leave, as in some cases the

mother may be the higher earner in the family. This could also work to shift the onus of care away from women and create better equality for men and women in relation to the provision of care, while also increasing female labour market participation. According to one independent submission, paternity leave is an important part of progressive family policy, and has been found to promote a closer relationship between the father and child. It was recommended that at least two weeks paternity leave should be introduced in Ireland, as was suggested by the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy in 2013.

Child Benefit

The main weakness that participants, most of whom fell into the categories of private and community providers, found with the current Child Benefit payment was that it is not means tested and therefore does not target those who need it most; *“the system is flawed when a child who is fed from such a payment is receiving the same payment as a child whose parents are able to save or use payment for luxuries”*. A number of respondents remarked that many higher income families do not rely on the payment to the same extent as lower income families. It was suggested that means testing the payment would enable savings to be made and allow for increases for those most in need. The payment is also cut off at 18 years of age, which some respondents stated was one of the most expensive periods in a child’s life (e.g. many young people are starting college around this age).

The other major weakness of the current Child Benefit payment suggested by respondents is that there is no guarantee that the benefits will not be abused and the money spent on purposes other than benefitting the child. Many respondents believed that as the benefit is a direct payment, it may not always go to meet the child’s needs, and it does nothing to ensure quality of provision of childcare in early years settings. One employee representative suggested a voucher system could be undertaken instead so as to ensure that the money is actually spent on the children, while an employer representative suggested that parents could nominate an approved childcare provider to receive the Child Benefit payment directly in order to subsidise the cost of childcare. The payment was also criticised for being too low to adequately feed, clothe and provide for a child.

Other

Other weaknesses that were identified by respondents included:

- No support for childcare that caters for children with special needs and the current Home Tuition Scheme does not fully meet the special educational requirements of children with autism
- Payments to parents do not improve standards in childcare settings in the same way as direct funding to services

Overall, many respondents report that indirect investment should be used more as a support for those most in need rather than a one system fits all approach. The current system has been described as *“blunt and universal”* and does not take into account people’s individual circumstances. In that context, it was suggested by some that a more targeted provision should therefore be considered.

2.5 Potential for Redistribution of Investment

Respondents were asked to consider how current investment might be redistributed or reformed in the event of no additional or further investment into the sector. Respondents were specifically asked to describe how current investment, both direct and indirect, could be reformed and/or

redistributed to improve early years and school-age care and education services, including children with additional needs, in the following areas:

- Affordability
- Accessibility
- Quality

A large number of respondents stated that the reform or redistribution of current investment was not a viable option as the sector is insufficiently funded and there is little or no slack in the system to allow for re-distribution or reform. It was suggested that more investment is what is needed: *“divert funds from other economic sectors as a matter of urgency”*. These respondents proposed that current investment is unable to be reformed or redistributed as it is:

- **Critically low in comparison to other OECD countries** with one respondent stating that it will be a *“bleak future ahead for all children”* if no further investment is made. According to an academic institution, *“while redistribution may address certain issues, it will only do so on a very short-term basis – the objective of the DCYA, in partnership with other key departments should be to secure an increase to reach the OECD average expenditure of 0.7 per cent of GDP within a reasonable time-frame”*
- **An under-investment.** It was suggested by a submission independent to the online survey that historic, chronic under investment in early childhood care and education has brought us to this point where services are unsustainable
- **Insufficient to meet the needs of the sector, improve affordability and accessibility, and ensure quality provision.** It was suggested that no further investment would actually result in a deterioration of the current system: the quality of early years education would fall; the best workers would leave the sector to work elsewhere; services would close; school-age childcare would continue to be unregulated; and Síolta would not be rolled out

One independent provider described further investment as a *“preventative measure”* which would demonstrate the *“State’s commitment to the youngest and most vulnerable”*. No future investment would be especially devastating for children with additional needs, who many reported would be left behind if there was a reform of current investment. However, despite the reluctance of many to entertain the idea of no further investment, a number of suggestions were made as to how to reform the current investment. Measures to enhance quality provision and professionalisation of the workforce was the most commonly suggested option among respondents, followed by improved supports for children with additional needs. As seen previously, a number of respondents also suggested that the Child Benefit payment should be made means-tested, while a reform of the ECCE Programme was suggested as another possible option for reforming current investment.

Enhance quality provision and professionalisation of the workforce

The most common option for reform or redistribution of current investment reported by respondents was linked to quality and increased professionalisation of the workforce. These views were shared across a range of different stakeholders. A number of respondents reported that investment should be linked to quality and that services that do not provide quality care and education should not receive the same capitation/funding as those that do. One community provider suggested that *“a thorough audit of current provision with a focus on the quality of provision”* would allow for services that deliver poor quality to be addressed and high quality services to be recognised. It was suggested by a private provider that this would also enable parents to make informed choices about what service to choose for their child.

A number of respondents made the link between quality and professionalisation, with a number stating that in order for a quality service to be provided, the staff need to feel valued, which does not appear to be the case in this sector. This was highlighted by one respondent who stated that *“it is very frustrating to be treated like a glorified babysitter, working for minimum wages”*. An employee representative group also proposed that there should be greater parity in terms of remuneration between early childhood educators and primary school educators as *“the children we teach at pre-school level are not less significant than the children primary school teachers teach, so why are we as practitioners less significant?”*

It was suggested by one of the submissions independent of the online survey that contracts for all early childhood programmes should have an element of Continuous Professional Development. However, there appeared to be no clear consensus on what an acceptable level of training/education should be, with one respondent stating that leaders in an ECCE setting should have FETAC Level 6 education at a minimum, while another respondent from a CCC, suggested that FETAC Level 8 be the minimum required. Continuous Professional Development for the workforce (e.g. child protection, special needs courses etc.) was deemed as highly important by an academic institution, as not only will it upskill the workforce, but it will also *“give them confidence and esteem in their professional work”*. As put by one community provider: *“invest in staff and quality will follow”*.

Improved supports for children with additional needs

While a large number of respondents’ report that a reform or redistribution of current investment would exclude children with additional needs as they *“do not exist in the present childcare system”*, there were a number of suggestions on how to improve the affordability, accessibility and quality of early-years and school-age care and education for this group.

The most common suggestion made by respondents was that the increased placement of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in pre-school and primary school settings (or funding to recruit ones) should be seen as a priority, as this would provide more support for the children and also allow more children to enrol in services. It was also proposed that services should be provided with funding to purchase necessary equipment and resources so that children with additional needs can realise their rights and access more services.

Some respondents made suggestions as to how the ECCE Programme could be adjusted to better cater for children with additional needs. It was proposed by a private provider that services be allowed to provide three days per week instead of five to children with additional needs and then use the extra two days funding to pay for SNAs. A community provider suggested that a second year of the ECCE Programme would benefit this group provided that the second year incorporated collaborative work between the pre-school and primary school in order to support the children’s transitions. It was suggested by another respondent that the higher capitation fee of the ECCE Programme should be redirected from staff qualifications to providing a better service for children with additional needs. In contrast, an occupational therapist suggested that the *“money needs to follow the child and not the service”* so that families can use it to fund transport to special educational settings or fund SNAs in home learning programmes. It was suggested that the money for these additional resources could be made available by shifting the focus from universal cover for GP visits for children under six to children with the highest priority needs, i.e. children with developmental disorders and special needs. It was also suggested in a submission independent of

the online survey that the Government should introduce a national inclusion policy for children with additional needs, so as to ensure equality in access to additional supports and to give guidance on the delivery of supports.

Means-tested Child Benefit

A number of respondents also suggested that in the event of no further investment, one possibility could be to means test the Child Benefit payment for high earners and redistribute such savings in order to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of early years and school-age care and education services. The following possible options for the redistribution of the savings were suggested:

- Use the money to support children with additional needs by paying for SNAs for pre-schools and primary schools or for a second ECCE year for children with a diagnosed disability
- Provide more benefits for those who need it most (e.g. low income households)
- Invest the savings in shared parental leave for the first year of a newborn's life

It was also suggested by some community providers and a Montessori teacher that the Child Benefit payments should be abolished completely with the money put directly into education and improving facilities and salaries in early years settings.

Reform of ECCE Programme

A number of respondents also reported that in the event of no further investment, one possible option would be to reform the ECCE Programme. A number of suggestions were made with regard to improving the affordability, accessibility and quality of the Programme. These included:

- Charge low fees to all parents to ensure services are sustainable and can provide quality care
- Revise the present funding system of the Programme in order to take account of staff non-contact time e.g. paperwork
- Simplify the complex administration process
- Provide a second free year. However, one provider disagreed with this and suggested that the Government should instead invest in the first year properly
- Support the needs of young children in the Programme who are learning English as an additional language

However, one respondent, a registered childminder and pre-school teacher, believed that the number of pre-schools being awarded an ECCE Contract should actually be reduced as there is over-supply in some areas.

Other

Other possible options for the reform or redistribution of current investment included:

- Reform the CCS Programme so as to extend it to eligible families in all areas and to extend it into privately run services and to registered childminders who meet quality standards
- Rationalisation of all Government agencies, initiatives, inspection systems, funding systems into one streamlined, coherent early education and care body
- Examine the discrepancy in pay and funding between community based services and private providers and realign where necessary

- Extend maternity/paternity leave with the option of splitting the leave between both parents
- Disperse funding more equitably to include positive discrimination towards the childminding sector to ensure that future development is evenly spread

2.6 Prioritisation of Investment for Early Years Care and Education

Respondents were asked to identify three priorities for investment in the early years care and education sector in the immediate term and a further three priorities for investment over the next five years. It should be noted that many respondents made little distinction between the two funding periods suggested in the survey and identified the same priorities across the two time periods. A significant number of respondents were explicit in this lack of distinction and attributed this to the need for investment in the priority areas to be continuous. As such the priority areas for investment over the two time periods are discussed below and explicit mention is made of where specific differentiation was made by respondents with regard to time period.

Priorities listed below are ordered by volume of response, i.e. 'investment in quality' was the priority most often listed across both time periods.

Investment in quality

Improving the quality of early years care and education was both an immediate and long-term priority identified by a large number of respondents. This was often linked with the suggestion that Government funding should be dependent on the quality of services. Increased direct investment in services was recommended by many respondents, as was direct funding to help services with issues such as purchasing appropriate equipment, change or refurbishment of premises, water charges and other maintenance costs. Increased Government funding to match the OECD average of 0.7 per cent GDP was also proposed.

Suggestions tended to be service-specific, i.e. either community or private services, although some respondents did not differentiate between the two types of provider. One respondent noted "*do not distinguish between public and private early years centres for capital grants, base it on proof of quality as private or public doesn't matter provided children and staff are getting what they should from it*". Investment in baseline assessment of quality and other funded research was proposed to identify pressing areas for quality improvement. Improved quality was also linked with the need to train practitioners in data collection to inform research on the early years sector. However, one community provider noted that there is already a body of international research on this and replication would not be a good use of public money.

Access to training and continued professional development for staff also emerged as a key priority for improvement of early years quality. The need to roll-out and embed Aistear and Síolta was frequently linked with improving quality, with one respondent suggesting these frameworks be linked to inspections. Many respondents also referred to the need for investment in and implementation of a national pay scale for early years practitioners, including pay for non-contact time.

ECCE

The establishment of a second free pre-school year was proposed by a number of respondents. However, many suggested that the current ECCE year firstly needs to be reformed before being extended. A number of respondents proposed extending the number of hours and weeks within the

current ECCE year, such as to four hours a day and 52 weeks a year. This extra time was also suggested to incorporate administrative tasks and continued professional development. Direct investment in ECCE services was suggested to improve wages. Incremental investment in ECCE was suggested as a long-term priority, to increase over five years from 0.2 per cent to one per cent of GDP.

Restoration of the cut capitation, along with an increase in capitation in general, was highlighted by many as necessary in order to promote sustainability. One community provider suggested parents should subsidise the Programme if Government funding is not increased.

Changes to the age of eligibility for ECCE services were proposed, including access for children from one year of age or choice of entry from birth to age six to allow parental flexibility in relation to ECCE. This were suggested as both immediate and long-term goals. One private provider supporting a second ECCE year suggested allowing parents to choose when a child may attend rather than having an age limit. Another suggested to *“include a second free year or allow parents to split their funding over two years, e.g. two free sessions a week in the first year and three in the second”*. However, a minority of respondents suggested there should be a limit on the number of new children entering the Programme.

Professionalisation of the workforce

Increased professionalisation of the early years workforce was suggested by many respondents, mostly as an immediate priority. The need to raise the qualifications of early years practitioners was highlighted. It was suggested that the workforce be graduate-led with an increase of the minimum qualification requirement to FETAC level 7 or 8. Investment in an extended Learners Fund was proposed to enable this. Many respondents suggested that wages and capitation be adjusted to reflect higher qualifications. A number of respondents suggested that early years wages be matched to those of primary school teachers. It was thought that these changes would directly impact on the quality of the sector.

Parental leave

Extension of paid parental leave was identified as an immediate priority by many respondents. Most referred to both maternity and paternity leave although a number referred exclusively to maternity leave. Some respondents referred to research suggesting that the first year at home is best for the child and identified paid leave for this period as an immediate and long-term priority. One respondent also suggested adoptive leave be addressed.

Tax credits

A number of respondents proposed that working parents who rely on professional formal childcare, as well as those using childminders, should be in receipt of tax breaks. Reasons for this included creating more affordable childcare, enabling women to return to work and countering *“black market”* childcare. Tax relief for businesses was also suggested with one provider noting *“more tax breaks for the provider, less commercial rates as we are not selling a product we are educating children”*. However, there was a lack of consensus around tax relief. Some respondents suggested tax credits would be a short term solution and would do nothing for ensuring quality of services. Likewise, there was concern that tax breaks often benefit the well-off more than other families and the stay-at-home parent must be recognised.

Childminding

Investment in childminding was proposed by a number of respondents. Some respondents suggested family members acting as childminders should be recognised for their role and should be eligible for tax breaks. One parent proposed childcare subsidies should include childminders and family members that provide care. Regulation and the introduction of inspection of childminders were also proposed by a number of respondents, as was the inclusion of childminding into mainstream national childcare programmes. Funding of Programmes to childminders who meet quality standards was also suggested. This was linked with the need to invest in childminding with Government support and regulation. Opening funding Programmes to suitably qualified childminders was proposed. One respondent suggested funded research into the quality of childminding could identify areas for investment

Regulation and inspection

A small number of respondents proposed the establishment of a unified and regulated inspectorate of early years services, mostly as an immediate priority. Many respondents felt that current inspectors are not appropriate to the role and this is an area for reform.

Other priorities:

Some other priorities for early years improvement were suggested, mostly for the longer term. These included:

- Formalised transition from early years to primary school, similar to the model for transition from primary to secondary school
- The need to support parents, particularly working parents, who fall between the subvention Programme and incomes that enable high quality care
- Centralising responsibility for early years within one Government department
- Courses on child development to be provided to parents

2.7 Prioritisation of Investment for School-aged Care and Education

As above, respondents were asked to identify three priorities for investment, this time in the school-aged care and education sector in the immediate term and a further three priorities for investment over the next five years. It should be noted that many respondents made little distinction between the two funding periods suggested in the survey and identified the same priorities across the two time periods. A significant number of respondents were explicit in this lack of distinction and attributed this to the need for investment in the priority areas to be continuous. Priorities listed below are ordered by volume of response.

Investment

Direct investment into school-age care and education was identified as both an immediate and long-term priority for improvement. Funding for resources was suggested, particularly equipment and facilities appropriate for this age group and for specialised after-school programmes such as those involving technology. Funding for non-academic resources such as outdoor activities, drama, art and dance was also regarded as necessary. More access to after-school care, clubs and programmes tailored to the child was desired, as was establishing free transport to deliver children from school to after-school services.

Funding to improve accessibility to after-school care also emerged as a priority for investment. While the majority of respondents highlighted the need for increased investment in this area, a community provider suggested that school-age care and education is well-funded in comparison to early years,

whereas another individual proposed focusing on funding early years services initially before focusing on school-aged investment: *“Get one area right before moving on”*.

Increased subsidies for after-school care were proposed by a number of respondents, provided they are linked to quality. Some respondents suggested subsidies be provided to low-income families whereas others proposed universal subsidised after-school care similar to the ECCE Programme. One respondent noted subsidies should *“...include all childcare providers not only the big services. It needs to bring childminders and grandparents in also and allow people using this form of childcare to benefit”*. Investment in employment and fair pay for early years practitioners was recommended with one community provider noting increased wages can *“give workers a sense of self-worth”*.

Regulation and inspection

A number of respondents highlighted the need to create and implement standards and regulations for school-aged care and education. A new regulatory framework and inspection regime was identified in particular as a long-term priority. The current system was referred to as disjointed by one respondent and the need for more appropriately qualified inspectors was raised. A number of respondents suggested inspectors have a background in care and education themselves and that inspections be carried out annually.

The lack of regulation and inspection for school-aged services compared to early years was of concern to many. One member of an advocacy organisation proposed: *“Develop a regulatory framework which includes registration and an inspection regime and covers all services in receipt of public funding, including school-age children and childminding services”*. Many of the suggestions made by respondents were linked with issues of funding and quality, such as the need to provide funding to ensure services meet the requirements for regulations and training for inspectors of these services. A private provider also suggested funding for services must be subject to passing inspections. Support and regulation for childminders and their inclusion in all strategies developed was also desired.

Quality

The need to improve the quality of school-age services over the immediate and longer term was raised by a number of respondents. Access to training, continued professional development, and general support for practitioners was linked to quality and viewed as necessary by many. One member of an advocacy organisation suggested the development of *“...a National Framework of competencies for after-school service providers, and support practitioners to develop the necessary knowledge and skills in supporting children’s learning, including on-site coaching”*. One private provider suggested the development of a similar quality framework but one unique to school-age care and education. A number of respondents also suggested extending the Aistear and Síolta frameworks to primary schools, in order to align the approaches to care and education across early years, primary school and after-school settings.

Re-evaluation of the current curriculum was suggested as some respondents expressed concern that school-aged services are overly focused on academic activities and that there is little emphasis on care or play, which was suggested may affect the overall quality of services. Increased focus on physical activity and more opportunities for outdoor activities were also proposed by many, as was provision of meals for children at lunch along with promotion of healthy eating. The introduction of quality standard reports that parents may access were also recommended. Other respondents

proposed carrying out an audit of existing services to ascertain how best to improve quality in a cost-effective manner.

Equality

The need to support families in accessing quality and affordable school-age services was highlighted as an immediate priority by a number of respondents. Increased provision of special needs assistants (SNAs) for children with additional needs was highlighted as an area requiring more investment and resources. The need to support low-income families was also raised, with many respondents suggesting targeted funding and extended eligibility for these families to ensure they can access these services: *“Allow free places for those in extreme financial hardship and payment to services that cover that cost”*. One respondent noted that equality, diversity and inclusion must be recognised and ensured as part of quality improvements of school-age care and education. Other respondents noted the need for universal and affordable after-school services tailored to the needs of families.

Links and transitions

The only issue identified as particular to the five year time frame was that of links and transitions. Establishing links between primary schools and school-age care and education was proposed by a number of respondents as a long-term priority. It was suggested these links could ease transitions between the services enabling *“smooth flow”* and could also improve services overall. One respondent suggested joint training for both primary school staff and school-aged care and education providers on elements such as supporting language and literacy development and introducing the new primary school curriculum. It was noted that these links were strongly associated with the need to improve quality in the school-aged care and education sector.

2.8 Prioritisation of Investment in Early Years and School-Aged Care and Education for Children with Additional Needs

As above, respondents were asked to identify three priorities for investment, this time in the early years and school-aged care and education for children with additional needs, in the immediate term and a further three priorities for investment over the next five years. It should be noted that many respondents made little distinction between the two funding periods suggested in the survey and identified the same priorities across the two time periods. Priorities listed below are ordered by volume of response and are common across both time periods unless indicated otherwise.

Special needs assistants (SNAs)

Providing the support of a qualified SNA to any child in need of it, particularly in early years, was an immediate and long-term priority according to the majority of respondents. Fully funded SNA posts for services were considered necessary to achieve this and would eliminate the need for services and parents to subsidise support for children. Automatic provision of SNAs to children with additional needs was suggested by many respondents. SNA support for the ECCE year onwards was strongly recommended by many, with one respondent noting *“Children with additional needs always have additional needs, not just when they start primary school”*. A number of respondents suggested restoration of entitlement to a second pre-school year for children with additional needs. However, a private provider noted *“Children with additional needs are entitled to a free pre-school year but most are unable to attend due to no SNA to support them”*. The development of an SNA qualification specifically for early years services was proposed, along with access to continuous professional development. Most respondents prioritising SNAs also prioritised the need for greater funding overall and greater quality and equality for both early years and school-aged care and education sectors.

Funding and investment

Funding for equipment and for changes to facilities that accommodate children with additional needs was identified as an immediate and longer term priority. A number of respondents referred to the renovations that are necessary to create the extra space often needed for children with additional needs, such as access and storage for wheelchairs. The need for funded assistive technology to support children was also highlighted. One private provider suggested that services have the option to apply for extra funding when a child with additional needs is registered. A member of an advocacy organisation proposed *“increased investment in early years settings in areas of concentrated disadvantage in line with a DEIS-type model”*. In-service training for practitioners to support children with additional needs and for inclusive practice was also proposed by a number of respondents. Mandatory training was suggested by one respondent, as was appropriate multidisciplinary training for both the early years and school-age sectors. Access to such training for childminders was suggested. Increased adult to child ratios in services to ensure sufficient support for children was also desired.

Equality

The need to address issues of equality both immediately and in the longer term was raised by some respondents. A number of respondents noted the need to improve inclusion of marginalised groups such as children from minority ethnic backgrounds and children with additional learning needs in both sectors and proposed the development of a national inclusion policy. In this context a number of respondents also suggested that children with additional needs attend their local services where possible to enable integration. Mandatory equality and diversity training for all staff was suggested by one respondent. Training in inclusive practice and to support children with specific learning disabilities for all staff was proposed by some, while others suggested training be provided to practitioners specifically working with children with additional needs. Standardised training for those delivering modules on supporting children with additional needs was also suggested. It was suggested that in order to better understand and respond to rates of access and uptake of the free pre-school year among children with additional needs and Traveller and Roma children, that data be systematically collected from service providers to inform policy in this area.

Early intervention and assessments

Addressing current waiting lists for assessments of young children was an immediate priority area for a number of respondents. Earlier assessments and faster referrals were identified as key areas for change. A community provider noted *“The waiting list for assessments should be made a priority for the early years sector as early intervention has proven to have the greatest impact”*. The majority of respondents made reference to the early years sector in relation to waiting lists and referrals. An increase in early intervention team staff and in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) early intervention units attached to mainstream primary schools and special schools were proposed. Increased funding for early intervention teams was also suggested. A number of respondents expressed the desire for therapeutic supports such as speech and language therapists and psychologists to be delivered on-site in services rather than in clinical settings. An increase in the number of speech and language therapists in general was also recommended by respondents.

Links and transitions

Interagency linking at local and regional levels was recommended for the longer term in order to *“ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to the inclusion of children with special educational needs in early childhood settings”*. A number of respondents highlighted the need for clear transition

plans for children moving from home to pre-school to school. Interagency working, better links with early intervention teams and having a link worker to assist children in transitions to school were recommended. Support for parents and consultation with them to assess their needs was also desired by many respondents.

Submissions made independent of the online survey

The majority of responses submitted by public representatives reflected similar priorities as those identified in the public consultation. Two of these submissions were from specialised organisations that focused on specific areas such as children in early years services and children with additional needs. Some additional points raised by these submissions included:

- The need to establish streamlined funding streams for early years services where funding follows the child and not just areas of disadvantage
- Regulatory impact analysis and needs analysis of school-age care and education
- Establishment of a mechanism to ensure quality standards of early years services and withdrawal of funding if standards do not rise in a given time-frame
- Extend entitlement to ECCE from child's third birthday to beginning of primary school, resulting in 18 months to two years of part-time pre-school for every child for 48 weeks annually
- Comprehensive public consultations in communities to assess after-school needs of families
- Development and implementation of an after-school strategy which outlines the goals for these children
- The need to acknowledge that some children with additional needs require different types of activities from their peers and this can impact on their opportunities and abilities to socialise. The need to integrate such children at a very young age is necessary to promote acceptance and inclusion
- Compulsory built-in sensory area in mainstream pre-school classes and any other special education early years setting
- Youth clubs that cater to children with additional needs
- Introduction of a national policy on access to pre-school SNAs
- The need for research on the number of places available for childcare in Ireland

2.9 Learning from International Experiences

Respondents were asked to reflect on and suggest learning from the approaches taken in other countries for the provision of early years and school-aged care and education. A number of respondents referred to how early years care and education is valued and funded elsewhere. Respondents mentioned country-specific approaches and models of service provision and other respondents also mentioned international examples of best practice. In contrast a small number of respondents reported that lessons cannot be learned from other countries as we have our own rules and regulations in Ireland.

How the Early Years sector is valued and funded in other countries

A number of respondents reported that an important lesson for Ireland is how the early years sector is valued and funded in other countries, and the value of investing in the early years across all Government departments. It was also noted that there is a higher GDP commitment to investment in other countries e.g. 1.1 per cent of GDP in Finland, which leads to the sector being more respected. Respondents cited a study by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) that showed that directly subsidising places in services is more effective than tax

credits, as it gives governments more ‘*steering capacity*’ over what happens in services. A number of respondents stated that early years care and education in Ireland should be seen as a universal public service or a public and social good similar to other countries.

It was suggested that the workforce is more valued in other countries, with higher levels of qualifications and access to continuous professional development, which allows for a higher quality service. One advocacy organisation made reference to research carried out by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood in the UK which has shown “*a direct and consistent association between the quality of pre-school staff training and qualifications and children’s later school performance*”. It was also highlighted by an academic institution that practitioners in the early years sector in other countries are unionised, which gives them status and encourages more males to enter the profession, as it is seen as a sustainable employment option. In contrast, according to another academic institution, the quality of early years provision in Ireland ranks extremely low compared to other international examples, public investment is “*embarrassingly low*”, and there is only a small proportion of staff with degree level education. A number of respondents made reference to evidence that investment in early years care and education is vital to long term health and well-being: “*there is extensive proof that investment in the early years has a positive long term outcome for children and for communities*”.

Country-specific approaches to early years and school-aged care and education and models of service provision were identified by respondent’s including examples from Scandinavia and New Zealand.

Scandinavian/Nordic Model

The Scandinavian/Nordic model was the most commonly cited model of international best practice among respondents, as this model demonstrates how a properly publicly-funded system can benefit families. While it was noted by respondents that there is no single Scandinavian/Nordic model of childcare, there are a number of common features across all Nordic countries (i.e. Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) that contribute to high quality early years and school-age care and education. In these countries, it was suggested that childcare is a priority and early education is heavily invested in. Early years services are mainly funded by the government which means that parents are only required to pay a small percentage of childcare costs. It was suggested that there should be a similar cap on childcare costs in Ireland as 60 per cent of workers in Scandinavian and Nordic countries have a degree and receive decent wages. The example of Finland was given, where continuous professional development is free and takes place during work hours with relief staff brought in to cover the practitioners who are training. It was also noted that Scandinavian countries have both a primary teacher and a BA (Hons) practitioner working in partnership together to make the transition from pre-school to primary school easier on the children. Respondents also suggested that while in these countries formal education starts later, overall children’s academic achievements are higher than those of Irish children. Finally, one employer representative group considered the Danish model a best practice example of delivering after-school services, while a submission independent of the online survey spoke of how the Finnish system is often regarded as one of the most equal, progressive and effective in providing educational outcomes for all children.

New Zealand

New Zealand was the second most commonly cited example of international best practice among respondents. New Zealand was praised for valuing its’ early years workforce who have the same status as teachers, with appropriate rates of pay and conditions. Two respondents mentioned ‘Te

Whariki³ as a good example and a model to be admired. One of these respondents, a private provider, noted that while we also have excellent frameworks in Ireland i.e. Síolta and Aistear, the academic entrance level needs to be raised for staff so that these frameworks can be fully implemented.

Other Countries

Examples of best practice in a number of other countries was also mentioned by some respondents. For example, Great Britain was noted for its proper investment in childcare services; the quality of the curriculum; and the production of reports on quality standards after an inspection. Inspections of childminding services in Scotland were highlighted for adopting a supportive approach. The Reggio Emilia approach from Italy was commended by an employee representative group for building early childhood education into the infrastructure of the culture. One private provider gave the example of France, where employers make a compulsory payment to a regional family allowance to subsidise early years education. Portugal was offered as an example by a pre-school teacher as a country where families only receive a small amount of Child Benefit but do not have to pay as much for crèche and pre-school services; pre-school education is free from three to six years; and every classroom/group has a fully trained worker with a degree in early years education as well as being supported by a trained assistant. Another respondent mentioned the USA, where legislation guides the provision of early years services, particularly the provision of services for children with additional needs. Finally, one academic institution made reference to a 2011 paper by Eurochild which discusses the SPIL Centre in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Other

Other lessons from international examples included:

- Most European countries start school at age seven and evidence shows that children who start formal schooling later do better than their younger classmates as children are allowed time to hone skills and become ready for all the complex skills needed to be in a formal educational setting
- Parental leave in countries such as Sweden is longer which allows both parents more time at home with their child and reduces financial pressure
- The outdoor environment is far more accessible, with children spending hours outside each day
- After-school services are broad ranging and accommodate the different interests of children
- The curriculum in early years settings in other countries focuses more on the performance of everyday tasks such as cutting vegetables and sweeping the floor, alongside more access to play, the outdoors, and self-directed learning. According to one community provider *“young children do not need to be entertained and played with, but rather given lots of opportunity to play by themselves”*. It was suggested by one private provider that Ireland needs to look at similar curricula that focus less on academia as *“we are making our children ill with content overload”*
- According to a Government department/agency, mainstream early years and school-age education and care is the norm for the vast majority of children with disabilities in many

³ Te Whariki is a curriculum guideline published in 1996 by the New Zealand Ministry of Education that outlines the curriculum that every early childhood education service is expected to follow. However, unlike a school curriculum, it does not prescribe the teaching of any subjects or specific knowledge, but rather emphasises a more holistic curriculum in response to children’s learning and development

jurisdictions where interventions are provided by early years and school-age care and education service staff with the support of a specialist

- Adopt an integrated approach for the development of early childhood care and education from birth to six years of age. Research signposts the importance of an integrated policy for under and over three's as infants and toddlers fare badly in split systems

2.10 Conclusion

The public consultation highlighted a number of key strengths and weaknesses of direct and indirect DCYA investment. Respondents to the public survey highlighted targeted programmes such as TEC and the CCS Programme as strengths of investment due to their support of parents and families and the direct benefit to the child. The provision of the ECCE Programme was identified as the main strength of direct investment. However, the Programme was also criticised for being insufficiently funded to cover the running costs and to ensure quality provision. Some key weaknesses of direct investment identified by respondents included insufficient investment overall, variability of quality of services, an under-recognised workforce and inequality of provision particularly for children with additional needs.

Respondents to the public survey highlighted maternity leave and benefit and Child Benefit as both strengths and weaknesses of indirect investment. These were praised as having positive outcomes for parents and children, such as the option for mothers to remain at home with their infants and the additional support gained from the Child Benefit payment. However, parental leave arrangements were considered insufficient and in need of extension to a full year's provision as well as extended to both parents. Means-tested Child Benefit was recommended in order to counter weaknesses such as families most in need missing out and the potential abuse of direct monetary payment as opposed to a voucher system.

Similar issues were raised in response to priorities for future investment in the immediate term and over the next five years. Some unique priorities were identified for early years care and education due to the particular features of this sector such as the ECCE Programme and maternity leave. Increased investment in and reform of the ECCE Programme was desired, as was its extension to two years. Extended maternity leave and the introduction of shared parental leave were also identified as priorities particular to early years.

A number of common priorities emerged across all three sectors of early years care and education, school-aged care and education, and care and education for children with additional needs. These included the need to invest directly into improving quality of services and their resources, greater equality of provision – in particular SNAs available to all children in need of them, reformed regulation and inspection of all services, upskilling and training of practitioners, and establishing links between all three sectors to ease transitions. It should be noted there was repetition of priorities for the immediate term and for the next five years in relation to early years, school-aged, and care and education for children with additional needs. Many respondents indicated that this was due to their importance both now and into the future.

Section 3: Results from Parents and Guardians Consultation

3.1 Introduction

As noted in section one, more than 900 parents from around the country participated in the consultation. Parents were asked to reflect on their experiences of three different types of care and education for their children: early years care and education, school-aged care and education, including after-school and out-of-school care.

Parents were asked to respond to the questions under each of these themes as relevant to their circumstances. The same themes and issues were explored across all three different types of care; as such the responses from each of the sections are presented together where appropriate.

3.2 Childcare Arrangements

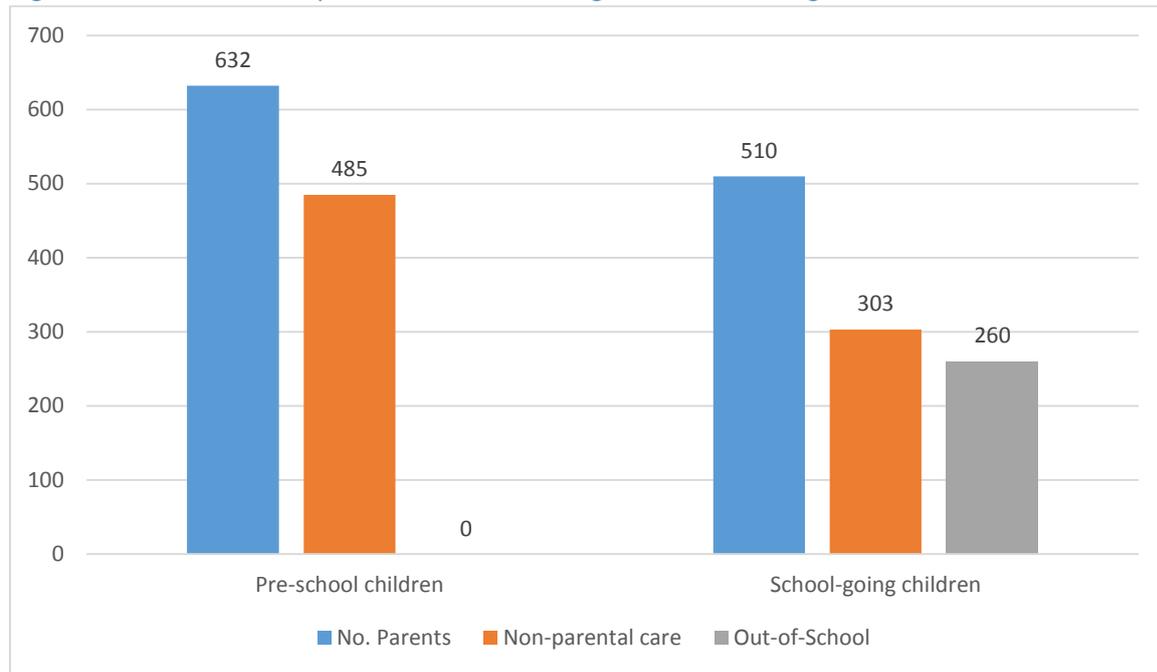
Parents were asked to indicate whether or not they had children in any of the three cohorts: children in receipt of early years care and education; children of school-going age participating in after-school and out-of-school care. They were also asked to indicate the type of childcare arrangements they had in place and how satisfied they were with these arrangements.

3.2.1 Profile of parents

The majority of parents, 632 out of 938, indicated they had pre-school children, while 510 parents responded that they had school-going children. Of the parents that reported having pre-school children, over two-thirds indicated that their child is cared for by someone other than a parent on a regular basis each week. Of the respondents who reported having school-going children, over half reported that their children are minded by someone else on a regular basis after-school. Similarly, just over half of respondents who have school-going children reported that their child is minded by someone else on a regular basis during the school holidays.

Figure 3.1 shows the type of care arrangements that parents reported are in place for pre-school children and children of school age.

Figure 3.1 Parent-reported Childcare Arrangements According to Parents



3.2.2 Type of care provided to children

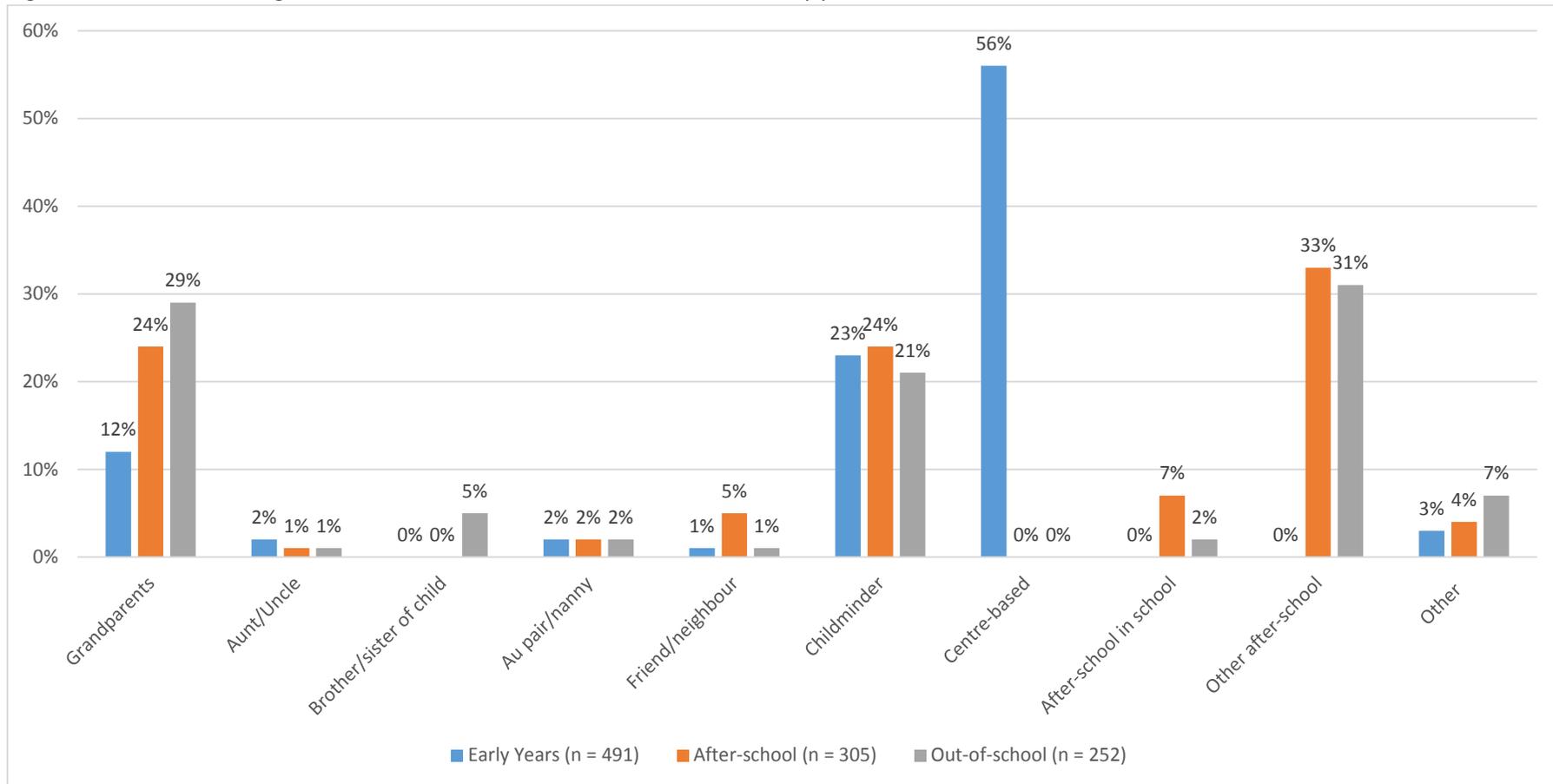
Over half of pre-school children not cared for by parents are in centre-based childcare such as crèche or Montessori. This was followed by childminders, who provide care for almost a quarter of this cohort. Grandparents were also a common form of caregiver. A small number of parents selected 'Other' for their pre-school childcare arrangements. These included a combination of grandparents and crèche and one child with additional needs receiving care from an ABA tutor.

The most popular form of after-school childcare was 'Other after-school service' with around a third of respondents stating that their school-going child was cared for by services such as a crèche or community centre. The second most common form of after-school childcare reported by respondents was a grandparent with almost a quarter of parents selecting this option. A small number of parents selected 'Other' for their after-school childcare arrangements. These forms of care were similar to those for pre-school children, including a combination of care such as formal after-school care and an au pair, and a "specialised one to one special needs childminder".

Similar to after-school care, the most common form of out-of-school childcare reported by parents was 'Other out-of-school service' such as a crèche or community centre. Likewise, grandparents were the second most common form of care for this cohort. Three respondents indicated they had alternative forms of out-of-school childcare. Four respondents indicated they had alternative forms of care, two respondents indicated cousins of the children provide care due to cost and convenience, while the two others reported a non-resident parent cares for their child during the school holidays due to cost.

Figure 3.2 summarises the main type of non-parental care provided to children across each of the three different care and education types.

Figure 3.2 Childcare arrangements for each cohort of children not cared for by parents



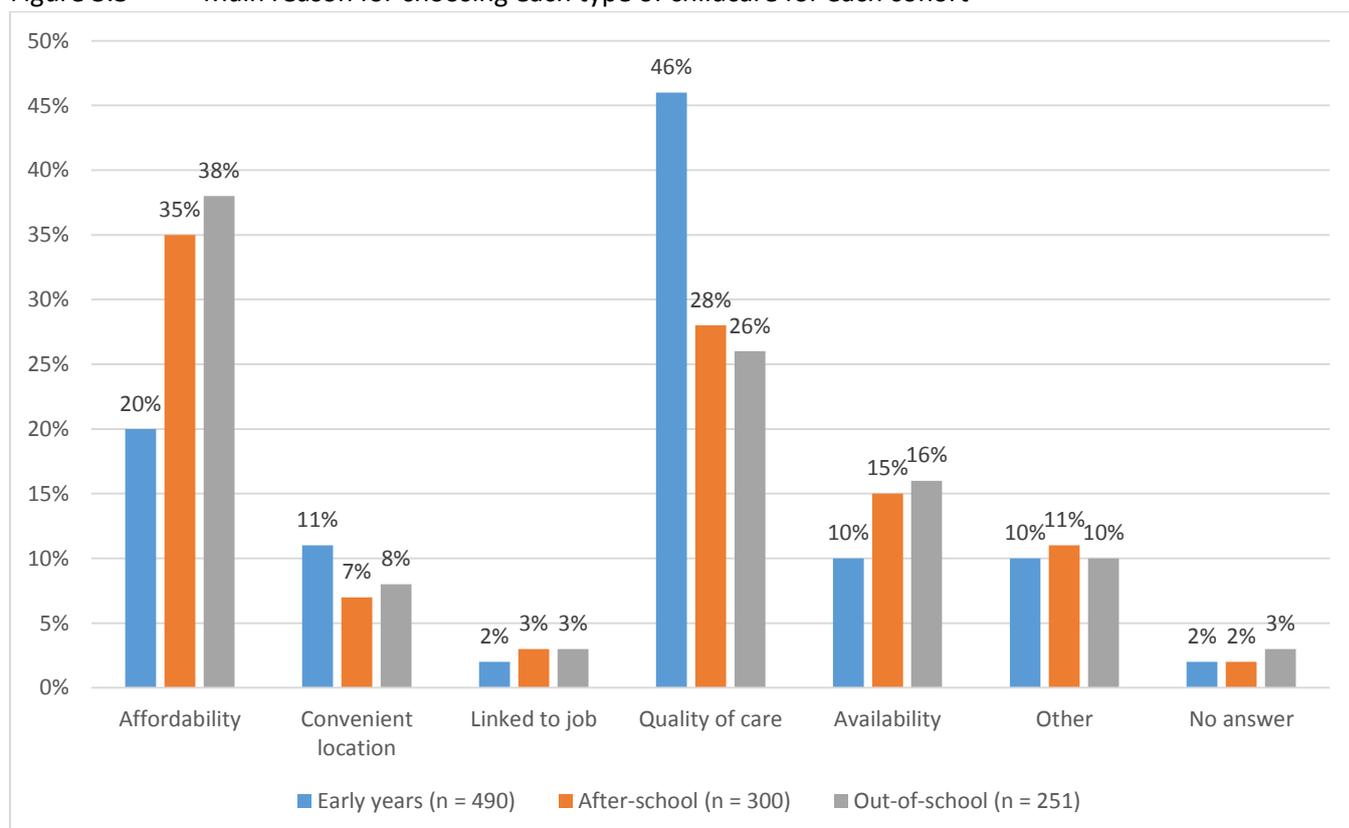
3.2.3 Reasons for selecting childcare type

Parents were asked to select a single most important reason for choosing their main form of childcare from a number of options. The most important reason for selecting early years childcare according to almost half of parents was the quality of care provided. This was followed by affordability of the care. A number of parents selected 'Other' as their reason for selecting a form of care. These alternative reasons included providing the child with the opportunity to socialise with other children, keeping siblings together in one service, use of the free pre-school year, and being the only option that is suitable for the hours of care needed.

Affordability was the most important reason for choosing forms of after-school care, followed by the quality of care provided. The locality of the service was also identified as being important. A number of parents also selected 'Other' as their reason for choosing after-school care. These included a lack of public provision resulting in use of whatever was available, convenience to the home, the need for a suitably experienced carer for a child with additional needs, and *"a multitude of reasons, it is impossible to tick one box"*.

Similar to after-school care, common reasons for choosing out-of-school care were affordability, quality of care, and locality of the service. Alternative reasons for choosing out-of-school care were the availability of summer camps, access to private care, and using a combination of care such as summer camps, grandparents and au pairs. Figure 3.3 shows the reasons selected by each cohort.

Figure 3.3 Main reason for choosing each type of childcare for each cohort



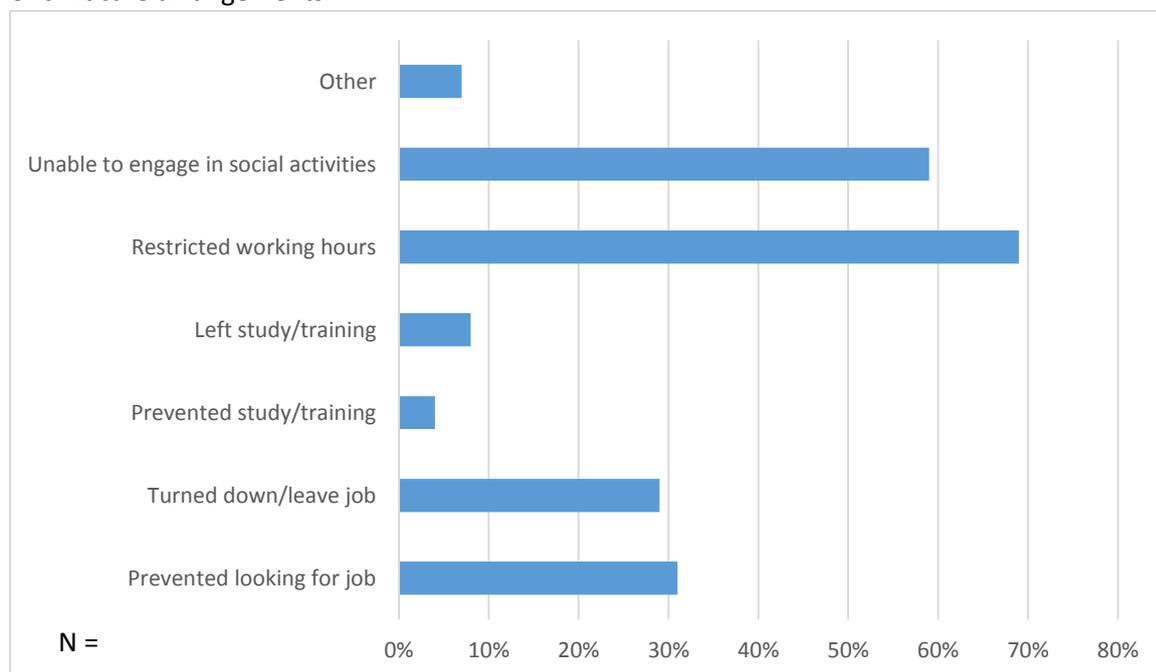
Parents were also asked to indicate if difficulties experienced in arranging childcare had ever interfered or restricted their ability to take up employment, training or studying opportunities.

Parents were asked to select as many restrictions or impediments they had experienced from a provided list. A total of 777 respondents (83 per cent) answered this question.

The most common restriction experienced by parents as a result of difficulties in arranging childcare was that their childcare arrangements (or lack thereof) restricted the hours the parent could work or study (539 respondents/70 per cent). The next most common restriction was that childcare arrangements prevented the parent from engaging in social activities (461 respondents/60 per cent). Almost 40 per cent of parents (390 respondents) reported that they were stopped from taking on some study or training because of childcare arrangements. Approximately one-quarter of parents indicated that childcare arrangements prevented them from looking for a job (244 respondents/31 per cent) and another quarter reported that they had to turn down a job because of childcare arrangements (227 respondents/29 per cent). Just over eight per cent of respondents (66) reported that they had to leave a study or training course because of their childcare arrangements.

Other restrictions or difficulties experienced by seven per cent of parents as a result of childcare arrangements included parents having to take time off work when their child is sick; affected parents' mental health and ability to have even minimal social interactions; stopped parents from progressing in their career; and caused stress and anxiety, and financial strain. Two respondents noted that they find it very difficult to find suitable care for their special needs child. Figure 3.4 illustrates the main restrictions faced by parents in gaining training or employment as a result of childcare arrangements.

Figure 3.4 Restrictions experienced by parents in accessing employment or training as a result of childcare arrangements



3.2.4 Levels of satisfaction with childcare arrangements

Parents were asked to indicate how satisfied they are with their arrangements of childcare, ranging from 'Very satisfied' to 'Very dissatisfied'. The vast majority of parents of pre-school children were either very satisfied or satisfied with their childcare arrangements. A minority of parents were dissatisfied with their arrangements. Reasons for dissatisfaction included the arrangement not being

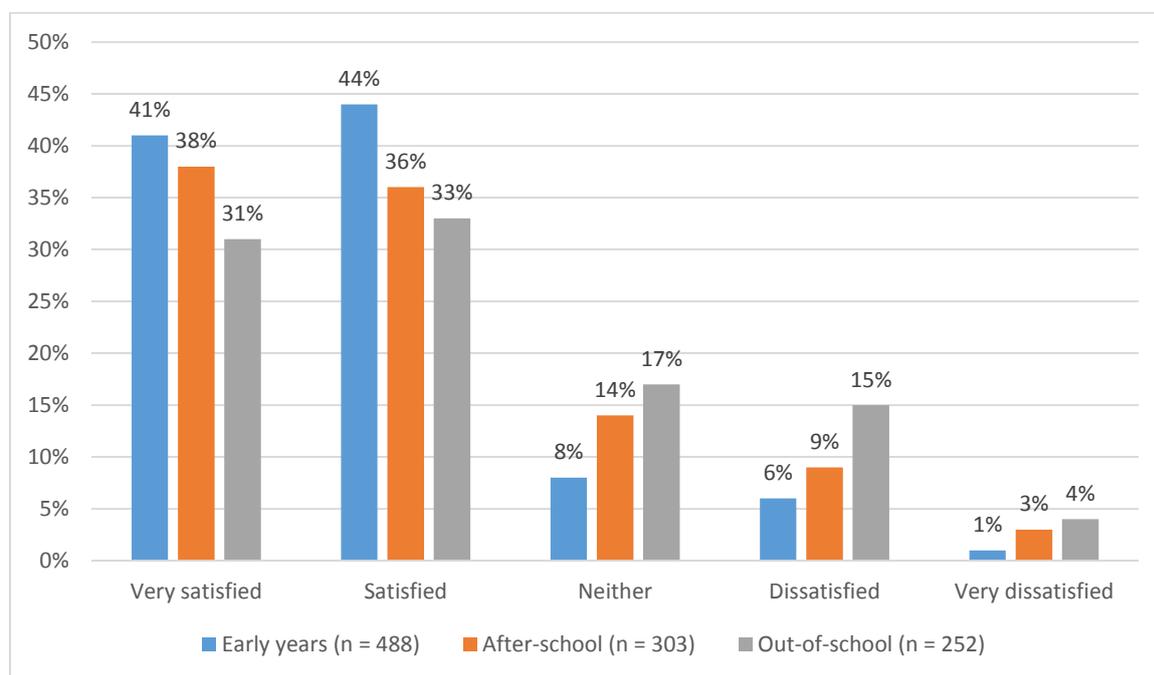
their first choice but it is all the parent can afford, concern over the amount of time a child spends in services, and parents who would prefer to be at home.

The majority of parents of children attending after-school services were either very satisfied or satisfied with their childcare arrangements. A number of parents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. However, no reasons were given for this. Reasons for parents being dissatisfied with their arrangements included it not being their first choice but it is all they can afford, parents preferring to be at home, and providing care being a strain on grandparents.

Similar to after-school care, the majority of parents were satisfied with their out-of-school childcare arrangements. Likewise, a number were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Common reasons for dissatisfaction with out-of-school childcare arrangements included parents preferring to be at home, the type of care being only option they can afford, and a number of children being unhappy with the arrangement.

Figure 3.5 shows the responses from parents across all three forms of childcare and education.

Figure 3.5 Satisfaction with Childcare Arrangements



3.2.5 Reasons for no regular childcare arrangements

Parents were asked to select a main reason for not having any regular childcare arrangements from a number of options presented.

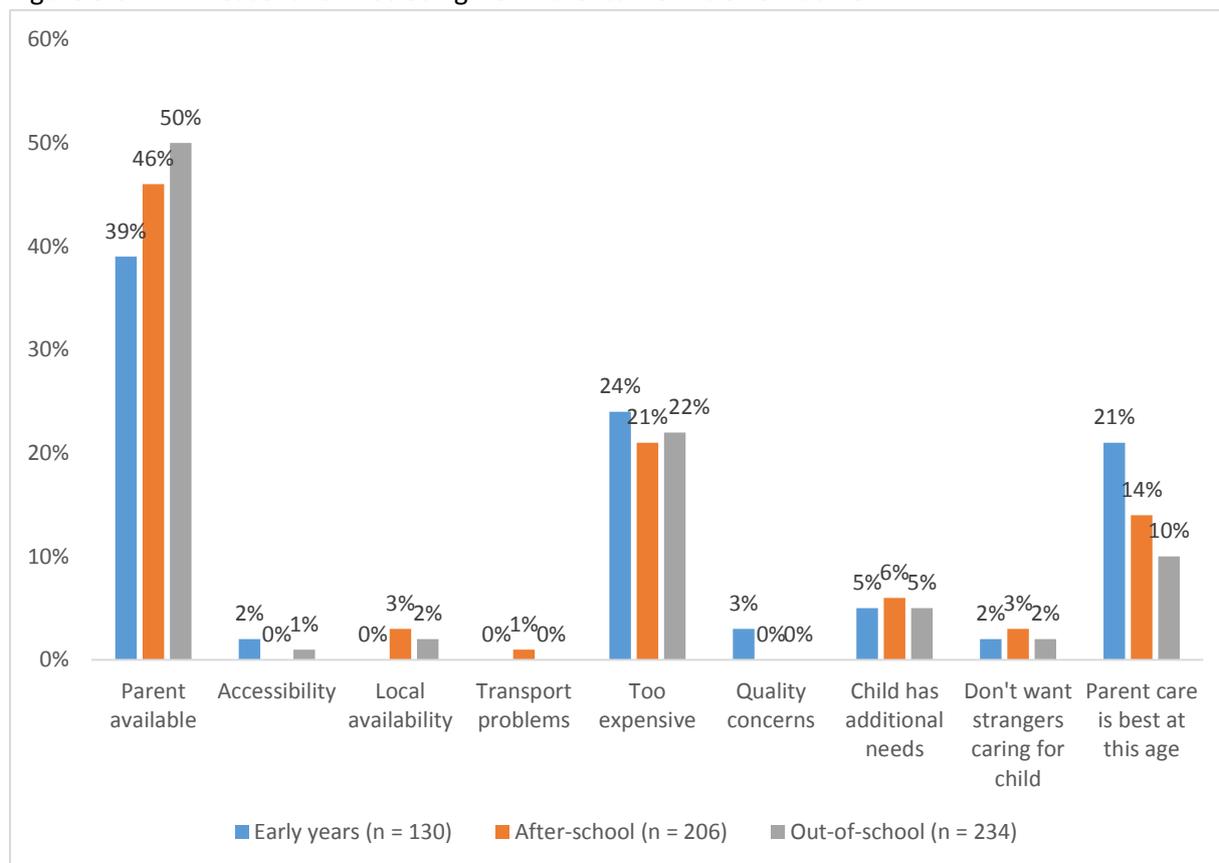
The availability of a parent was the most common reason parents of pre-school children did not have regular childcare arrangements. This was followed by parents being unable to afford other forms of childcare. A number of parents also indicated that parental care is best for their child at this age. A small number of parents selected 'Other' as their reason for not having regular care arrangements.

Most of these were mothers still on maternity leave. However, one parent reported that she had established her own pre-school as she was unhappy with those available to her.

Availability of a parent was also the most common reason parents did not have regular after-school childcare arrangements. This was also followed by affordability and the belief that parental care is best for the child at this age. A number of parents selected 'Other' as their reason for not having regular after-school care. These included home schooling or boarding school, children being old enough to be home alone, and parents that are also childminders themselves.

Similar trends were seen for out-of-school care. Half of parents that responded to this question indicated that availability of a parent meant there was no need for regular care arrangements. Affordability and parental care being the best option were also common reasons. A number of parents also selected 'Other'. Alternative reasons included having older children, the use of summer camps, and parents that are childminders themselves. Figure 3.6 illustrates the reasons selected by parents.

Figure 3.6 Reasons for Not Using Non-Parental Forms of Childcare



3.3 Priorities for Future Government Investment

Participating parents were asked to suggest one priority action for future Government investment in early years and school-aged care and education in the following areas:

- Quality
- Affordability
- Accessibility
- Choice

The questions regarding future investment priorities were open-ended with a word limit of 200 words or less. Parental responses under each of these themes are discussed in turn below.

3.3.1 Priority investment for quality

Parents identified one priority area for future Government investment to ensure that that services are safe and are providing activities that are good for children and improve their outcomes; the most common areas/themes are presented below.

Regulation and Inspection

Regular and rigorous inspections of childcare facilities were strongly recommended by respondents as a priority for quality improvement. A number of respondents proposed that these inspections be unannounced and carried out frequently, such as a minimum of twice a year. Engaging with parents

as part of these inspections in order to enable transparency and elicit feedback was also suggested. A number of respondents suggested reports of inspections be published online for the public to easily access. Appropriately trained and qualified inspectors with a background in childcare and education were desired by a number of respondents. Ensuring all staff including childminders are Garda vetted was recommended. Regulation and inspection of childminders in general was suggested by a number of respondents. Some respondents proposed that Government funding be dependent on the results of inspections. One individual suggested training, such as in Siolta, be provided to services that are underperforming.

Professionalisation of workforce

Investment in affordable and accessible training and CPD for all staff was identified as a priority for quality improvement. Access to training for childminders was also recommended. Minimum qualification levels to practice were recommended, with a large number of respondents strongly suggesting staff be remunerated appropriate to their qualifications. Better pay was linked with improved quality of services, a more recognised and valued workforce and increased likelihood of retaining staff. Some respondents suggested degree level qualifications be mandatory. High quality training for all staff was desired. One respondent noted *“Managers should receive high quality training in childcare as well as management. Staff should be well paid and not overworked”*. Training and a focus on care and play as well as education was recommended by some respondents. The establishment of a governing body for the childcare and education sector was proposed by some respondents.

After-school services

Increased options for after-school services were suggested by respondents, with some indicating that options are quite limited. One respondent suggested *“Have staff trained in after-school care as it requires a different skill than that required in early years settings”*. Provision of meals in after-school services was recommended by one respondent. Breakfast clubs were often mentioned in conjunction with after-school services, with respondents suggesting increased provision of these to ease burdens on parents.

Integrated services

A number of respondents suggested links be established between early years, school services and parents. One respondent noted the need for *“...a consistent integrated system that coordinates across all service providers and development stages”*. Such links were recommended in order to ease transitions for children between services and to provide parents with information on their children’s progression.

Funding for services

Direct funding for services was recommended by a number of respondents. Staff training, improved staff pay, facility renovations and equipment, transport to and from services, and out of service activities were areas that would benefit from increased funding according to respondents.

Other

Some other priorities for investment in quality included:

- Longer opening hours of services to accommodate working parents
- Learning to be gained from Scandinavian models of childcare and education
- Improved quality of food served and stored in services

3.3.2 Priority investment for affordability

Parents identified one priority area for future Government investment to ensure that parents and families who wish to avail of childcare can do so, especially those who need to access employment or training; the most common areas/themes are presented below.

Tax credits

Tax relief for working parents and parents seeking to re-enter employment was a priority for affordability for the majority of respondents. Increased tax allowance per child was proposed by a number of respondents. Capped or standardised childcare fees were often mentioned alongside the need for tax relief. One parent noted *“There needs to be some tax relief or allowance set off against childcare costs to encourage and enable parents to go back to work. The current system effectively keeps mothers at home until their child is at an age for the free pre-school year and even that only covers three hours a day which is very restrictive for a parent to work around”*. A number of respondents referred to one parent having to stay at home due to the high cost of childcare *“for many, the decision not to return to work is solely an economic one”*. Greater tax relief for households with two working parents was proposed by many, with one parent proposing *“Tax credits based on levels of income, i.e. more support for lower income families where both parents are working”*. However, one respondent recommended that credits be equal for all income levels. A number of respondents suggested tax relief be available for childcare workers in order to increase their wages. One respondent suggested childminders be exempt from tax up to a certain amount and family members that provide care also be exempt.

Subsidised childcare

A number of parents and guardians proposed that the Government provide subsidised childcare for both early years and after-school care. Many suggested this as an alternative to tax credits while a small number of respondents proposed both be provided. One parent noted *“Giving me a tax credit will not stop fees going up so would defeat the purpose intended and cost the State too much in the long run”*, while another parent proposed a mix of tiered tax credits and subsidised places. The need for parents to return to work was the most popular reason subsidies were suggested. Some parents suggested subsidised rates be means tested or based on income levels at a sliding scale. Voucher subsidies were also proposed. One respondent suggested staff salaries be subsidised instead of subsidising every child. Subsidised breakfast clubs and after-school clubs were proposed in order to allow parents time to get to and from work. Similar to tax credits, subsidised childcare was often mentioned in relation to parents returning to work.

ECCE

Extending the free pre-school year to a full 12 months including holidays, and to at least 4 hours a day were identified as actions to improve affordability. Expansion of ECCE to two full years was also strongly desired by a number of respondents, *“A second free pre-school year makes it affordable for everyone and gives a fairer chance to all starting school on the same level”*, while one individual suggested 3 years of ECCE. However, one parent noted *“A second free pre-school year will help some but not all as one still has to pay a minder to do pick up etc.”* One parent also noted the timeframe for application for the Programme is too short and excludes children who wish to commence after October.

Parental leave

Extended and paid parental leave was mentioned as a priority for affordability by a small number of respondents. One parent proposed the provision of financial assistance for mothers returning to work from parental leave enabling them to stabilise themselves financially. Another suggested both parents should have the option to stay at home until the baby is 6 weeks old before deciding who will remain at home.

Other

Some other priorities for investment in affordability included:

- Increasing the Child Benefit allowance
- Provision of childcare in workplaces
- Provision of a 'living wage' to cover costs such as childcare

3.3.3 Priority investment for accessibility

Parents identified one priority area for future Government investment to ensure services are available where they are needed and that children with additional needs can access them; the most common areas/themes are presented below.

Children with additional needs

Funding for the provision of SNAs, particularly in early years services, was strongly recommended by a number of respondents. Some parents referred to the difficulty in finding an appropriate pre-school for their child due to a lack of SNAs. A number of respondents believed care for children with additional needs should be available in every crèche, with one parent suggesting that all services should be required to take in a percentage of these children. Increased rates for services that provide care for children with additional needs for the ECCE Programme was also proposed. One parent stated *"2nd free pre-school year for children with disabilities should be a priority over everything else. These children need more support to access and stay in mainstream education"*. Early assessment and reduced waiting periods were desired, as was training for staff in caring for children with additional needs. Inclusion and early intervention were also highlighted as important – *"every child deserves a chance"*.

Transport

Providing transport to and from childcare facilities was proposed by a number of parents. This was particularly desired by those living in rural areas and small communities. Government funded bus services to bring children to care was suggested. One parent noted *"Accessibility is important, but within reason. Obviously can't be accessible for everyone but needs to be for the majority"*. A small number of respondents stated that they have no issues accessing services.

Wraparound services

A number of parents suggested that early years and afterschool facilities should be on or near school grounds in order to minimise transportation and also to ease transitions and provide continuity for children. One parent proposed *"Childcare should be provided through schools, in particular new school buildings should be designed with this added purpose in mind"*. Another suggested extending school hours in order to provide after-school care on school grounds.

Funding

Funding for services to improve facilities was identified as a priority by a number of parents. Funding was particularly desired for rural areas in order to provide better quality services and more choice for parents in some instances. Funding was linked with early intervention, with one parent noting *"What the Government scrimps on childcare they pay out on 20 years later in unemployment assistance, public health and the justice system"*. Funding for staff training and qualifications was also proposed.

Other

Some other priorities for investment in accessibility included:

- After-school services to be provided within schools
- Extended service hours to accommodate working parents
- Increase in number of community-based services

3.3.4 Priority investment for choice

Parents identified one priority area for future Government investment to ensure that parents who wish to remain at home are facilitated to do so, especially when children are very young; the most common areas/themes are presented below. A number of priorities identified for improving affordability were also identified for improving choice. Many parents felt these issues were inextricably linked.

Parental leave

Extended paid maternity leave and the introduction of shared parental leave were priorities for choice for a number of respondents. Many parents believed that maternity benefit should not be taxed and that compulsory maternity pay should be provided with employers receiving tax relief to enable this. One parent suggested maternity leave be extended up to three years (unpaid) to allow the mother to remain home until the child begins pre-school. Another proposed a year's leave on full pay, followed by reduced pay until the parent returns to work. A number of parents made reference to the provision of maternity leave in Nordic countries as examples to emulate.

Tax credits and subsidies

Tax relief for childcare and/or subsidised childcare was considered necessary to allow parents the choice to stay at home or return to work. One parent noted *"Assistance needs to be given so that such important decisions are taken on what is best for the family as a whole and not what is necessary on a financial basis"*. Some parents suggested stay at home parents should be entitled to some form of grant or allowance, or be able to claim stamps for PAYE PRSI purposes. A number of other respondents prioritised subsidised childcare over tax credits.

Career breaks and job sharing

A number of parents expressed the desire for employers to allow career breaks for parents. This was suggested for both private and public sectors. Employer flexibility and understanding was identified as allowing parents greater choice to care for their children. Similarly, a number of parents wished for the opportunity to job share and/or work from home. One respondent noted *"flexible working hours - being able to work term time and part time are essential to balancing the childcare need"*. Government incentivised job sharing was also proposed, to enable employers to offer this.

Other

Some other priorities for investment in choice included:

- Increasing the Child Benefit allowance
- Cheaper childcare services
- Providing courses for parents returning to work
- Reversing the One-Parent Family payment child age limit

3.5 Priority Groups for investment

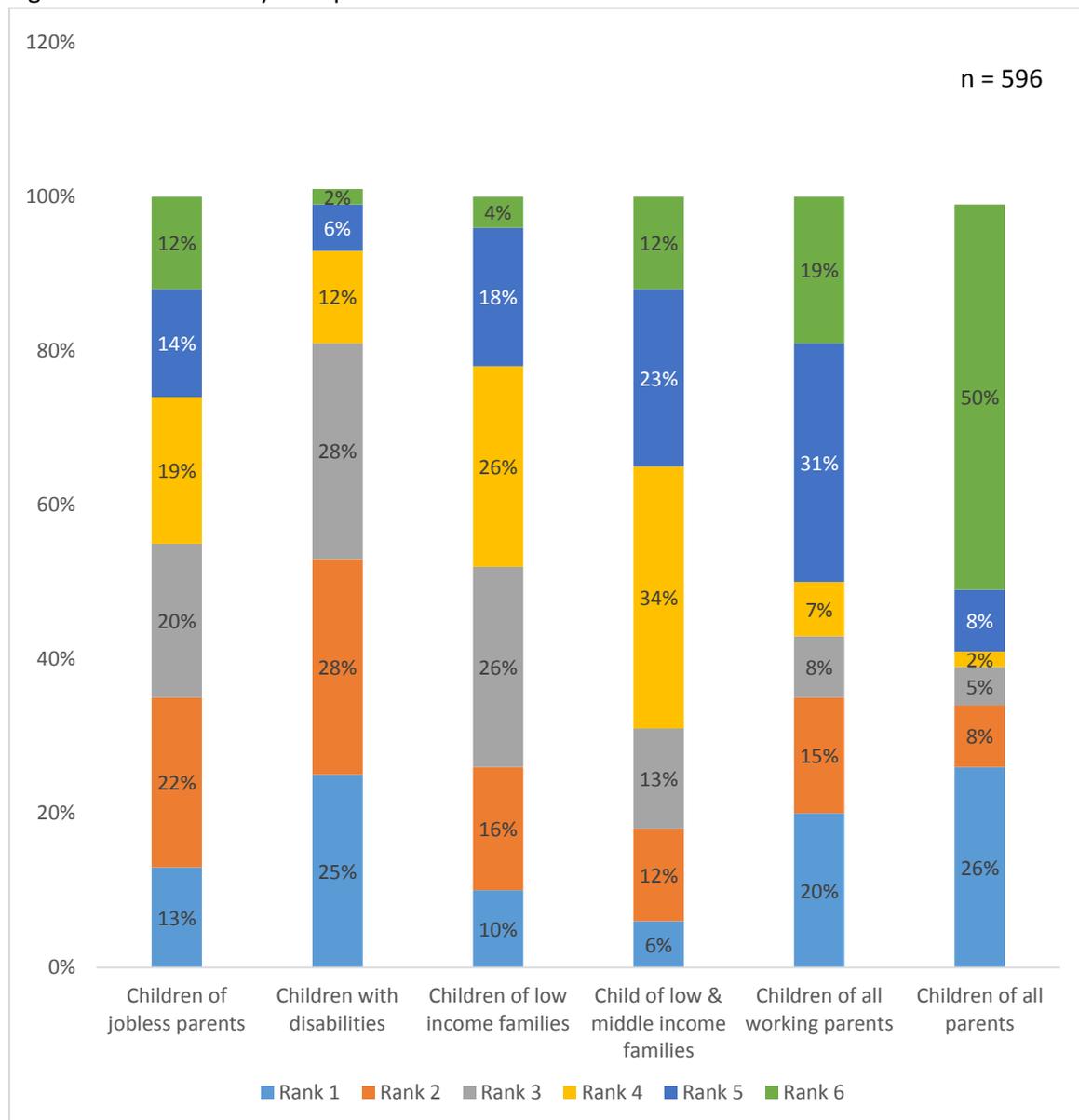
Parents were asked to identify and rank which groups of children the Government should focus its investment on. Children of all parents received more first rankings than other groups with 26 per cent of respondents ranking this group of children as the highest priority; conversely this group of children also received the most sixth place rankings with 50 per cent of respondents ranking this group as the lowest priority group. Children with disabilities received more second and third rankings than any other group; with 28 per cent ranking this group of children second and another 28 per cent ranking this group as the third highest priority group. Children of low and middle income families received more fourth place rankings than any other group, with just more than one-third of parents ranking this group fourth. Children of all working parents received more fifth place rankings

than other group with 31 per cent of all parents ranking the group as the fifth highest priority for investment.

It should be noted that more than 36 per cent of the parents (342/938) that took part in the survey did not answer this question.

Figure 3.7 illustrates the rank assigned to each group of children by respondents.

Figure 3.7 Priority Groups for Government Focus



Section 4: Discussion and Conclusions

4.1 Introduction

The main objective of these consultations was to identify areas for future investment and reform, with a focus on improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of early years and school-age care and education. A number of common themes and suggestions emerged from both the public and parent consultation forms. However, there were also differences observed between the suggestions and priority areas identified in the different consultation processes. These similarities and differences are discussed below.

4.2 Common Themes and Suggestions

Parental leave

The desire for extended paid maternity leave and the introduction of shared parental leave. Current leave arrangements were identified as both a strength and a weakness of current investment in the public consultation. A large number of respondents to both forms proposed maternity leave be extended to the recommended minimum standard of 12 months. Likewise, greater provision of paternity leave was desired by many. These were classed as immediate priorities for improvement of early years care and education in the public consultation. Likewise, introduction of these changes were highlighted as priorities for improvements to affordability and choice by parents. A number of parents also suggested that maternity pay be increased and exempt from tax. A small number of respondents from both cohorts suggested unpaid maternity leave be extended to a number of years.

Children with additional needs

Children with additional needs were identified as needing greater support and equality, particularly in the early years. Both parents and public respondents were concerned about the lack of access for these children to the free pre-school year. The majority of both sets of respondents suggested that SNAs be provided to all services to allow children with additional needs to attend. This was identified as a weakness in current investment and was a popular priority for improvement in quality, affordability and accessibility, as well as early intervention. A number of respondents to both surveys also proposed a second free pre-school year be automatically provided to these children. A number of parents also highlighted how their child's disability or health meant they had to arrange alternative forms of childcare. Waiting lists for assessments and referral were also highlighted as a weakness by both groups. A number of childcare providers noted the need for investment to improve facilities and access for these children. Likewise, both parents and providers suggested that children with additional needs should attend their local service where possible, to support and enable inclusion.

Professionalisation of workforce

The need for a better-recognised and qualified workforce. Incentivising professionalisation of childcare providers was a common theme across both consultations. A large number of all respondents referred to this workforce as undervalued and underpaid. Access to affordable training and CPD were highlighted by both the public and parents as necessary for improvement of quality in the sector. A graduate-led workforce through an increase in the Learners Fund was identified as a priority for investment by both cohorts. Increase in the minimum qualification level required to work in the sector was a shared theme, as was the establishment of a national pay scale to reflect this. However, there was variation in the minimum levels of qualifications proposed across both groups with some respondents suggesting Level 6 at a minimum, while others suggested up to Level 8.

Regulation and inspection

The need for greater regulation and inspection of services and childminders was highlighted in relation to early years by both parents and the public. Investment in a new regulatory framework and inspectorate were priorities for improving quality of services, both in the immediate and longer term. Parents in particular supported regular and unannounced inspections, along with publication of the results online for them to access. Both groups recommended inspectors be appropriately qualified and have a background in childcare themselves. Garda vetting of staff and childminders was desired by a number of parents. A number of respondents from both groups suggested funding be dependent on the passing of inspections.

Wraparound services

Wraparound services were suggested by both sets of respondents. These were mentioned in relation to improved access and reduced transportation by many parents, with the suggestion that early years services be provided on school grounds. Similarly, establishing links between early years and school-age care and education were suggested by a number of providers in order to ease transitions for children and improve the quality of both services.

International examples

With regard to lessons from international examples, a number of respondents to both surveys suggested that the Irish Government should take note of how the early years sector is valued and funded in other countries. The Scandinavian model and New Zealand were often highlighted as examples of international best practice. However, few submissions made reference to how these models are funded and the contribution made from the public purse.

4.3 Contrasting Views

Although a number of similar themes were raised by both the public and parent respondents, there was not complete consensus across the issues raised and the priorities identified. Some areas of difference both within and between the two groups included the following:

ECCE

A second free pre-school year. There was a lack of agreement within both groups whether a second ECCE year be introduced as soon as possible or whether the first free year was in need of reform before extension. Although the ECCE Programme was highlighted as a strength of investment due to its universal provision and affordability, it was also criticised by a number of respondents. Extended hours were desired by many parents, as was provision of care throughout the entire year, including holidays. However, these issues were not raised by many respondents to the public consultation. Inequality for children with additional needs was a concern to both groups. A number of public respondents suggested the age of eligibility be extended for children entering the Programme. This was not mentioned by parents however.

Direct payments

Tax credits and/or subsidies were desired by parents in order to improve affordability of childcare and enable a return to employment. Although a number of public respondents were also in support of this, there were alternative views with many respondents suggesting tax relief would benefit more well-off families, discriminate against stay-at-home parents and would do nothing to improve quality of the sector.

Child Benefit

Introduction of means-tested Child Benefit was recommended by a number of public respondents. However, many parents suggested an increase in the Child Benefit allowance overall, with only a small number suggesting it be means-tested.

Aistear and Síolta

A large number of public respondents referred to the Aistear and Síolta quality frameworks and the need for their roll-out to improve quality. However, few parents mentioned these frameworks in their responses.

Career breaks

A number of parents recommended the provision of career breaks or opportunities for job sharing in order to enable greater choice around staying at home. These were not raised in the public responses.

Appendix 1: Primer

Introduction

Improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of early years and school-age care and education is a priority for the Irish Government. Driving this is the irrefutable evidence that shows how participation in early years and school-age care and education can confer significant benefits to children (with the greatest benefits conferred to children from disadvantaged backgrounds), to families, to communities and to the economy.

Against this background, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. James Reilly, T.D. has established an Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) on Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education. The IDG, which is being chaired by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, is tasked with exploring ways of ensuring that current (and future) investment delivers more affordable, accessible and high quality early years and school-age care and education. The full Terms of Reference of IDG are attached at Appendix 1.

The IDG will submit a series of options for future investment to Government in June 2015. These options will be informed by research evidence and best practice and by existing policy commitments, including those set out in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020). The IDG will also solicit the views of key stakeholders, interested parties and the general public through a number of consultative processes including an Open Policy Debate on Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education Services (which was hosted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs on Tuesday, 31st March 2015), a series of bilateral discussions with relevant Government Departments and a general call for submissions through this public consultation process.

For this public consultation process, the IDG wants to find out what is working well and learn where it can best direct (current and future) investment to improve the accessibility, affordability and/or quality of Ireland's early years and school-age care and education services. Specifically, the IDG is asking you to: a) propose the objectives of, and core principles for, investment; b) review and (if necessary) make recommendations to reform/redistribute current investment; and c) identify priorities for future investment (including the costs of various options, if available).

While current investment has been largely directed towards early years provision (as opposed to school-age provision) and towards 'formal' provision (i.e. centre-based care) as opposed to 'informal' provision (e.g. childminders and nannies), respondents are asked to consider both early years and school-age provision and both formal and informal provision when responding to this public consultation. Early years provision refers to services provided to pre-school children (aged 0-6) and school-age provision refers to services provided to school-aged children during after-school or out-of-school periods (e.g. school holidays).

Respondents are also asked to consider investment in universal programmes and programmes targeted at children with additional needs including:

- children with a disability or other medical needs or those with a parent (or carer) or sibling that has a disability;
- Traveller children;
- children from non-English speaking or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;
- children from low-income families;
- children at risk of abuse or neglect; and
- other vulnerable or disadvantaged children.

Key statistics on children

In 2014, there were an estimated 435,747 children aged 0-5 years and 458,665 children aged 6-12 years living in Ireland. Drawing on data from the Census of the Population in 2011, 18.3% of these children are estimated to live in a lone parent household and 5.8% have a disability. In addition, drawing on recently published data from the EU-SILC, 12.9% of children aged 0-5 years and 17.2% of children aged 6-11 years are considered to be at risk of poverty (i.e. living in households with an equivalised household disposable income below the 60% median) while consistent poverty rates (i.e. living in households with an equivalised household disposable income below the 60% median who experienced at least two forms of enforced deprivation) among children of these age groups of children are 7.4% and 11.1% respectively.

Key evidence

What is best for children?

It is now well-established that investment in early years improves outcomes for children and families. Research has demonstrated that, inter alia, such investment can support children in benefiting more from school as well as compensating, to a degree, for inequalities in other factors related to disadvantage and parental income. Considering the 'private' and the 'public' benefits – these have been described as follows:-

- *Private success* – better health, higher income, better employment attributes
- *Public externalities* - lower crime, less social interventions, greater civic contribution as well as economic benefits of a more skilled workforce, higher productivity and direct employment effects.

There is evidence to suggest that the timing of early years provision must be considered. Research suggests, for example, that children benefit from parental care in the first year of life. Indeed, according to the Marmot Review (2010) *'sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children and enhanced social competence and work skills later in school. It is therefore important that we create the conditions to enable parents to develop this relationship during the child's critical first year... Paid parental leave is associated with better maternal and child health with studies finding an association with lower rates of maternal depression, lower rates of infant mortality, fewer low birth-weight babies, more breast-feeding and more use of preventative health care'* (Marmot Review, 2010, p. 98).

Research also indicates that *'from the age of 2-3 onwards children do better in high quality care and education services than if they remain at home'* and that *'vulnerable children in families experiencing high levels of disadvantage or with complex needs....benefit from early care and education services at a younger age, provided the services are high quality'* (Melhuish 2004, cited Start Strong, 2014, p.9).

Research on the impact of early years provision on children's developmental outcomes does vary for different groups of children but the literature is very clear *'that gains from quality childcare are largest for low-income or immigrant households and those with less educated parents'* (Gambaro et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding this evidence, it is to be noted that the amount of time spent in centre-based care must be considered. Indeed, evidence suggests that prolonged periods in centre-based care can have a negative impact on children's outcomes, particularly for younger children (UNICEF, 2008).

Quality

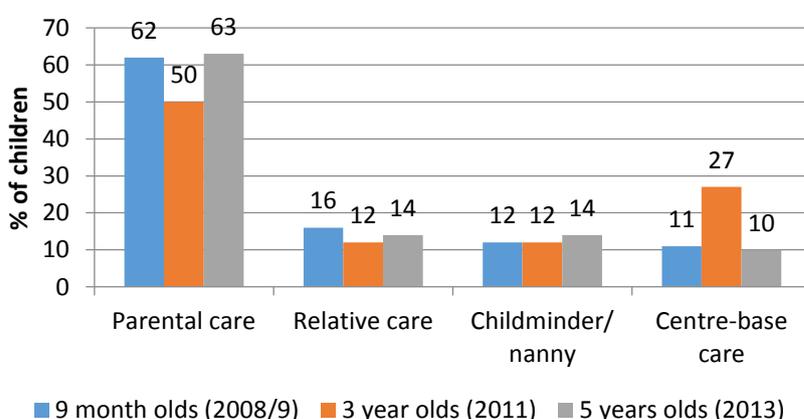
Embedded within the research, and increasingly a focus of government and international initiatives, is the importance of quality. The European Commission has said *'although access is a key issue, access without quality may even be detrimental to children'* (Rand Europe, 2014). The literature on quality reiterates this:

- *'poor quality provision harms children's future prospects'* (McCartney, 2004)
- *'Poor quality care may harm children, and depress their educational and social learning; and conversely, high quality care offers some kind of protective and social educational boost, especially for vulnerable children'* (Leseman, 2009).

Patterns of Parental, Formal and/or Informal Care in Ireland

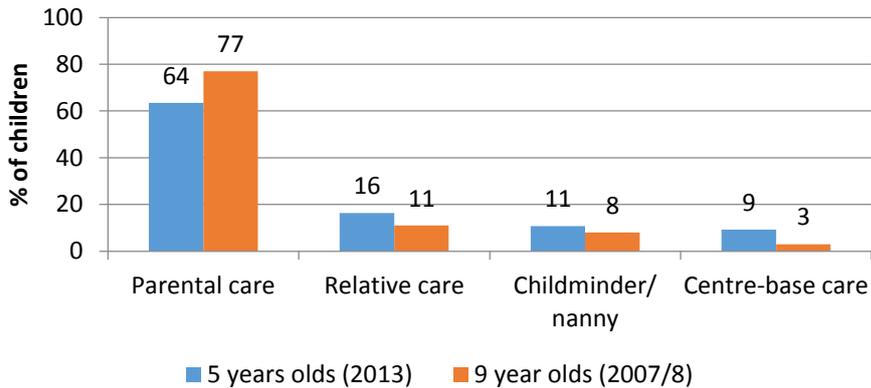
Pre-school children: Data on the main childcare arrangements for pre-school children are presented in Figure 1. These data are drawn from Growing Up in Ireland and relate to data collection with the infant cohort at three different ages (i.e. at ages 9 months, 3 years and 5 years) and at three different points in time (i.e. 2008/9, 2011 and 2013). At 9 months of age, 62% of pre-school children were cared for at home by a parent and just 11% were in centre-based settings (i.e. formal care). By age 3, the percentage cared for at home by a parent fell to 50% while the percentage in centre-based settings rose to 27%. By 5 years of age, the majority of children in the infant cohort (who had not yet started primary school) were cared for at home by a parent (i.e. 63%) and 10% were in centre-based care. The increase at age 3 relates, in part, to participation in the free pre-school year. The proportion of pre-school children in informal childcare arrangements (i.e. with a childminder or a relative) remained fairly stable. Approximately one in four children at 9 months, three years and 5 years were in such informal childcare arrangements.

Figure 1: Main childcare arrangements for pre-school children



Primary-school children: Data on the main after-school childcare arrangements for primary-school children are presented in Figure 2. These data are also drawn from Growing Up in Ireland and relate to data collection with the infant cohort (at age 5), which was conducted in 2013 and data collection with the child cohort (at age 9), which was conducted in 2007 and 2008. At 5 years of age, 64% of the infant cohort (who had started primary school) were cared for at home by a parent after school, 27% were in informal after-school childcare arrangements and 9% were in centre-based settings. At 9 years of age, the percentage of primary school children cared for at home by a parent after school was 77% while the percentages in informal and formal after-school care arrangements were 19% and 3% respectively.

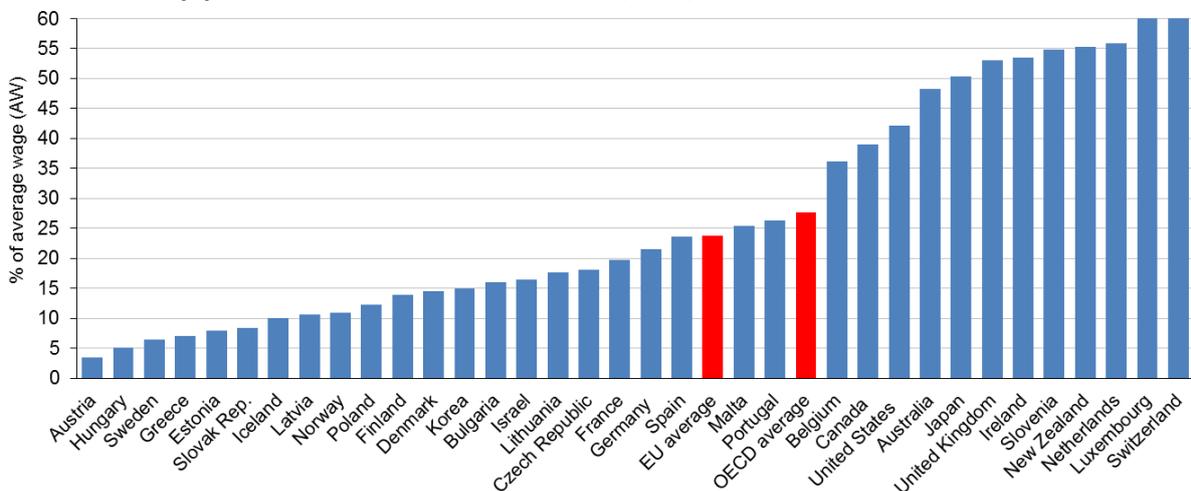
Figure 2: Main after-school childcare arrangements for primary school children



Affordability

The choice of childcare arrangements (parental, formal and/or informal care) is influenced by a large number of factors, with affordability often being among the most relevant. Figure 3 below shows that, across OECD countries, the average ‘typical’ childcare fee paid for a two-year old in full-time care is just over 27% of the average wage. However, there is wide variation across countries. This amount ranges from around 5% of the average wage or less in Hungary and Sweden to above 50% in Japan, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The data here represent the ‘typical’ fees charged by accredited childcare centres in the country, and ignore variation in childcare fees by type of care, region/municipality.

Figure 3: Gross childcare fees as a percentage of the average wage per two-year old attending accredited early-years care and education services (2012)



Across Member States of the European Union, women who have children under the mandatory school age and state that they do not work or work only part-time for reasons linked to childcare, do so because childcare is too expensive (53%), not available (25%) of insufficient quality (4%) or for other reasons (18%). It is important to note that childcare costs are high in most Member States across the European Union but are offset by similarly high childcare benefits. This is not the case in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Rand Europe, 2014).

Women’s participation in the labour force

The European Union set a target rate for female employment of 60% by 2010, and Ireland had exceeded that figure by 2007. By 2008, there were 921,600 women in employment in Ireland (compared to 1,186,900 men) with an employment rate of 60.5%. However, during the economic

crisis the figure dropped significantly, falling to 55.2% by 2012. In 2014, the rate increased slightly to 55.9%. The female unemployment rate was as low as 4% during Ireland's boom years but it more than doubled during the crisis to 8.3% in 2009 and rose to a peak of 11.4% in 2013 before falling back to 9.9% in 2014. According to the most recent Census of the Population in 2011, just 6.8% of children under 6 and 2.9% of primary after school children (aged 6-12) lived in an unemployed household. Further, 65.9% of children under 6 lived in households where the mother was in the labour force. Among children of primary school, 61.4% lived in households where the mother was in the labour force.

Staffing

Staff costs constitute around 80% of the running costs of childcare business, and competition and cost efficiency requires these costs to be kept as low as possible (Start Strong, 2013).

In Ireland, qualification levels and requirements are significantly below European standards (saving the United Kingdom) and compared to comparators in the primary school sector. According to data from Pobal in 2012 *'a significant proportion of staff in the childcare sector (13% in 2011) were participants in the government employment schemes. This figure is even higher in community-based providers, where staff participating in these schemes accounted for 23% of all staff. A further 4% of staff in the early years sector were unpaid volunteers. The latest Pobal survey also showed a high level of staff turnover in the sector'* [McGinnity et al., 2013).

Direct Investment

The Irish Government currently provides approximately €260 million annually to early years and school-age care and education services. The majority of this funding (i.e. approximately €246 million) is directed towards three programmes, which aim to improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of early years and school-age care and education. These programmes – the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, and the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and support the provision of early years and school-age care and education for more than 100,000 children each year. The remaining €14 million is directed towards funding all City/County Childcare Committees, the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and various quality development and training initiatives including the Learner Fund, Better Start, Childminder Development Grants and Parent and Toddler Group Grants).

| Table 1: Early Years and School-Age Care and Education Programmes | | |
|---|--|--|
| Programme | Details | |
| Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) | The free pre-school year under the ECCE programme was introduced in January 2010. Almost every pre-school service (more than 4,300) in the State is participating with up to 68,000 children, or 95% of the eligible age cohort, expected to avail of the programme in 2015. The objective of the programme is to make early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children in the year before they commence primary school. This programme represents an annual investment of approximately €175 million. The support is provided through capitation payments paid to services in advance of and during each school term. Participating services currently receive a capitation fee of €62.50 per week per qualifying child attending. A higher capitation fee of €73 a week is available to services with more highly qualified staff. | |
| Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) | The CCS programme provides funding to community childcare services to enable them to provide quality childcare at reduced rates to disadvantaged and low-income working parents. Parents qualify as disadvantaged or low-income on the basis of means-tested entitlements. In the case of full day care, parents qualifying for the higher rate of subvention under the CCS programme can have up to €95 per week deducted from the overall charge for childcare in the participating childcare service. To ensure that access to subvention funding is not a disincentive for parents to return to employment, the CCS programme allows a parent who is in receipt of the higher level of subvention support, and who secures employment, to retain that level of funding support until the end of that school year in the same service, and also to have a reduced level of funding support for one further school year following that. About 25,000 children are catered for under the CCS each year in almost 900 community childcare services. The programme has an annual budget of €45 million. | |
| Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) | Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) | Under the CETS programme, childcare services are contracted to provide childcare places to qualifying Solas or Education and Training Board (ETB) trainees or students for the duration of their courses. This programme also provides part time and after-school places. Under the programme €145, per week is provided towards the cost of a full day childcare place and the service is permitted to charge the parent up to a further €25 per week towards the cost of the place. The Programme has a budget of €17 million per year and in the region of 8,000 children are catered for annually. |
| | After-School Childcare (ASCC) | The ASCC programme is designed to support low-income and unemployed people to take up a job, increase their days of employment or take up a place on a Department of Social Protection Employment programme. The ASCC provides after-school care for primary school children of eligible parents for a period of 52 weeks. The programme contributes €40 per week for an after-school place or €80 per week in situations where a pick-up service is required to take the child from school to the childcare provider. The programme also provides a full day care rate of €105 per week, for a maximum of 10 weeks, to cater for school holiday periods. In all cases, the maximum fee payable by parents is €15 per week per child. The programme has a funding allocation of €1.32 million in 2015, which will provide between 300 to 500 places, depending on the mix between after-school and after-school with pick-up places. |
| | Community Employment Childcare (CEC) | The CEC programme is targeted specifically at participants in the Community Employment (CE) schemes operated by the Department of Social Protection. Under the programme, €80 per week is provided for pre-school places for children up to the age of 5 and €40 per week for after-school places for primary school children up to the age of 13, with a set charge of €15 per week to the parent in either case. The programme also provides a part time day care rate of €80 per week, for a maximum of 10 weeks, to cater for school holiday periods. Places are approved for 50 weeks. The CEC programme has an annual budget of €7.5 million to provide 2,000 places. |

Indirect Investment

Universal Child Benefit is paid in respect of all children up to 16 years of age. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children up to their 18th birthday who are in full-time education or who have a disability. In Budget 2015, the rate of Child Benefit was increased by €5 to €135 per month. Further details on Child Benefit Monthly Rates are presented below.

| Table 2: Child Benefit Monthly Rates (2015) | |
|---|--------------|
| Number of children | Monthly Rate |
| 1 child | €135.00 |
| 2 children | €270.00 |
| 3 children | €405.00 |
| 4 children | €540.00 |
| 5 children | €675.00 |
| 6 children | €810.00 |
| 7 children | €945.00 |
| 8 children | €1,080 |

In addition to the universal Child Benefit payment, the social protection system also provides assistance to low-income families with children through the payment of [Qualified Child Increases \(QCIs\)](#) on primary social welfare payments.

[One-Parent Family Payment \(OFP\)](#) is a payment for men and women under 66 who are bringing children up without the support of a partner. The payment is means tested and is a taxable source of income. The One-Parent Family Payment rates for 2015 are presented in Table 3.

| Table 3: One-Parent Family Payment Rates (2015) | |
|--|---------------------|
| Number of children | Monthly Rate |
| Personal rate (under 66) | €188 |
| Child dependant | €29.80 |

In 2011, changes were introduced to One-Parent Family Payments. These resulted in a gradual reduction in the maximum age of the youngest child for whom payment can be claimed (i.e. from 18 years to 7 years by 2014 for new customers and 2015 for existing customers) (see Table 4).

| Table 4: One-Parent Family Payment: Maximum Age of the Youngest Child for Whom Payment can be Claimed | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
| Payment continues up to age if: | | | |
| One-Parent Family Payment commenced before 27 April 2011 | Age 17 | Age 16 | Age 7 |
| One-Parent Family Payment commenced between 27 April 2011 and 3 May 2012 | Age 12 | Age 10 | Age 7 |
| One-Parent Family Payment commenced after 3 May 2012 | Age 10 | Age 7 | Age 7 |

[Family Income Supplement \(FIS\)](#) is a weekly tax-free income support payment available to low-earning employees with children. It gives extra financial support to people on low pay. To be eligible, applicants must have at least one child who normally lives with them or are financially supported by them. The child(ren) must be under 18 years of age or between 18 and 22 years of age and in full-time education. To qualify for FIS, the average weekly family income must be below a certain amount for the family size. The FIS received is 60% of the difference between the average weekly family income and the income limit which applies to the family. The payment effectively preserves the incentive to take up or remain in employment in circumstances where the employee might be marginally better off than if he or she were claiming other social welfare payments.

[Guardian's payment](#) is payable to a person taking care of an orphan. It is not necessary to be a legally appointed guardian. A guardian's payment may be paid if the orphan lives with the person and they are responsible for his or her care. The payment must benefit the orphan. In 2015, the Guardian's Payment (Contributory) is paid at a standard rate of €161 per week and the maximum Guardian's Payment (Non-Contributory) is €161 per week.

[Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance \(BTSCFA\)](#) helps meet the cost of uniforms and footwear for children going to school. The parent or guardian must be getting certain social welfare payments or taking part in training, employment or adult education schemes and their child/ren must be aged between 4 and 17 on or before 30 September of the year they apply or aged between 18 and 22 on or before 30 September if in second-level education. The allowance paid for each eligible child aged 4-11 on or before 30 September 2014 was €100. The allowance paid for each eligible child aged 12-22 on or before 30 September 2014 was €200. Children aged between 18 and 22 years must be in full-time second-level education in a recognised school or college.

| Table 5: Expenditure on Child Related Payments by Payment Type (2013 and 2014) | | |
|---|------------------|------------------|
| | 2013 | 2014 |
| | €000 | €000 |
| Child Benefit | 1,899,908 | 1,902,574 |
| Family Income Supplement | 261,472 | 297,707 |
| Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance | 47,976 | 42,452 |
| School Meals | 36,775 | 16,572 |
| Other Vote 37 funded Child Related Payments: Guardian's Payment (Non-Contributory) Widowed Parent / Surviving Civil Partner Grant (Non-Contributory) | 5,373 | 5,471 |
| SIF Funded Child Related Payments: Guardian's Payment (Contributory) Widowed Parent / Surviving Civil Partner Grant (Contributory) | 17,293 | 16,664 |
| TOTAL | 2,268,797 | 2,281,440 |

Maternity and Parental Leave Arrangements

Since 2007, women have been entitled to 26 weeks paid maternity leave, an increase of 8 weeks over previous provision, and an additional 16 weeks unpaid leave, also an increase of 8 weeks over previous provision. Maternity Benefit is a payment for employed and self-employed people who meet the PRSI contributions' criteria for the tax year relevant to their claim and who are in insurable employment covered by the Maternity Protection Act 1994 immediately before the first day of maternity leave. Maternity Benefit is paid by the Department of Social Protection to women who have a certain number of paid PRSI contributions on their social insurance record and who are in insurable employment up to the first day of their maternity leave. The last day of work can be within 16 weeks of the end of the week the baby is due. Maternity Benefit is paid for 26 weeks. At least 2 weeks and not more than 16 weeks leave must be taken before the end of the week in which the baby is due. Rate of payment for claims beginning on or after 6 January 2014 is €230 which is the standard payment weekly rate.

Adoptive Benefit is a payment to an adopting mother or a single male who adopts a child. Adoptive Benefit is paid for a continuous period of 24 weeks from the date of placement of the child at the same rate as Maternity Benefit.

| Table 6: (Estimated) Expenditure on Maternity and Adoptive Benefit (2013, 2014 and 2015) | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| | Maternity Benefit (€000) | | | Adoptive Benefit (€000) | |
| | Expenditure | Recipients | Awarded | Expenditure | Recipients |
| 2013 | 292,597 | 22,812 | 45,173 | 420 | 15 |
| ¹ Outturn 2014 | 269,497 | 21,629 | 44,282 | 169 | 11 |
| ² REV 2015 | 254,050 | 23,660 | | 110 | 14 |
| ¹ <i>Provisional</i> | | | | | |
| ² <i>From Published Revised Estimates Volume 2015</i> | | | | | |

Parental leave provisions are governed under the Parental Leave Act 1998 (as amended). The age of the child for which parental leave can be taken is from 5 to 8 years. In the case of a child with a disability, parental leave may be taken up to the age of 16 years. Parental leave is available for each child and amounts to a total of 18 working weeks per child. Both parents have equal and separate entitlement to parental leave. If both parents work for the same employer, parental leave entitlements may be transferred between parents with the employer's agreement.

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Terms of Reference of the Inter-Departmental Group (IDG)

Purpose

To identify and assess policies and future options for increasing the quality, accessibility (including supply) and affordability of early years and school age (out of school) care and education services:-

- Assessing the returns that can accrue from investing in early years from supporting children's early cognitive, social and emotional development and generating long term returns to the State and society;
- Facilitating parents' participation in the workforce.

Background

The work of the IDG will take account of other recent policy initiatives, including the commitments contained in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* – The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, the development of the National Early Years Strategy, the report '*Right from the Start*' produced by the Expert Advisory group, and the establishment by the Minister for Education of an Early Years Education Advisory Group.

Under the European Semester process, to which Ireland is subject, the European Council issued advice in the form of a Country Specific Recommendation (CSR) in 2014 requiring Ireland to make improvements in facilitating female labour market participation, through improved access to more affordable full time childcare facilities. To address this requirement the policy recommendation must have beneficial impacts on labour supply and support the overall productive capacity of the economy. The 2014 CSR required Ireland to update on progress in this regard by the first quarter of 2015. The enclosed terms of reference support compliance with this milestone.

Specific Task

The work of the IDG will focus on:

1. Identifying policy objectives to guide investment, including

- Improved outcomes for children, including those with special needs, in terms of their learning, wellbeing and development by ensuring access to high quality early years services.
- Support for parents to care for their children
- Contribution towards improvements in social inclusion and poverty reduction
- Support for parents' participation in education, training and employment

2. Reviewing the current state of play with a view to:

- Quantifying current key investment vehicles that support early years care and education provision across all departments, through both direct and indirect investment in terms of both supply and demand side measures;
- Identifying gaps in provision;
- Identifying duplication of effort;
- Examining the fit between the various investment vehicles;
- Identifying any other supports which have an impact on supporting parents with childcare responsibilities; and
- Workforce development.

3. **Analysing evidence and best practice in relation to the modalities of support by governments internationally.**
4. **Identifying and assessing options for investment in early years and school age care and, specifying the costs and benefits of each option. In each case, this should include:-**
 - The developmental benefits of quality education and care in the early years for children;
 - The verifiable impact of the policy option on labour supply, the overall productive capacity of the economy and long-term benefits for the public finances will also be examined.
5. **Making recommendations regarding:-**
 - Principles that should underpin State investment
 - Streamlining of existing policies and programmes to create a coherent investment policy
 - Priorities in respect of future investment

Membership

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Department of Education and Skills
- Department of Social Protection
- Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation
- Department of Public Expenditure & Reform
- Department of Finance
- Department of an Taoiseach

Meetings

- It is envisaged that the group will meet on no more than six occasions before reporting this summer
- Meetings will be organised and chaired by DCYA
- Initial topics for the agenda will be generated by DCYA
- Papers and minutes required for meetings will be circulated in advance
- DCYA will provide the secretariat for the group.