

## **Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Barry Andrews welcomes free pre-school year in early childhood care and education (ECCE)**

**7 April 2009**

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Barry Andrews, T.D. welcomed today's Budget announcement by the Minister for Finance of the introduction next January of a free pre-school year for children. The scheme is expected to benefit some 70,000 children, aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months every year.

Minister Andrews said, "This is a highly significant step in the development of Ireland's early childhood care and education (ECCE) policy. The Government has, by announcing this decision, demonstrated our commitment to our children's social and educational development. It is a key building block in the realisation of our plan for a smart economy. The provision of a year's free pre-school to all children will promote equality of opportunity at the most important developmental stage of children's lives. Regardless of income or ability to pay, all children will be entitled to avail of this pre-school service".

Quoting from the recent National Competitiveness Council Report on Education and Training, the Minister said, "pre-primary education is a key determinant of student performance at all levels of education, as it leads to improvements in students' skills levels, motivation and the propensity to learn, which in turn raises the private and social returns from all future investments in their education".

While the free pre-school year will be available to all parents, Minister Andrews said, "the real winners from today's announcement will be the more disadvantaged and marginalised children in our society who do not currently benefit from pre-school care and education".

Minister Andrews said, "re-direction of over €170 million from the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS) into the provision of a free pre-school year starting in January next, was the right policy choice. This policy has been called for by experts in early years care and education, including bodies such as the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), Barnardos, the Children's Rights Alliance and the OECD".

"As a result of Government's investment over the last decade of some €1 billion in developing a childcare infrastructure, under both the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 and, prior to that, the EU co-funded Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006, some 70,000 additional childcare places will be in place by 2010. This investment in infrastructure, has made it possible to introduce the pre-school year scheme and be confident that parents, who wish to access a pre-school year place for their child, will be able to do so," said Minister Andrews.

Children enrolled in playschools will receive free pre-school provision of 3 hours per day, 5 days each week over a 38 week year. This equates to a weekly capitation grant to the service provider of €64.50 and parents with children enrolled in these services will not be charged. Children enrolled in full- or part-time childcare services will receive free pre-school provision of 2 hours and 15 minutes per day, five days a week over a 50 week period. This equates to a weekly capitation grant to the service of €48.50, with parents paying for their childcare net of this amount. Over the course of the year, the financial benefit of the scheme for a single child is over €2,400 euro.

All community and private pre-school services, which meet the requirements of the scheme, will be invited to apply for entry to the scheme and all notified pre-school services will be contacted by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) by the end of May, 2009. To introduce the scheme as quickly as possible and maximise the number of children and their parents who will benefit from the outset, the Minister said he did not propose to wait until the school year beginning September 2010 but would introduce the scheme from January 2010. From September 2010, the pre-school year will run from September of each year in line with the school year.

All children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months at September 1<sup>st</sup> each year, will be eligible and parents who wish to avail of the scheme can enrol their children with the available participating service of their choice. Children entering the scheme in January 2010 will be eligible, if they are aged between 3 years and 7 months and 4 years and 10 months at 1 January 2010 (children born between March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 and June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006). Parents should have regard to the enrolment policies of their local primary schools in making decisions regarding the age that their children should avail of the pre-school year.

The Department of Education and Science has established an Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Furthermore, a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland (Síolta) was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) and a coordinated implementation plan to disseminate and support Síolta is now being developed by the OMCYA. As part of this implementation plan, the OMCYA will work with national voluntary childcare bodies and County Childcare Committees to support the implementation of the ECCE. In this regard, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has developed a *Framework for Early Learning*, which is a national curriculum framework to support all adults who are involved in promoting children's learning, well-being and development from birth to six years and this is to be launched in the coming months.

A Workforce Development Plan for the early childhood care and education sector is also being developed. In general, the ECCE will be delivered by an Early Years Leader and Assistant. Early years leaders will be expected to be appropriately qualified to undertake this work and it is recognised that there will be a need to build towards appropriate qualifications/levels over time.

A helpline will be in place **with effect from Monday 20<sup>th</sup> April** to answer queries from parents and childcare providers in relation to the operation of the new Scheme. The number is **1890 30 30 39**.

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