

**ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM**

**DELIVERING INTEGRATED POLICY AND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The Irish Public Service has been relatively strong historically in the area of policy formulation. I have come to the conclusion, however, that we are relatively weak when it comes to implementation and many good policies fail due to a lack of appropriate structures and processes to ensure their successful implementation from policy objectives to tangible outcomes. This paper outlines the role of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), which is seeking to overcome that difficulty and bring about more effective implementation of services and interventions for children through cross-Departmental and cross-sectoral working.

In December 2005, the Government announced an expanded role for the Minister for Children. The effect of the decision was to provide for the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children, bringing together under one organisation responsibility for a range of policy matters related to children. The Government also decided that the Minister for Children would attend Cabinet meetings, an indication of the importance the Government attaches to issues relating to children and their wellbeing.

The Office of the Minister for Children focuses on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education, youth justice, child welfare and protection, children and young people's participation, research on children and young people and cross-cutting initiatives for children. The OMC supports the Minister for Children in driving the implementation of:

- The National Children's Strategy (2000 – 2010)
- The National Childcare Investment Programme (2006 – 2010)
- The Children Act (2001) and the Child Care Act, 1991
- Developing policy on child welfare and child protection

The OMC also maintains a general strategic oversight of bodies with responsibility for developing and delivering services for children.

The OMC is a cross-cutting Government office located in the Department of Health and Children. Staff working on The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform), on child welfare and child protection (from the Department of Health and Children) and from the National Children's Office amalgamated in early 2006 to form the OMC. In addition, staff from the Irish Youth Justice Service of the Department of Justice, Equality

and Law Reform and from the Early Years Education Policy in the Department of Education and Science will be co-located in the OMC, to provide a joined-up government approach to delivering policy and services for children. (See Figure 1)



## 2. ORIGINS OF THE OMC

There were two major influences on the Government's thinking when it came to the establishment of the OMC. The first was Ireland's relatively poor performance before the UN's Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the mid-1990s. Ireland was criticized by the UN Committee on that occasion for the absence of a focused Governmental approach to the needs of children. This led to the development of the National Children's Strategy, published in 2000, and the establishment of the National Children's Office (NCO). The intention was that the NCO would drive the implementation of the Strategy across all Government departments and agencies. The NCO made significant progress in developing the concept of participation and consultation with children and it also developed capacity in the field of research on children's lives. However, it was less successful in influencing mainstream Government departments and agencies in relation to their policies on children, as it lacked the requisite power or authority.

A second influence on the establishment of the OMC was a review of youth justice services which was undertaken under my leadership in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The Task Force which carried out the review visited other countries to learn from their experiences. The key finding of the review was that the best outcomes for young people were achieved where all the relevant agencies were brought together under the direction of one body and the policy and practices emerging from that body were adequately funded. In the case of the Irish Youth Justice Service, this finding required some joined-up solution involving the Health Service, the Justice sector and the Education sector and hence the concept of the OMC emerged.

As well as the highly practical reasons outlined above, there is a sound theoretical rationale behind the concept of the OMC. The National Children’s Strategy is underpinned by a coherent and inclusive view of childhood described as “the whole child perspective”. The whole child perspective is concerned with the comprehensiveness of children’s lives through the viewpoint of the child. It recognises that children’s development is influenced by three broad domains and these are:

- 1 **their innate capacity**, which deals with the extent of children’s own capacities. It recognises the child as an active participant in their own development and is the starting point for growth and development. The capacities are expressed in different ways as children grow, develop and express themselves as individuals. This domain has nine dimensions, set out below, and these dimensions can be understood as areas around which outcomes can be expressed. The nine areas should be understood as relatively discrete but interrelated dimensions and there is no hierarchy of importance intended between these dimensions.
- 2 **the relationships around them**; the whole child perspective sees childhood as a complex set of dynamic relationships which interact in ways which are, as yet, not fully understood, but are recognised as essential to a satisfying and successful childhood. These relationships range from the family, the primary source of care and protection for children, to the State, which acts as the ultimate guarantor of their rights. The whole child perspective recognises that children affect and in turn are affected by the relationships around them.
- 3 **formal and informal supports**: essential supports and services are provided for children through the primary, social networks of family, extended family and community, known as the informal supports, and through the formal support services provided by the voluntary sector, commercial sector, the State and its agencies. These provide the conduit through which children draw the support and services they need and benefit from.

The nine dimensions of children’s innate capacity now set out in the whole child perspective are:

- Physical and mental wellbeing;
- Emotional and behavioural wellbeing;
- Intellectual capacity;
- Spiritual and moral wellbeing;
- Identity;
- Self care;
- Family relationships;
- Social and peer relationships;
- Social presentation.

These are not set out in any particular order and there is not, within the nine dimensions, a hierarchy or prioritisation of any individual dimension. Rather, they provide a comprehensive operationalisation of the concept ‘active developing child’ and within the whole child perspective, they combine synergistically to form children’s innate capacity. While each dimension is important, it is only by taking all dimensions together that we can have a comprehensive presentation of children’s innate capacity. In respect of early childhood education and care, we can see then, that there are many different areas of children’s lives that need to be addressed and supported. Consequently, they make redundant any separation of ‘care’ and ‘education’ and also highlight the necessity of ensuring that the care of children is tailored to ensure that all dimensions outlined above are taken into account at different times in children’s lives.

The clear implication for Government of the “whole child perspective” is that, when making decisions about children’s lives, there is a need to take account of all of the different domains in children’s lives and their inter-relationships. Having a Government Office with a specific focus on children enables this approach to be put into practice.

### 3. THE OMC's BROADER REMIT

The OMC has inherited from the National Children's Office the responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the National Children's Strategy. This function gives the OMC a remit to engage with every Government Department and Agency that can contribute to achieving better outcomes for children. An example of the way in which this remit was successfully used by the NCO is the implementation of the National Play Policy, *Ready, Steady, Play!* The NCO entered into partnerships with the Department of the Environment and the local authorities to develop local play policies and fund the construction of new playgrounds around the country. Obstacles such as difficulties with insurance cover were overcome through joint working and funding arrangements.

Since the publication of the National Play Policy in March 2004, a total of €24.8 million of Government funding has been spent on improving play infrastructure. This funding has led to the development of playgrounds in every local authority area in the country, with specialised schemes for building play facilities in both urban and rural disadvantaged areas. Over 400 playgrounds have been built to date with more in the development process and due for completion in 2007.

A key mechanism which supports the OMC's cross-cutting work is the National Partnership Agreement, *Towards 2016*. Influenced by the NESC report *The Developmental Welfare State* (2005), the Agreement adopts a lifecycle approach in relation to its social inclusion measures, with children identified as a key component. The lifecycle approach to policy encourages a collaborative, cross-sectoral way of working, which is the *modus operandi* of the OMC. Another key advantage is the ten-year timeframe of the Agreement, as it allows sufficient time for fundamental, strategic change to take place. Having a longer timeframe forces us to think differently about policy and makes a focus on achieving better outcomes more realistic. In some contexts, there is a tendency to think that our aspirations for children and children's services are almost impossible to achieve, but if there is a stable ten-year horizon, they can seem possible.

### 4. USING TOWARDS 2016 TO DRIVE IMPLEMENTATION

In line with a commitment in *Towards 2016*, the OMC has established a National Implementation Group to monitor progress on the implementation of the commitments in the National Children's Strategy (2000-2010). The Group includes key officials from Government Departments and agencies responsible for the provision of services which impact on children's lives. Crucially, this group includes not only policy-makers, but agencies responsible for implementation of policy also. This is essential because many services in Ireland are managed and controlled nationally, rather than locally, unlike most other European countries. This can be a significant problem in implementing policy, for without a mandate from the key person at national level, many services are unable or unwilling to engage locally in cross-sectoral working. This can lead to poor communications between services and the "recycling" of the same groups of children between different agencies. It is extremely challenging for agencies to be asked to work strategically together rather than in isolation from each other, and a key function of the National Group will be to provide a strong leadership role in that regard.

Also in *Towards 2016* is a commitment to establish a multi-agency Children's Services Committee in each county. These Committees will involve key officials from statutory services, who already have responsibility for budgets and service delivery, working in partnership together and developing a strategic approach to services for children in their own county. How each Committee operates will be a matter for local preference, but the end-product is clear – the OMC will be seeking information on the children in each county, on what each county is spending on children's services and what outcomes are being achieved for the investment. The focus will be on local accountability for achieving better outcomes for children. The key drivers for these Children's Services Committees will be the Local Authorities, through the County Development Boards and the Health Service Executive, though the Local Health Office in each county. Four Children's

Services Committees have been set up during 2007 in the first phase of this development in Donegal, Dublin City, South Dublin and Limerick City and more are planned for 2008. It is hoped that, among other things, the Children's Services Committees will play a significant role in the rolling out at local level of the recommendations of the National Recreation Policy, *Teenspace*, published recently by the Minister for Children.

## **5. PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION**

A growing body of international research supports earlier intervention to secure better longer-term outcomes for children. Research shows that positive supports provided in the very first years of life can significantly impact life chances by promoting emotional and physical development, particularly for those children disadvantaged by socio-economic background or family circumstances. The OMC is supporting innovative service delivery in this area through the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Programme will run for a five-year period and has a fund amounting to €36 million in total, half of which will be provided by Government and half by The Atlantic Philanthropies. The Programme is being managed by the OMC and administration of the funds is also overseen by the OMC. The programme focuses on disadvantaged children and their families, encourages innovation in service design and will be rigorously evaluated to ascertain its impact on outcomes. Three projects (Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative, YoungBallymun and Northside Partnership) have been selected for funding under the Programme. The aim of the Programme is to support these sites to promote better outcomes for children through innovation and improved planning, integration and delivery of services. A phased programme of activities commenced in the three areas in September 2007.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Programme will examine innovative methods for improving outcomes for children in an integrated way. The intention is to ensure that local services connect effectively with one another, making them more focused on the multiple needs of children and families. The strategy will also provide for some new services and the re-orientation of existing services in the identified area to meet the specified needs of the community. In addition to the impact these projects will have on the communities involved, the monitoring and evaluation of the projects will present the OMC with an opportunity to learn about "what works" in the field and to transfer that learning to mainstream service provision. This, in fact, will be a key challenge for us. In my experience, many excellent initiatives have remained at the "pilot" stage for years due to a lack of focus on transferring the learning to the mainstream services. Therefore, in my view, planning for the transfer of learning needs to commence as soon as possible in the lifespan of the Programme.

The cornerstone of the PEIP is leadership and involvement in the project by the key statutory agencies from the very commencement and a commitment by them to designate PEIPs as mainstream activity designed to improve service outcomes for children.

## **6. THE OMC RESEARCH AGENDA**

Until recently, there had been relatively little research on children and childhood in Ireland. This meant that many of our inferences for policy purposes were taken indirectly from information derived from studies in other countries. There is, however, a need to understand the specific child-rearing and socialisation practices of children in Ireland and the effects of the rapid economic and social change and indeed changing family structures, among others, on children in Ireland. An extensive research agenda using a variety of methods was introduced by the National Children's Office as part of the National Children's Strategy (2000) to fill these gaps and the OMC is continuing this important work.

The National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators was launched by the National Children's Office in June 2005 and a peer-reviewed paper on this development was published in the Journal of Social Indicators earlier this year.<sup>1</sup> This indicator set, which comprises forty-two child well-being indicators and seven demographic indicators, informs the production of the biennial '*State of the Nation's Children Report*'.

The first State of the Nations Children report was published by the OMC on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2007. The report is published in fulfilment of a commitment given in the National Children's Strategy that a regularly updated statement of key indicators of children's well-being would be made available and this commitment reflects a more global effort to measure and monitor child well-being.

Information and knowledge about children and their lives is a necessary first step in understanding their lives better and in planning supports and services for them. Within the new partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, a commitment was given to developing a data strategy around children's lives, particularly in the area of childcare. In addition, the recently published State of the Nation's Children report highlighted a number of areas where better information is required and where access to information needs to be improved. A new national data strategy on children's lives is being developed through the OMC in association with other key stakeholders. The strategy will identify additional key areas where data is required to inform policy and, in the longer-term, to evaluate both the impact of investment on the quality of life experienced by children and where specific targeting of resources is most needed.

The National Children's Strategy Research Scholarship Scheme was established in 2001 with the aim of developing the research capacity in relation to children and supporting research directly related to the National Children's Strategy. Under this programme, successful applicants receive an annual maintenance grant and also have university fees paid in full by the OMC. To date 23 scholarships have been awarded. In 2004, the National Children's Strategy Research Scholarship Scheme was extended to include Research Placement Awards. This gives students the opportunity to work with the Research Division at the OMC. To date eight research placements have been awarded. Finally, the OMC's Research Programme commissions research on specific aspects of children's lives and a total of 20 research projects have been funded to date.

## **7. GROWING UP IN IRELAND – THE NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF CHILDREN IN IRELAND**

The National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland is by far the largest and most complex of the research activities undertaken by the OMC, but it is also the most potentially rewarding. The aim of *Growing up in Ireland* is '*to study the factors, which contribute to or undermine the well-being of children in contemporary Irish families, and, through this, contribute to the setting of effective and responsive policies relating to children and to the design of services for children and their families*'. The Study will monitor the development of 18,000 children, yielding important information about each significant transition throughout their young lives.

The contract to undertake the study was awarded in 2006 to a research consortium led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD). *Growing up in Ireland* is a two-cohort Study with an achieved sample of approximately 10,000 infants and 8,000 nine-year old children. Two data sweeps (at aged nine months old and at three years) will be undertaken for the infant cohort and two for the nine-year old cohort (at nine years and at thirteen years). *Growing up in Ireland* will collect data on three broad categories - Health and Well-being

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<sup>1</sup> Hanafin, S.; Brooks, A.M.; Carroll, E.; Fitzgerald, E.; NicGabhainn, S.; Sixsmith, J. (2007) Achieving Consensus in Developing a National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators *Social Indicators Research*, Volume 80, Number 1, January 2007, pp. 79-104(26).

Outcomes, Educational and Psychological Outcomes, and Social, Family, Economic and Demographic Information. Data will be collected by means of face-to-face interviews, self-complete questionnaires and direct assessments such as the Drumcondra Test in Mathematics and English, which will be administered to children in the nine-year old cohort. Resident and non-resident parents and childcare givers (non-parental) will be included in the Study. For the nine-year old cohort teachers, principals and the children themselves will also be included.

*Growing Up in Ireland* will provide vital information for policy formation and academic understanding and will allow us to assess the impact of changing policies and practices on our children's lives. I would hope that its findings will feed into our policy development processes in all aspects of social policy and will shape our legislation in years to come.

## **8. CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION**

The National Children's Strategy acknowledges children as citizens, with a contribution to make to social and political life. There is a growing international literature that supports the importance of participation by children and young people in decision-making, particularly at community and local level. The involvement of children and young people in decision-making 'improves the relevance and quality of policies and services, gives young people a sense of civic responsibility, makes them more interested in national and local politics and increases the likelihood that they will vote in elections.' (Children and Young People's Unit, 2002).

The OMC takes the lead role in ensuring the development and improvement of structures to enable participation by children and young people, such as Dáil na nÓg. It also undertakes specific participation projects in partnership with statutory bodies, government departments and non-government organisations. The OMC is committed to ensuring that hard-to-reach children and young people are included in participation structures and projects.

Under the National Children's Strategy, County and City Development Boards (CDBs) have a key role in establishing local Comhairle na nÓg (youth councils). The purpose of the Comhairle na nÓg is to give children and young people a voice at local level and an opportunity to influence local policy and planning. Young people are elected to Dáil na nÓg through their local Comhairle na nÓg. The OMC provides a small annual grant to CDBs to support the Comhairle. While some CDBs have established regular sessions of Comhairle na nÓg, which link with the adult county council, it is acknowledged that the majority of Comhairle na nÓg are not yet functioning at this level. In response to this, the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group, established and chaired by the OMC, is devising a five-year Strategic Plan for the further development of Comhairle na nÓg, to be completed by December 2007. Simultaneously, the OMC will establish, oversee and monitor a range of funding schemes aimed at developing good practice and building capacity in Comhairle na nÓg. The OMC is also collaborating with the Department of Education and Science in overseeing the establishment and running of a new Student Council support service for second level schools, which will be operational by September 2007.

The OMC has also developed a considerable degree of expertise in consulting with children and young people on behalf of the Government. For example, in the summer of 2006, the OMC sought the views of children and young people as part of the Irish Government Report to the UN on implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In October 2006, in the context of the Supreme Court decision on statutory rape, the OMC consulted with young people on the issues to be considered when examining the age of consent for sexual activity. A report on this consultation process was presented to the Minister for Children and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Child Protection. In autumn 2007, the OMC will be consulting with young people in relation to their views on alcohol. It is also envisaged that children and young people will be consulted in the near future about current issues in the health sector which affect them, such as mental health services, the new Children's Hospital etc.

## 9. CHILDREN IN CARE AND BEFORE THE COURTS

As I mentioned earlier, a key impetus for the establishment of the OMC was the findings of the Youth Justice Review, which highlighted the fact that, despite the plethora of professionals and agencies concerned with them, vulnerable children and young people before the Courts were not being well served by the current system. One judge commented that, on a particular day in court, no less than 68 people appeared before him in relation to a child, all of them paid by the State, and yet there was no service on offer for the child. Clearly, this state of affairs is untenable and a major objective for the OMC is to bring about a more coherent system for meeting the needs of this very vulnerable group of children and young people.

Almost every case which comes before the Courts concerning a child involves a multitude of State services – the Health Service Executive, the Garda, the Probation Service, the education services, the detention schools etc. The key requirement is that these services work together more effectively around the shared objective of achieving the best outcome for the child. An example of where the OMC can add value in this kind of circumstance is our recent experience with regard to video recording of evidence from children. In November 2006, the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Child Protection recommended the provision of video-recording facilities in Garda stations for interviewing child witnesses/victims. In fact, the legal powers enabling Garda to video-record evidence has been in existence since 1992. A key factor in the delay had been a lack of communication and co-operation between the health boards (now the HSE) who are statutorily responsible for the care and welfare of the children concerned, and the Gardaí, who are the investigators of the criminal aspects of each case. The OMC led on the matter in late 2006 and, because of our unique position with a role in both the Department of Health & Children and the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, we were able to make progress on an issue which hitherto had seemed intractable. The HSE and the Garda authorities are now working together to ensure that facilities (and the requisite professional support) will be in place for the video-recording of child witnesses in various locations around the country by January 2008.

A key challenge for the OMC in 2007 was the implementation of the Children Act, 2001. The commencement of all but one of the outstanding provisions of the Children Act, 2001, as amended by the Criminal Justice Act, 2006, was completed on 1 March 2007. The commencement introduced wide-ranging changes in relation to the treatment of children who find themselves in conflict with the law with the emphasis on diverting young people from crime, re-integration and using detention as a last resort. In April 2007, the Government approved the allocation of significant additional resources to allow for the effective implementation of the Children Act. These extra resources included extra staff for the Probation Service and Irish Youth Justice Service, extra Judges for the Children Court and extra Juvenile Liaison Officers for the Garda Síochána.

Under the new National Development Plan (2007-2013), €224 million is available under the Youth Justice Programme. In addition to the commencement of the Act, 1 March 2007 saw responsibility for the management of children detention school facilities transferred from the Department of Education and Science to the Irish Youth Justice Service. The four detention schools for which the IYJS has assumed responsibility are: Finglas Child and Adolescent Centre, Oberstown Boys School, Lusk; Oberstown Girls School, Lusk and Trinity House School, Lusk. This significant change will enable all of the services which provide for young people in conflict with the law to be managed within the Youth Justice Service. The role of the Department of Education and Science is now confined to developing and implementing an educational strategy for the purposes of the Children Act, 2001 so as to ensure that each child's educational needs are met in an effective way.

The OMC also has responsibility, through its Child Protection and Welfare Unit, for ensuring the implementation of the Child Care Act, 1991. This is one of the finest and most progressive pieces of legislation we have in relation to children. Its provisions in relation to child protection are well

known, but its equal emphasis on the duty of a health board (now HSE) to provide family support services is rarely noticed. Research commissioned by the Department of Health & Children found that most of the resources spent on childcare services in Ireland are allocated to child protection and children in care. It recommended a re-orientation of services towards a more appropriate balance of prevention, early intervention and crisis intervention in services for families and children. The OMC hopes to facilitate and encourage such a re-orientation, working in partnership with the HSE, and a national policy document in this regard is due to be published later this year.

## **10. CHILDCARE POLICY**

The history of Government intervention in the sphere of the provision of childcare services in Ireland spans little more than a decade. It was only since the mid-1990s and the emergence of the economic growth dubbed as the “Celtic Tiger” that demand for formal childcare services started to increase. The first Government-funded childcare programme, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme was introduced as an employment equality measure, designed to encourage more women to enter the workforce and was co-financed by the European Commission as such. However, childcare programmes can also serve other social policy goals, such as ensuring the well-being and early development of young children, particularly those from disadvantaged families, and preparing young children for engagement with school.

The OMC’s approach to childcare policy is strongly influenced by the NESC report referred to earlier, *The Developmental Welfare State* (2005). This report argues that there is a complementary relationship between social policy and economic performance and that, as a consequence, it makes sense for the State to invest in social policy measures. It points out that our underdeveloped childcare services make it more difficult to tackle educational disadvantage or to increase the workforce participation of lower-educated women and thus impact on child poverty. It also draws attention to the fact that, in Ireland, our education spend is lowest in the area of early childhood education (0-5 years) where the international evidence has shown the return on investment is highest.

Drawing on research which has shown that targeted services are often not accessed by those groups for which they were intended, *The Developmental Welfare State* puts forward the concept of “tailored universalism”, that is, the provision of quality services available to all, but with additional supports provided to enable disadvantaged groups to access them. This is the model to which we in the OMC aspire in relation to childcare provision, even though we are only in the very early years of its implementation.

## **11. CURRENT CHILDCARE PROVISION**

The Irish Government’s policy to support parents in relation to childcare is two-fold. While there is no state provision of childcare in Ireland, the current Irish model has taken the classic features of state supported “supply-side” systems, such as wage supports for community childcare services, direct capital funding for both the community and voluntary and private sectors, providing supports for services through the 33 local City and County Childcare Committees, supporting national voluntary childcare organisations and targeting identified local childcare service needs, while also incorporating “demand-side” measures to help parents meet the costs of childcare, such as increasing Child Benefit by over 400% in the last ten years and introducing the Early Childcare Supplement of €1,000 per annum in 2006 for all children under 6 years. Government expenditure in these areas is set out in the table below:

**Table 1**

State expenditure on Childcare Services, 2006
<u>“Supply side” measures</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Capital €34.9 m</li><li>• Current €34.75 m</li></ul>
<u>“Demand side” measures</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Child Benefit €2.05 bn</li><li>• Early Childhood Supplement (from April 2006) €281.3 m</li></ul>

On the “supply-side”, the Government’s approach has been to stimulate the provision of quality childcare places, through the provision of grants for the childcare sector. This is being done through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006 and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010. Both Programmes are being administered by the Childcare Directorate of the Office of the Minister for Children. These programmes, with a combined budget of almost €1.1 billion, are projected to create over 90,000 childcare places, with some 34,000 of the new places already in place. These places are provided either through community based/not for profit childcare groups or by private providers.

Large scale capital funding up to €1.2 million and supports towards the staffing costs of employing childcare workers in community based childcare centres in disadvantaged areas have been available under both Programmes, ensuring that less advantaged parents in those areas have increased access to quality childcare and that they are charged fees which are less than the economic cost of providing the service.

Under the NCIP, private providers can apply for funding up to a maximum of €100,000 per facility (subject to a maximum of 75% of the total cost) and a maximum of €500,000 for multiple services in different catchment areas. Capital allowances are also available for private sector providers for expenditure incurred on childcare facilities where these meet the required standards for such facilities, as provided for under the Child Care Act 1991. Capital expenditure incurred on the construction, extension or refurbishment of a building or part of a building used as a childcare facility qualifies, as well as expenditure on the conversion of an existing building or part of a building for use as a childcare facility. The capital allowances may be written off over seven years, at the rate of 15% per annum for the first six years and 10% in year seven. With the introduction of accelerated capital allowances in 2000, owner-operators were allowed to increase the write off to 100% of the qualifying expenditure in the first year. The tax life for buildings first used prior to 1 February 2007 is ten years.

The Government also recognises the important role that childminders play within the Early Childhood Care and Education sector. Given the traditionally informal nature of childminding in Ireland, a number of measures have been introduced by the Government to encourage childminders to voluntarily notify their service to their local HSE through the City or County Childcare Committee. These include the National Childminding Initiative, launched in 2004, which includes a lecture based Quality Improvement Programme, a small capital grant of €630, and training, information and networking opportunities. In 2006, a €15,000 tax exemption on childminding income was introduced. Childminders are now eligible for small capital grants (up to €5,000 per child) under the NCIP 2006 – 2010.

Furthermore, a strategic approach is being adopted in the development of training and standards for childcare workers, with direct linkages to FÁS, VECs, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). To this end, a National Childcare Training Strategy is being developed by the Department of Education and Science, through the OMC, in order to co-ordinate the provision of quality training to meet the

growing needs of the sector and to deliver on the target set of 17,000 additional childcare training places under the NCIP.

On the “demand-side”, Child Benefit and the Early Childcare Supplement support all parents irrespective of income or employment status and thus do not discriminate against those who choose to stay at home to care for their children and those in education or training. Child Benefit has been increased in successive budgets and in Budget 2007, it was increased to €160 per month for the first two children; and to €190 per month for the third and subsequent children. The Early Childcare Supplement of €1,000 per annum was introduced for all children less than 6 years of age and became effective in April 2006. This is a direct, non-taxable payment of €250 per quarter year, in respect of each eligible child.

Further childcare policy measures introduced under the National Childcare Strategy include increases in Maternity Leave and Maternity Benefit. Budget 2007 extended paid maternity leave entitlement to 6 months and increased unpaid maternity leave to 16 weeks.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

In Ireland, we are only at the very early stages of strategic developments in our public policy in relation to children. In line with the NESC report, our aim is to provide quality services for all children, with additional supports provided to enable children who are disadvantaged to access them. As our society and our economy continues to expand and develop, I have no doubt that better outcomes for children will be demanded, not only for the welfare of the children themselves (which is our priority in the OMC), but also for the compelling economic reasons which have been put forward by Heckman, NESC and others. In our ongoing cross-cutting, cross-sectoral working, and within the context of Government policy and the National Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016*, the OMC is putting in place measures to enable those better outcomes for children to be achieved.