



PLANET – The Partnerships Network
Presentation to
**Oireachtas Committee for
Justice, Equality, Defence, and Women’s Rights**

20th April 2005

BACKGROUND

PLANET represents the 38 area-based Partnership companies throughout the country. Area-based Partnerships were established in 1991 as a locally based targeted response to long-term unemployment and social exclusion. The Companies are owned and run by the local community through a partnership arrangement, and are established in disadvantaged communities on a town and county basis.

The issue of childcare, and the key role it plays in combating social and economic exclusion, has led Partnerships to actively address specific childcare needs at a local level across a range of measures - including developing services; participating on childcare community group management committees; providing information, advice and technical support; community development; training and capacity building; building networks; and subsidising childcare provision. Partnerships also contributed to the development of the County/City Childcare Committees (CCCs), and continue to be active participants, while many of the CCCs have service agreements with Partnership companies to implement their strategy.

The objective of Partnerships is to meet the needs of socially excluded communities.

PLANET Childcare Policy Group is a subgroup of the PLANET Network, and has the remit of identifying policy issues pertaining to the development and provision of accessible, affordable, quality childcare services for those experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. In addition, the Childcare Policy Group also seeks to identify and disseminate models of good practice which are responsive to childcare needs of disadvantaged communities.

ISSUES

Funding:

Many community childcare services are in receipt of staffing grants under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) from the Dept. Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). The childcare sector in Ireland started from a very low base, but the introduction of the EOCP in 2000 made a significant contribution to improvement of these services. In the last four years, as a result of this funding, positive changes and a marked improvement in the quality of childcare provision has been noticeably evident. **It is imperative that we build on what has been put in place over the last four years.**

The funding under EOCP is for the six-year period 2000 – 2006. Community childcare services initially received a three-year funding allocation, and would then reapply for the second three years. However, the reality was that after the first three years, groups were only granted 'rollover funding' until a new funding application form would be available. Most groups have now been on 'rollover funding' for one year at the same level of funding as they received in Year 3. (Note: in December 2004 groups were informed that they would remain on 'rollover' funding, at the same level, until 31st August, 2005). The funding allocation needs to take inflation and national wage agreements into account.

Definition:

The department of JELR is currently reviewing the criteria for staffing grants and has stated that only 'very disadvantaged' groups will qualify in the future.

Staffing Concerns:

Because of the current uncertain situation, many childcare workers have short-term contracts or in some instances no contracts at all. Under existing Labour Law this is not best practice. Unfortunately, if clarification is not forthcoming on the continuation of staffing grants, childcare services will have to consider putting staff on *protective notice*.

Community Childcare services cannot revert to the situation prior to 2000. At that time, childcare workers were on very low pay with poor working conditions, and childcare services were struggling to provide quality childcare with very little input from Government sources. The reality is that community not-for-profit services can never be 100% sustainable - they will always require some level of funding and support. The EOCP funding was greatly welcomed. Any reduction of same would adversely affect the quality of childcare provision. As with all cuts, it will be the most vulnerable in society that will suffer.

In summary, funding cuts will have an impact on: ¹

- The quality of provision for children.
- The number of childcare places.
- Parents.
- Childcare Services.
- Childcare Workers.
- The Community.
- The Economy.

(See Appendix A)

¹ As identified by *Cork Early Years Network* through meetings with local childcare groups

KEY QUESTIONS

PLANET Childcare Policy Group, Cork Early Years Network, and a number of community groups that its members have representation on and linkages with, are very concerned about these issues, and wish to raise them with this Committee, in the desire that clarification and resolution may be achieved:

1. Clarification on the criteria used by the DJELR to determine the term 'very disadvantaged' in respect to funding.
2. The proposed timeline for issuing the next round of funding application forms? It is our experience that these applications take a minimum of four months to prepare and process, and with a 31st August deadline rapidly approaching, the window for groups to complete forms is becoming extremely tight.
3. Will all applications received be fully processed prior to end August 2005?
4. If this is not achieved, will there be a further rollover of funding?

CONCLUSION

There is inequality in the Childcare sector through the following:

- **Age:** The younger the child the fewer the choices.
- **Socio Economic Background:** Poorer families face cumulative difficulties and are more limited in service options.
- **Gender:** It is mainly women who work in the sector.
- **Affordability:** With limited state support, both at demand and supply side, there is considerable disparity in cost.
- **Location:** Paradoxically, the more Urban and more Rural, the greater the difference.
- **Provision:** Selection and quality of services differ, and there is little choice
- **Professional Supports:** Differential in the investment in training.

Income levels determine to a large extent whether parents can avail of services. In the absence of state supports for childcare, service providers rely almost exclusively on parents' fees to meet their running costs. The capacity of parents on a low income to pay for childcare is diminished, thus excluding and marginalising those most in need of services.

If the EOCP funding is reduced or withdrawn from community childcare services, parents who wish to take up training, education, and employment opportunities are prevented from doing so because they lack the financial capacity to pay the market rate for childcare.

PLANET believes that the continuation of funding to community childcare services will go a long way towards improving the quality of life for people in disadvantaged communities.

It is our view that childcare is fundamental to an integrated approach to tackling the causes of poverty and disadvantage. Please support our effort to ensure that funding is not cut or withdrawn from community childcare services, in fact it needs to be **INCREASED.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Immediate removal of current uncertainty over staffing grants.
2. Clarification of eligibility criteria for the term 'very disadvantaged' in the context of receiving funding.
3. Issuing of new funding application forms to community childcare services.
4. If there is to be further rollover of staff contracts post 31st August, to ensure that allocations allow for statutory wage increases.
5. Removal of cap on staffing grants, and replacement with a scale directly related to the number of childcare places. Taking into consideration the other subsidies that groups may be receiving i.e. Community Employment or Health Service Executive investment.
6. Recognition of the reality that community childcare is also dependent on the goodwill of voluntary management committees. Administration costs and technical assistance, as well as ongoing training and development supports, must be built into childcare staffing grants.
7. Acknowledgement of the importance of childcare provision in the community, and the reality that community childcare will never be sustainable without Government investment.
8. The establishment of a Government Department / Agency responsible for childcare. We would recommend the Family Support Agency.
9. The establishment, implementation, and funding of a ten-year plan for Childcare.

As already illustrated, these concerns are being experienced throughout the country. As a representative organisation, we have received a number of examples from Cork, Waterford, Dublin and the Border Counties, who also asked that we highlight these issues.

Appendix A

IMPACT – Funding cuts would have on Community Childcare Services

The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme has been hugely successful in creating additional childcare places and in assisting with raising the standards of childcare and educational services in Ireland. Cut backs will result in a giant leap back four years. Expectations and opportunities that have been created will no longer be available. In fact childcare will be more unstable than it was four years ago. Constant worry, time and effort are expended on contingencies and 'what if' in the childcare sector. No other sector would accept or put up with this. We feel that cutbacks in funding will have the following impact on community not-for-profit childcare services

IMPACT FOR CHILDREN

- Lose the right to affordable, accessible, quality childcare places.
- Upheaval for children
- Loss of childcare places
- If service is reduced quality will be diminished.
- Children entering school at a disadvantage – cycle will never be broken –

CREATING FURTHER DISADVANTAGE

- Back to reliance on Community Employment Schemes. This will mean reliance on untrained workers, constant turnover of staff. No consistency for the children.
- Back to relying on the availability of parents to help on a rota system. Again this will result in inconsistency of provision.
- The lack of new initiatives or developments in this period of uncertainty will also impact on children.
- Non adherence to pre-school regulations– adult/child ratios.
- Safety issues.
- Will make planning difficult, this in turn will affect the delivery of service to children.
- Lowering standards of employment of childcare workers will have a knock on effect on the quality of childcare provision.
- The most vulnerable children will be affected.
- **Children being denied rights to access to play/educational development.**

Are we not supposed to cherish all children of the land equally?

In 1979 the United Nations produced the 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child.' Ireland signed up to these rights. In this important document Principle 7 states:

'The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.'

Article 29 of the same document states

‘Education should be directed at developing the child’s personality and talents, preparing the child for active life as an adult, fostering respect for basic human rights; developing respect for the child’s own cultural and national values and those of others; and developing respect for the natural environment.’

This development takes place in all quality childcare services. The pre-school years are the formative years. ‘The most rigorous studies have shown that high-quality early education *leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children, which persist through adolescence and adulthood*’ (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993; Woodhead, 1996, Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997).

Are we now going to deny the right of some of our children to the opportunity of quality early development and education?

IMPACT FOR PARENTS

- Reduced number of childcare places
- Sessional services are more threatened therefore parents needs/rights not been taken into account. Their choice is being taken away.
- Higher childcare costs.
- As a lot of services could face closure, accessibility would create a problem. Parents may have to travel for childcare places. This in turn would create transport problems.
- Impact on number of families accessing services.
- Impact on parents accessing training, education and employment
- Tiered fee structures – may have a stigma attached.
- **High costs for Early Education – Full funding for primary and secondary education as well as Third Level Fees – There is an imbalance here.**

IMPACT FOR CHILDCARE SERVICES

- Reduction in childcare places
- Reduction in staff
- Increased costs
- Staff will leave for jobs in other sectors
- Bad business planning (investment), particularly when so much has been invested in the last four years.
- Dependency on Community Employment Schemes again.
- Increased waiting lists
- No new initiatives or developments in this period of uncertainty.
- Unable to forward plan beyond August 2005. Dept. JELR claims that childcare services are bad at financial planning. How can we plan in such a climate of uncertainty? The goalposts have moved several times since this funding became available in 2001.
- Escalating running costs.

- The requirement of 46 weeks of operation is not viable for all groups.

IMPACT FOR CHILDCARE WORKERS

- Constant rollover of funding is demoralising for staff.
- No wage increases resulting in low morale
- Temporary/no contracts.
- Makes nonsense of the amount of money being spent on childcare training.
- Devaluing the childcare worker.
- Denying employee rights.
- Increased economic inequalities.
- Increased workload and responsibility for qualified staff.
- Increased stress levels for workers.
- Lowering conditions of employment of childcare workers. This will have a knock-on effect on childcare.
- Staff will leave for other jobs.
- Quality of Staff decreased.
- Difficulty in recruitment of staff.
- Reversing progress made in childcare as a profession.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

- Childcare still remains the main barrier to people participating in their community, in accessing education, employment and training
- Whole community affected – Impact on people’s retirement – they will have to mind their grandchildren.
- Stigmatising and labelling ‘disadvantaged’ areas, reinforcing divisions.
- Community status will lose out. We will have to charge as much as the private sector. This will result in the closure of community childcare services. The most vulnerable in our communities will once again be affected.
- Who decides the level of disadvantage?

IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

- Women will be unable to take up employment, education or training due to lack of childcare.
- Students (mainly women) will be unable to continue with their courses or take up courses due to lack of affordable childcare provision.
- A leakage of highly trained personnel from the workforce.
- A leakage of highly quality childcare workers from the childcare sector.

Is it now time that the Government put a proper Childcare Plan in place, at least for the next 10 years. Support the not-for-profit sector with subsidies. Give some support to parents with childcare costs. Remove the uncertainty that has been created in childcare. Seriously look at having one Government department/agency with responsibility for the sector.