



PRESS RELEASE

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CHILDCARE FACILITIES FACE CLOSURE UNLESS SUBVENTION SCHEME IS CHANGED

Childcare centres throughout the country will be forced to close unless the Government makes immediate changes to its proposed Community Childcare Subvention Scheme. That's according to the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN) – a nationwide umbrella organisation, committed to ensuring increased Government investment in children's care and education.

The ICPN – which represents the majority of community childcare providers in Ireland – outlined its concerns about the proposed subvention scheme at a media briefing this morning (12.12.07). ICPN representatives spoke of the fear amongst community childcare providers that their facilities would be forced to close down or cut back on staff if the Government's proposed scheme went ahead unchanged.

Denise McCormilla, Spokesperson for the ICPN, said: "Our members throughout the country have deep concerns that this new scheme will drive them out of business. Rather than childcare providers receiving staffing grants – as happens under the current system – the new scheme would give subventions to providers so they could charge reduced fees to children who fall under the scheme's definition of 'disadvantaged'.

"However, the scheme is based on a definition of 'disadvantaged' limited to parents' income levels and welfare entitlements. There is no provision for low-income earners who fall outside the eligibility criteria, or for other disadvantaged groups such as Travellers, ethnic minority children or children with special educational needs. Furthermore, rural deprivation cannot be adequately measured by eligibility for welfare payments.

"Basing the scheme on a very narrow and targeted definition of 'disadvantaged' will lead to the segregation of children from different backgrounds. This flies in the face of international best practice which shows that the integration of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds is the most effective approach to childcare."

According to the ICPN, the proposed scheme would have negative consequences not only for children and childcare providers, but also for parents throughout the country.

"Under the proposed scheme, many community childcare services will receive less funding from the Government than they currently receive," explained Denise McCormilla. "The reduced funding will lead to fee increases, which in turn will force parents to either opt to leave their employment or to seek less expensive and perhaps unregulated forms of childcare. Reduced funding will compromise quality which will, in turn, have a negative impact on the benefits of the service to children.

“Many of the parents who will be affected by this scheme are currently involved in adult education, training programmes or back-to-work schemes, or they have returned to work because they have been able to avail of community childcare facilities. If the proposed scheme is introduced, many of them will be forced to withdraw their children from childcare, as they will no longer be able to afford it, and will therefore have to leave their education programmes or even their jobs.”

At today’s event, the ICPN made a number of recommendations to Government on how the scheme should be amended to avoid negative consequences, including job losses, in communities throughout Ireland. The ICPN’s recommendations include:

1. Deferring the introduction of the scheme until the end of 2008 to allow for a comprehensive consultation process with all stakeholders.
2. Changing the definition of ‘disadvantaged’ and the eligibility criteria for the scheme to take into account low-income families, where the parents are not in receipt of unemployment assistance, training assistance or Family Income Support. A means test, linked to a sliding scale of fee subsidy – such as the system used by the HSE to determine eligibility for a medical card – should replace the eligibility criteria currently set out.
3. Changing the application system proposed for the scheme so that it is housed in the Department of Social and Family Affairs. (Under the scheme proposed at present, childcare staff or committee members would have to seek personal information on income levels from parents hoping to qualify for a subvention. This would place an administrative burden on voluntary management committees and raise issues about confidentiality in local communities.)
4. Establishing nationally agreed salary scales for staff at all levels within the childcare sector.

“Unless our recommendations are taken on board, childcare providers will suffer and communities will suffer but, more importantly, families and children themselves will lose out,” said Denise McCormilla. “The people hardest hit will be the working poor – the very people the Government are urging to upskill themselves and re-enter the workforce. Unless this scheme is changed, people on low incomes will no longer be able to afford community childcare, so they will be left with little option but to leave their jobs or training programmes in order to mind their children at home.

“We recognise that the proposed scheme is an attempt by Government to target the most disadvantaged families in society, but we feel that this could be done in a more effective and equitable way. We hope the Government will take our views on board, and we look forward to working with them over the coming months to ensure the subvention scheme is as effective, fair and well-received as possible.”

ENDS

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Notes:

Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN)

The ICPN is comprised of a broad range of stakeholders committed to ensuring increased Government investment in children’s care and education. The membership of the ICPN includes: Ballymun Partnership; Barnardos; the Border Counties’ Childcare Network; the Childcare Bureau; Childminding Ireland; the Children’s Rights Alliance; City and County Childcare Committees; Family Resource Centres National Forum; Forbairt Naíonraí Teo; Geraldine French (Early Years Consultant); Grovelands Crèche; Dr. Noírin Hayes; Home-Start; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Rural Link; the Katharine Howard Foundation; Lifestart; National Children’s Nurseries Association; National Women’s Council of Ireland; OPEN – One Parent Exchange Network; PLANET – the Partnerships’ Network; St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.