

# **SIPTU Submission on the Consultation Document on Developing the Workforce in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector**

## **Changing Practice Environments**

Agree with OMC statement

### Additional Comments

The delivery of quality childcare is dependent upon a highly skilled childcare workforce that is retained within the sector. This is particularly pertinent with the welcome introduction of the AISTEAR and SÍOLTA standards.

It is SIPTU's position that the facilitation of training and education will be a core element of developing the workforce. We are equally of the view that the development of a sustainable highly qualified workforce will not occur in the absence of appropriate pay, working conditions and career progression for childcare workers.

Quality, affordable, accessible childcare with quality jobs is SIPTU's fundamental demand in respect of the early childhood education and care sector.

A clear vision for the early years sector needs to be developed that takes into account the needs of children, parents, workers and providers. This can only be achieved with the involvement of the State as funder of quality childcare and as legislator, setting basic legal requirements / qualifications.

The current situation of multiple streams of funding with varying criteria attaching to each does not lend itself to a coherent early years strategy. Indeed, it may be seen as an obstacle to equality of access to childcare places. The CCSS, for instance, has forced many community childcare settings to focus almost exclusively on "Band A" parents (in receipt of social welfare) at the expense of a social mix of children.

## **The Demand for Education & Training**

Agree with OMC statement

### Additional Comments

Qualification and training of childcare workers is a corner stone of a quality early years sector. Furthermore, minimum education / qualification standards need to be introduced to ensure a basic level of competency in the sector.

The areas that need to be addressed to facilitate these aims are listed. However, SIPTU proposes in addition an apprenticeship system for the sector that would combine on-the-job training with class room based learning. It is our view that the State should play a primary role

in providing funding for effective delivery and access to quality training.

#### *Flexible Work Arrangements*

Access to class room based training is a major issue for the training / up-skilling of early years workers. As the majority of workers in the sector are women with family commitments, it is SIPTU's position that provision will have to be made for training during working hours with paid release.

To maximize uptake for training, workers should have the option to access training on a modular basis.

#### *Cost of Training*

Another major factor in determining uptake is cost. As childcare is currently a low pay sector, the high cost of participation in structured training can be prohibitive for many workers.

Currently, the childcare workforce is low paid with many workers earning just over the statutory minimum wage. SIPTU believes that it simply is unfair that workers would be placed in a position where the financial burden of fees for upskilling is placed solely on them. SIPTU does not want to see a situation where low paid workers are forced into debt to meet the cost of training fees. Indeed childcare workers may be forced to leave the sector to take up alternative employment in other sectors if this issue is not adequately addressed.

#### *Recognition of Prior Learning*

SIPTU very much welcomes the proposal that a system of Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) be agreed and introduced. Any RPL system needs to give due regard and recognition to the expertise gained through service in the industry. In other sectors the Social Partners have developed fair, transparent and worker-friendly systems.

For an RPL system to be effective, workers need to be confident that their expertise and experience within the sector will be fairly assessed. Furthermore, standards achieved through an RPL system need to be recognised not just in name, but also in pay and conditions.

Workers need assurance also that any grievance or dispute arising out of the RPL process will be dealt with fairly and in adherence to the principles of natural justice.

SIPTU represents a large number of workers who have attained their qualifications in other countries. A system needs to be developed that benchmarks their qualifications within the Irish context. The Social Partners have developed workable models for this in other sectors.

#### *Apprenticeship Model for Childcare*

Along with the proposals above, an apprenticeship structure should be developed both for those entering into and those already employed in the childcare sector.

This system would integrate class room based learning with on-the-job training and development.

This proposal would benefit the sector and workers for the following reasons:

- It could address any current difficulties in relation to training costs from the employer's perspective and from the worker's perspective
- It would underpin the concept of professional standards
- Professionalism through an apprentice system could lead to a better perception of what we would argue is undervalued work
- It would be consistent with sectors where it is accepted that in order to address standards and training needs that the apprenticeship process is the most suitable.

## **Sectoral Standards**

Agree with OMC statement

### Additional Comments

SIPTU believes that there should be a monitoring body responsible for the oversight of sectoral standards. As the largest trade union representing childcare workers, we would argue that SIPTU has a key representative role to play on such a body.

## **Supply of Education and Training Places**

Agree with OMC statement

### Additional Comments

The Department's current approach in relation to education and training appears inconsistent.

The current situation whereby the Childcare Regulations (2006) refer to "a competent adult" to operate a childcare facility is in contrast to the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme's requirement for a minimum FETAC Level 7 (for top-up payment). The CCSS, on the other hand, appears to say nothing on the qualification of childcare workers and thereby does nothing to address the issue of quality.

We would call on the OMC to take a standard approach to qualifications within the sector in order to ensure a consistent level of quality and expertise regardless of funding stream or setting (public, private or community).

### *Supply Quality*

Our childcare members advise us that the standard of training courses and the length of time it takes to achieve a qualification varies from one training provider to another. Workers need to be assured that there is standardisation of quality and consistency in the delivery of early childhood education and care courses.

## Retention of Qualified Staff

Agree with OMC statement

### Additional Comments

SIPTU believes that the fundamental issues of pay, conditions and worker rights are critical to the retention of staff.

There is a large literature which indicates a direct correlation between pay and working conditions and staff retention. Linkages such as these have been made in respect of the childcare workforce in Ireland by Duignan & Walsh (2004) and indeed by the National Economic and Social Forum (2005) in their call for the introduction of a minimum standard of training and national pay scales.

The OMCYA, County Childcare Committees, providers, worker representatives and other stakeholders all acknowledge the need to retain qualified and experienced workers in the sector.

It is SIPTU's position that in the absence of pay and conditions that give due regard to qualifications, relevant experience, levels of responsibility and so forth that the sector will continue to experience difficulty in retaining qualified experienced staff.

Unfortunately, there are employers in the childcare industry who believe that it is acceptable to pay staff rates that are barely at the legal minimum wage and to make no provision in respect of pension, sick pay, maternity pay, additional leave or other benefits. Some childcare providers take a hire and fire stance in relation to workers who seek an improvement in their working conditions. Furthermore, these workers are regularly denied the fundamental human right to representation or collective bargaining.

It is important to state that there are also very good employers in this sector who offer quality employment, with good pay and conditions who respect the rights of their staff. It is essential that these employers are not placed at a competitive disadvantage for maintaining decent standards. The only means of addressing this issue is by ensuring a threshold of decency with respect to pay and conditions for childcare workers.

In other related sectors the issue of professionalisation and appropriate remuneration and conditions have been successfully addressed by adopting a partnership approach involving key stakeholders. SIPTU believes that childcare workers are entitled to no less favourable treatment than their comparators in the approach adopted in their sector.

Our members are frustrated that SIPTU's attempts to date to engage with the OMCYA on childcare workers' issues have fallen on deaf ears.

**SIPTU is calling for a meaningful engagement between the relevant stakeholders in the childcare sector. The objective of such an engagement would be to arrive at an agreement which would allow for the development of the workforce and the introduction of appropriate pay and working conditions for the childcare workforce commensurate with those of comparable sectors.**

30 September, 2009