

Postponing the commencement of minimum qualification requirement for pre-schools

Prior to the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in 2010, there was no minimum qualification for staff working in the pre-school sector. Under the ECCE programme, all pre-school leaders were required to hold a Level 5 qualification. In addition, pre-school services could qualify for a higher capitation rate where all the pre-school leaders, in the ECCE room, held a Level 7 qualification, and all the pre-school assistants held a Level 5. This represented a major step forward in improving the quality of early years services.

When the Early Years Quality Agenda was introduced in 2013, in order to improve quality in pre-school services, one of the items to be progressed was the introduction of a requirement that all staff working with children in pre-school services should hold a qualification in early childhood care and education at a minimum of Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework or equivalent and that Pre-school leaders in ECCE services would be required to hold a minimum Level 6 qualification, or equivalent. These requirements were to be introduced with effect from September 2015 following the publication of new Childcare Regulations.

In order to support existing childcare staff to achieve the minimum qualifications, the Government introduced the Learner Fund. €3m was provided under this Fund and more than 2,500 staff have completed or are currently completing training to allow them to meet the minimum requirements.

Despite this investment, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has received feedback that the commencement of the qualification requirement in September 2015 would pose a number of challenges, for the childcare sector.

- Some staff who availed of the Learner Fund will not have completed their training by September 2015 and would not, therefore, meet the qualification requirement. (It is acknowledged that the completion of the eight components required to achieve a major award, at the same time as working in a fulltime job in childcare, is not easy. It is also acknowledged that many people found it difficult to access the necessary training in their local areas.)
- The Department has been alerted to the fact that a number of staff did not avail of the Learner Fund because they assumed – or were incorrectly advised – that they already met the qualification requirement.
- More established professions have regulators who hold lists of approved qualifications. The absence of an official list of approved qualifications for Early Years means that staff – and their employers – cannot easily obtain assurance that the qualifications that they hold will meet the minimum requirements.
- The absence of this list would also create difficulties for the Early Years Inspectorate who will be charged with inspection of services under the new Childcare Regulations, including staff qualifications.

- Some community-based services rely on Community Employment workers as core staff within the service staff : child ratios, and these services would face issues of sustainability if these workers were to become supernumerary and they needed to employ more qualified staff.

As the proposed September deadline approaches, the Minister and the Department has taken note of the concerns expressed surrounding the imposition of the minimum qualification requirement from September 2015, particularly the fact that meeting this deadline has proved difficult for many learners and training providers. It is therefore proposed to postpone the commencement of this requirement for a period of 12 months, that is, until September 2016.

The Minister is aware that the introduction of minimum qualification requirements for childcare staff was welcomed by people working in the sector, as well as by parents, as an indication of the Government's commitment to improving quality in pre-school services, and that any postponement in commencing the minimum qualification requirements will create disappointment. However, the Minister would point to major progress that has been made in improving qualifications in the sector and he remains committed to further improving quality, and to ensuring that everyone working with pre-school children holds a minimum qualification. The Quality Agenda continues to be progressed. However, it is important to make absolutely certain that all childcare staff are given the opportunity to assess their qualification levels and, if necessary to seek the appropriate training in order to up-skill.

The Department has commenced discussions with the Department of Education and Skills and with Pobal regarding the development of a database of recognised qualifications, for use by the sector and by the Inspectorate. The Department aims for this to be in place by the end of the year and it will represent a major resource for potential students, employers and the Tusla Inspectorate. The Department will also work closely with the Department of Social Protection and community providers to agree a way forward for the Community Employment workers in the sector.

The new Childcare Regulations which are being prepared will include the minimum qualification requirements as mandatory for all new services seeking to register with the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) following the commencement of the Regulations, but will provide for a 12 month postponement of the requirements for existing services.

Similarly, the ECCE contract for any new services applying to participate in programme for the first time from September 2015 will stipulate that all childcare staff must meet the minimum qualification requirements, and all pre-school leaders must hold a Level 6 qualification. Existing services participating in the ECCE Programme prior to 2015 will be provided a 12 month postponement for this requirement, although we will require evidence that

- the pre-school leader is enrolled and engaged in training to meet the Level 6 qualification.
- the pre-school assistants are enrolled and engaged in training to meet the Level 5 qualification or hold a signed grandfathering declaration form.

It is acknowledged that the sector had been expecting the minimum qualification requirement to be in place by September 2015, and we apologise that the announcement of the postponement of this requirement is coming at this stage. However, we believe that this postponement is necessary to ensure that all the staff in the sector are clear on the requirements, and that they have the opportunity to achieve the necessary qualifications (if they have not already done so) in order to remain working in the sector. We believe that this would not be the case if we maintain the September 2015 deadline.

We would like to emphasise again the Minister's and the Department's commitment to progressing the Early Years Quality Agenda. We support the ongoing professionalism of the sector, and are anxious to include those people who have not yet completed their training. The decision to postpone the commencement of the qualifications requirement is practical in the context of developing a high quality and sustainable sector, which will be in the best interests of children in the long term.

In Summary:

- Qualification requirements under the new Childcare Regulations:

The new Childcare Regulations which are being prepared will include the minimum qualification requirements as mandatory for all new services seeking to register with the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) following the commencement of the Regulations, but will provide for a 12 month postponement of the requirements for existing services.

- Qualification requirements under the ECCE Programme

The ECCE contract for any new services applying to participate in programme for the first time from September 2015 will stipulate that all childcare staff must meet the minimum qualification requirements, and all pre-school leaders must hold a Level 6 qualification. Existing services participating in the ECCE Programme prior to 2015 will be provided a 12 month postponement for this requirement, although we will require evidence that:

- the pre-school leader is enrolled and engaged in training to meet the Level 6 qualification.
- the pre-school assistants are enrolled and engaged in training to meet the Level 5 qualification or hold a signed grandfathering declaration form.

Early Years Policies and Programmes
Department of Children and Youth Affairs
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