

Executive Summary

The preparation of this strategy has been carried out by the North Tipperary County Childcare Committee (NTCCC) with the facilitation and assistance of Tipperary Institute.

The Committee in preparing the Strategy took on board the recommendations of the National Childcare Strategy along with information from other relevant reports and publications.

Range and Scope of the Strategy

The Committee decided that the following principles would be adopted for the development of the strategy.

- *That the strategy should be wide-ranging in its focus*
- *That the needs of children up to the age of 18 should be addressed, with the strategy initially focusing on the 0 to 12 age group.*
- *That a wide range of stakeholders should be considered*
- *That the focus should be on childcare outside the home but that account should be taken of the needs of parents and children at home*

Process

At the beginning of the process, it was agreed that the committee was broad ranging in its composition and that it adequately represented the various providers, regulators and consumers of childcare in the county. As a result, it was considered appropriate that this group would be the participatory element of the creation of the strategy.

The process involved in the creation of the strategy was a series of workshops facilitated by Tipperary Institute (TI) at which the:

- *approach was agreed,*
- *issues for childcare in North Tipperary identified*
- *visions and objectives created*
- *actions developed*

The data available was then reviewed in order to test the range and scale of the objectives in the strategy. Finally, a monitoring and implementation programme was developed and an action programme for the first year of the strategy was set in place.

Within the time frame available, this process was considered to offer a reasonable balance between participation and consultation while giving an opportunity to a range of stakeholders to have an input to the process. It was also acknowledged that the participatory process is one that will need to continue over the period of the implementation of the strategy. While a strategy has been developed this has been based on the information available at the time of development. As more up to date and

accurate information becomes available through the process, amendments will be made that will reflect a clearer view of the needs and capacities of a wider range of stakeholders.

Issues

At its early meetings Committee considered the range of issues that faced Childcare in North Tipperary. These issues were to form the basis of the visions, objectives and actions of the strategy.

The following issues were identified –

- *Service Availability*
- *Staff recruitment and training*
- *Access*
- *Cost and Ability to Pay*
- *Information*
- *Registration*
- *Social inclusion and support*
- *Networking*
- *Promotion*

Purpose of strategy

The committee considered the purpose of the strategy. The agreement on this purpose was ultimately reflected in the visions and objectives adopted by the committee.

- *Facilitate people to participate in the workforce*
- *Give parents freedom to make a range life choices*
- *Help to ensure that children are cared for in a manner that meets their specific needs, having regard to variations in ethnicity, culture, language, age and minority group needs*
- *Help to ensure that the development needs of children are included as part of the care provided*
- *Help to ensure that a range of high quality childcare opportunities are available in the community*
- *Encourage the formalisation of the childcare sector in order to raise standards*
- *Help to ensure that childcare providers are fairly rewarded*
- *Help to ensure that childcare providers are properly trained and monitored*

- *Help to ensure equity of treatment in the availability of childcare having regard to the specific needs imposed by area of residence, class, family status etc*

Role of NTCCC and its Strategy

It was in the context of the issues and purposes outlined above that the strategy was developed. It was noted that many of the issues could not be addressed directly by the committee itself in its strategy since, as noted above, they essentially lay within the remit of Central Government. This particularly applied to the issues of capital funding and the provision of on-going financial support for service providers and for those availing of childcare services. In addition, the registration of childcare providers and the development of a national system of training lie within the remit of national government and agencies.

The role of the NTCCC and its strategy, therefore, was seen as being five-fold –

- *To create the environment in which maximum use can be made of any developments in childcare support at National level*
- *To promote the issue of childcare, its availability and its importance in North Tipperary*
- *To collate and provide the information on which decisions regarding childcare provision and management in North Tipperary can be based*
- *To support individuals and groups that wished to provide or improve the provision of childcare facilities in their area in accordance with an overall strategic approach*
- *To create a system of mutual support and learning amongst childcare providers, workers and users in North Tipperary.*

Current Situation in North Tipperary

The following were the principal findings of the background research regarding notified childcare in North Tipperary.

- Childcare participation rates are poor for the area overall with only 1 child in 10 attending childcare facilities in North Tipperary.
- Childcare provision is particularly poor for children under one year and for children in the after-school age groups.
- There are very few full-day childcare services available in North Tipperary
- Most of the sessional facilities operate in the mornings only and therefore cannot facilitate care for children whose parents wish to work full-time or avail of education and training opportunities.

- There is a predominance of sessional and small-scale services and facilities spread unevenly across the county.
- Childcare facilities are particularly poor in the Borrisokane Electoral Area. As this is largely a rural area, special provision will need to be made to meet the needs of rural dwellers in relation to childcare.
- In many cases parents and children are travelling long distances to access childcare. This has implications both for childcare provision within reasonably accessible distances to children's homes and for transport provision, particularly in rural areas.
- It is estimated that there will be 1,414 more children aged 0-6 years living in North Tipperary due to normal population increases alone in 2016 than in 1996. This will have significant implications for childcare provision.
- Increased female participation rates in the workforce indicate that the demand for labour-force generated childcare could be as high as 5,000 places in 2016.
- The projected population figures indicate that over 15,200 children aged 0-14 will be in the childcare age range in 2016
- The recent increased migration to urban centres in North Tipperary was a feature of the last inter-censal period and this trend is expected to continue thus creating a potential further demand for childcare places.

Themes and Recommendations

The recommendations that are contained in the childcare strategy relate to a number of themes that emerged during the course of the review of the context of childcare in North Tipperary having regard to the visions and objectives identified by the committee.

Themes

1. ***Meeting the demand for childcare places in the various areas of North Tipperary:*** *This strategy recommends that appropriate childcare would be available within an accessible distance of home, workplace, educational and recreational facility to everyone in the County.*
2. ***Making childcare affordable:*** *For families on low or moderate incomes, especially lone-parent families dependant on one income often via a social welfare payment, the cost of childcare can be so high that they cannot afford to work. Others have to use a substantial proportion of their disposable family income on childcare.*
3. ***Supporting childcare for people in the workforce:*** *Despite the growing numbers in the workforce and the increasing numbers of parents particularly women in the workforce, planned provision of childcare to support this trend is practically non-existent. There appears to be little workplace childcare available.*
4. ***Supporting childcare to meet education, training and recreational needs:*** *The main education and training providers have highlighted the need for suitable, affordable and accessible quality childcare throughout North Tipperary*

5. ***Providing information on childcare availability:*** *It is extremely difficult to ascertain the exact picture relating to childcare provision in North Tipperary. The main body of work completed on the area was the 1999 county childcare census of all group based childcare providers who cater for children aged 0-12 in the area.*
6. ***Supporting childcare for social inclusion:*** *In a childcare context all children should have equal opportunities for learning and enjoyment. The principle of inclusion involves access to childcare services in addition to respect and support for all children and their families, including those from marginalised groups.*
7. ***Ensuring quality in childcare:*** *The main issues relating to provision of quality childcare are training of childcare personnel, payment of staff, the registration and formalisation of informal carers, the availability of suitable premises are key issues in ensuring quality in childcare*
8. ***Childminders initiatives:*** *Childminding by childminders and relatives plays a significant part in the care of children in North Tipperary. Nationally the childcare strategy report states that childminding in the minder's home is the most commonly used childcare arrangement for mothers in paid employment.*

Recommendations

The following are the principal recommendations that emerged from consideration of the issues under those themes. These recommendations are as follows and are reflected in the first annual action plan

- In terms of meeting the demand for childcare places then one possible strategy is to divide North Tipperary into a series of childcare service areas. These areas are generally proposed to be based around population settlements of 200 or more people. This strategy recommends that appropriate childcare would be available within an accessible distance of home, workplace, educational and recreational facility to everyone in the County. This has a number of implications:
 - That pre-school, sessional, full day care and after-school care is available in all service area nodes as defined above.
 - That a phased programme of provision to address the shortfall in formal provision is put in place
 - That resources are allocated for more childcare facilities in the urban centres of North Tipperary
 - That transport availability is addressed as a key issue.
- The strategy recommends that childcare would be available at a range of prices that would reflect the range of abilities to pay to ensure that low income is not a barrier to accessing childcare. This would involve the state subsidisation of places through supporting childcare through the taxation and social welfare system.
- The strategy recommends that all employers of an appropriate size would provide childcare facilities within the workplace or provide subsidies for childcare. It is also important that employee-friendly practices that encourage good childcare practice exist in the workplace.

- The strategy recommends that no person in North Tipperary would be prevented from engaging in training and education, from participating in social and recreational activities or from attending to their occasional personal needs solely by being obliged to care for one or more children.
- The strategy recommends that no person would be discouraged or prevented from placing their child in any assisted childcare facility due to cost, class, ethnic background or any other reason.
- It also recommends that provision for children with special needs be made within all mainstream childcare facilities.
- The strategy includes actions to address the needs of travellers and other ethnic minorities
- This strategy makes a number of recommendations regarding quality in childcare. It recommends that all non-family childcare providers be included in the formal childcare structures to ensure quality control. It also recommends that all those working in or managing childcare facilities be suitably qualified.
- The strategy recommends that a national pay scale should be established to reflect the social and economic value of the work undertaken by childcare workers.
- The strategy recommends that all notified and non notified childminders be given the opportunity to participate in training, to develop support networks and to be assisted and facilitated in becoming notified services where appropriate.

Implementation and Monitoring

Financial Resources

The proposals have been costed in outline. The principal costs that will be involved in the implementation of the strategy will be personnel and ancillary costs as well as the costs of advertising and communication work. While there are no specific financial commitments by other agencies outlined in the template for the implementation of the strategy, the committee is confident that other organisations will be in a position to invest in its delivery through the involvement of personnel and resources.

Personnel Resources

The personnel resources that will be required to implement year one of the strategy are three-fold. On the one hand there is a requirement for a co-ordinator who will help to establish networks and inter-agency programmes, will liaise with government and voluntary organisations and will help the NTCCC to input to national policy development as well as supervising the design and implementation of research and project development. In addition to this requirement there will be a requirement for a researcher in year one. This resource may be provided by the NTCCC member organisations, by the appointment of consultants or by the appointment of a

research/development worker. Given the on-going nature of the research required it may be that the latter approach is most suitable with the addition of some external guidance.

The committee also intends to employ a worker with the specific brief to work with childminders and who will take responsibility for the childminder actions in the strategy. This work will initially concentrate on strategies to identify and develop supports for non-notified and notified childminders in co-operation with the pre- school services section of the Mid Western Health Board.

Formal and Informal Authority

The formal authority for some of the work of the NTCCC may be already vested in the Health, Social Welfare and Education and Training Institutes. However, a substantial amount of the work of the committee will not require any specific formal authority beyond that vested in the committee itself.

Inter-organisational management

The implementation of the strategy will require the establishment of mechanisms for ensuring co-operation between organisations that have a responsibility in this area. It will be an element of the implementation that a sub-committee of the NTCCC be established to ensure co-operation between the various relevant organisations.

Intra-organisational management

The management of the activities of the organisation must also be addressed, While it is suggested above that a number of personnel appointments be made, it is also important that the management of the organisation is appropriate to its functions. In order to address these matters it is suggested that a number of sub-committees be established to oversee the specific activities of the NTCCC. The following are suggested –

- A training and education sub-committee
- A registration and standards sub-committee
- An information and dissemination sub-committee
- A social inclusion sub-committee
- A facilities sub-committee
- A Childminders Initiative sub-committee
- An evaluation sub-committee

This structure would allow for the inclusion of partners in the process other than those currently included on the North Tipperary County Childcare Committee.