



## INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

### EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: IRELAND

#### 1. Abstract

##### ***Introduction***

The establishment of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education Project by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education coincides with a very dynamic period of development in Early Years policy, provision and practice in Ireland. As this is likely to impact on the proposed case studies, a brief overview of the key national policies follows.

Since 2010, the Irish Government has funded a universal free pre-school year in an early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme, which provides every child aged between 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months the opportunity to avail of one year of pre-school education in the year before they commence primary school. Under the ECCE programme, the State pays a capitation fee to participating services. Almost every pre-school service (more than 4,300) in the State is participating, with up to 68,000 children, or 95% of the eligible age cohort, expected to avail of the programme in 2015. The normal pattern of free provision for services is three hours a day, five days a week, over 38 weeks. The high take-up level of the ECCE programme has effectively included children with a wide range of additional needs arising from a range of factors including, for example, disability, socio-economic disadvantage or ethnicity (home language different from that of the language of instruction in the early education setting). However, until recently there was no nationally co-ordinated approach to supporting early years services with the challenges of inclusive early education practice. This was recently addressed by a high level inter-departmental working group which has resulted in the development of a strategic proposal for supports to commence in 2016. While details of the programme have yet to be published, it has taken account of research evidence which recommends a multi-level and multi-layered response in support of the following objectives:

##### ***Level 1: An Inclusive Culture***

This level is the critical foundation for the model. This sets out that a strong culture of inclusion must be fostered and embedded to support all children's maximum participation in ECCE.

##### ***Level 2: Information for Parents and Providers***



This level recognises the requirement of parents and pre-school providers to have access to clear, consistent and up-to-date information regarding ECCE services and supports.

*Level 3: A Qualified and Confident Workforce*

This level recognises the requirement to continue to develop a qualified workforce that can confidently meet the needs of all children wishing to participate in the ECCE programme.

*Level 4: Expert Educational Advice and Support*

This level addresses the needs of early years practitioners across the country to have timely access to advice and support from experts in early years education (and disability in particular) to assist them meet each child's needs.

*Level 5: Equipment, Appliances and Minor Alterations Capital Grant*

This level recognises that some children require specialised equipment, appliances, assistive technology and/or that some early years settings may require minor structural alterations to ensure children with a disability can participate in ECCE.

*Level 6: Therapeutic Intervention*

This level provides for access to therapeutic services where they are critical to enable the child be enrolled, and fully participate in ECCE.

*Level 7: Additional Assistance in the Pre-School Room*

This level recognises that a small number of children will require more support than is available through Levels 1–6.

The implementation of this new initiative will commence in 2016 and will be monitored and evaluated across the period to 2020. The advent of this major national intervention to support inclusive early childhood education practice offers a unique opportunity to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to examine change in practice at macro and micro levels.

***Proposed case studies***

Ireland is offering the opportunity to visit two unique early childhood settings as part of a single national case study. Each setting offers a distinct philosophy and practice insight for any visiting teams. The sites include the following:

*Togher Family Centre*

Togher Family Centre is a multi-service family centre in Cork City. The centre



provides a range of universal and targeted services, including early years care and education to 156 children between the ages of one and five years, of which 100 are between three years and primary school age. The Family Centre also provides Youth Services to 80 children per week, Family Support services to 10 families per week, Child Contact Services to 10 families per week, Adult Education Services to 50 adults per week and Parent and Toddler services to 12 families per week.

The centre continually widens its base of universal services to facilitate more families into the centre, as the more families who use the centre, the greater the number of vulnerable families that can be identified and supported through its targeted services.

Togher Family Centre has a high percentage of children with additional needs attending its early years provision. In 2013–2014, 45% of the children attending the centre had an additional need, including children with speech and language delay, children with a diagnosed developmental delay, children with a physical disability, children receiving or awaiting occupational therapy support and children identified as needing the support of an educational psychologist. Sixteen percent of children attending the early years provision in Togher Family Centre do not have English as their first language. Togher Family Centre is based in an area of social disadvantage and many of the families utilising the Early Years Service are lone parent families. In addition, the Togher Family Centre works closely with government agencies (Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and the Health Service Executive) through the social work departments, public health nurses, community mental health nurses and other health professionals to ensure that the most vulnerable families and children in the community can be supported and educated in an environment where their needs are fully understood.

The workforce is diverse, with a range of qualifications from basic entry level childcare qualifications (level 5 in the National Framework of Qualifications), to Master's degree level. The manager is currently undertaking doctoral studies. The centre actively supports staff to engage in training at all levels. The centre utilises the HighScope model of working with children, while also incorporating various aspects of other models of working with children and elevating the child's voice. The curriculum is closely aligned to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and aims to deliver high-quality experience in line with Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. There is a high staff–child ratio which facilitates children of all abilities and needs to fully engage in their learning.

### *Curious Minds*

Curious Minds Preschool is a privately owned and operated pre-school funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to deliver the free pre-school year in



the ECCE programme. Formerly a segregated Traveller pre-school, Curious Minds now provides a fully inclusive service to all children in the Castlebar area. Forty-six children aged between two years and ten months and five years are currently enrolled. Castlebar is located in the west of Ireland and has a total population of almost 13,000. It is a diverse community, with 17% of its population comprising non-Irish nationals (the national average is 12%, according to the 2011 census). Curious Minds Preschool reflects the diversity of children and families living in the Castlebar area. Its admissions policy outlines its commitment to a diverse service. The management considers all enrolments annually in order to achieve a service that reflects the makeup of the local community. Some of the issues that the management reflects on in relation to enrolments are:

- Achieving an appropriate mix of children that reflects the cultural and socio-economic status of families in the community
- Access for children with a physical and/or intellectual disability.

In Curious Minds Preschool, the foundations of its work are based on an anti-bias approach and the HighScope Curriculum Approach, which is also linked to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009). The holistic curriculum approach is the basis for building on the children's interests and planning learning experiences that promote all aspects of children's development. All the work is linked to Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and the national Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (2006) to critically reflect on practice. Curious Minds completed the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme in 2014 and was externally validated at the highest possible level of quality in practice.

### **Conclusion**

The early years settings presented in this proposal offer the opportunity for gaining in-depth insights into a broad range of challenges and successful interventions in practice in Ireland to address the issue of inclusion of children with additional needs in ECCE settings. Each chosen setting has already been involved in evaluation activity and would be able to provide a wealth of data and practical materials to support the objectives of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education project.

Each of the proposed settings will be participating in an Early Years Forum hosted by the Minister for Education and Skills on 15 December 2015. They will be participants in a showcase of practice which will be staged by 24 early years settings across a diverse range of provision. If the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education project team would like to attend this event to get some further insight on the proposed case study settings, this could be arranged.



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Should the Agency prefer, either of these proposed settings could be selected as a single site case study. Further details of both settings are included in the appendices.