# Report to Dept. of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the consultation with the Early Learning and Care Stakeholders Forum on EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WebEx - Tuesday June 29th – 11.15 to 12.45

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# Process

Participants had received documentation in advance of the meeting.

A presentation was made summarising:

* the background to the development of the ESD Strategy by the Dept. of Education
* the strategy and the Early Learning and Care / School Age Childcare

In two breakout groups, participants discussed the presentation and ESD in ELC/SAC settings, addressing questions set out in advance.

# Consultation Questions

1. In developing the ESD framework and three-year implementation plans for the Early Learning & Care/School Age Childcare sector, which of the UNESCO Priority areas\* should be prioritised? Should any be excluded?
2. What are the main challenges in integrating ESD in the activity and curriculum of the ELC/SAC sector?
3. In building on the ESD work already being done in the ELC/SAC Sector, what guidance or supports could be included in the next three-year plan?
4. In the education and professional development of ELC/SAC practitioners, how can we better support development of knowledge and competence?

**\*UNESCO Priority Areas**

1. Advancing Policy; 2. Transforming Learning Environments; 3. Building capacities of Educators; 4. Empowering and mobilising Youth; 5. Accelerating Local actions

# Report

This summary report reflects the group discussions and the additional points made in the plenary

sessions, and sets out the feedback in response to the four consultation questions.

# Q.1 The UNESCO Priority areas

All of the UNESCO Priorities are considered relevant with one group prioritising Transforming Learning Environments; Building capacities of Educators; and Accelerating local actions

# Q.2 Challenges in integrating ESD in the activity and curriculum of the ELC/SAC sector

An ESD strategy for ELC/SAC needs to recognise that Early Years is foundational for learning and development, and that all future development is built upon the outcomes achieved in Early Years. In this, consistency across Government, and Government agencies is crucial so that everyone operates from the same commitment, with the same purpose and develops their approach and systems accordingly.

An ‘ESD strategy’ could risk introducing new, ‘high-order’ language and terminology. To avoid creating a disconnect with the ELC/SAC sector**, inclusive and engaging language** is important, as is recognising that many practical actions related to sustainable development are already taking place.

Centres/services are at **different stages of development** in relation to ESD activity and a three-year plan should address this and encourage engagement as well as development.

In introducing a strategy/plan it is vital that there is a **commitment to continuity and consistency by Government and the agencies responsible**. It was noted that there has been work on ESD and related issues in the past, and sustainability emphasised in capital funding for example. However, there have also been changes to priorities, initiatives started and then dropped, with practitioners experiencing the rug being pulled from under them.

**ESD proofing** of all policy and strategy by Government is required to avoid contradictions in what one part of Government demands and another restricts. The example given was restrictions to services taking children out, when an ESD strategy requires engagement with the wider world.

# Sector capacity

A lot of work has already been done on ESD in the sector, and for positive engagement with any new initiative it is imperative that this work is acknowledged.

Concerns raised reflect those articulated by the Stakeholder Forum in relation to other developments in the sector. **Capacity to implement** is inhibited in the absence *from the start* of complete resourcing plans and budgets, together with adequate training, capacity building and supports being in place for any initiative*.* Without a comprehensive plan for ESD, it could be seen as yet ‘something else we have to do’ without adequate support, and a burden rather than an opportunity.

Since the ongoing **COVID-19** pandemic is a continuing systemic challenge for ELC/SAC, ESD might place further demands on the already stretched sector.

# Children

It is considered important to **make the ESD Strategy meaningful for children** and that their role as agents of change, influencing each other, their families and communities is embedded and included in a plan. In this the links between early years and school age services were viewed as also offering opportunities for children of different ages to learn from each other.

It was emphasised that to advance ESD children need to learn to love the outdoors before they can learn about climate change and sustainability, and to understand where food comes from to develop healthy relationships with food

A strategy must recognise that **play-based learning** in Early Years is an important model and that learning about the ESD issues, such as the environment, citizenship, and justice, can and must emerge from play.

# Cost of ‘being sustainable’

While many Centres and services were keen to integrate sustainable practice the cost of doing so was highlighted as a problem. It was pointed out that in everything from nappies to cars, Centres and services setting out to become more sustainable and reduce waste and pollution face significant costs, and that Government policy must address this if practice is to change.

# Q.3 Guidance or supports that could be included in the next three-year plan

As a precursor to a Plan, it was suggested that a **mapping of the work already underway** in the sector would be valuable, bringing together what is currently a fragmented set of activities on a wide variety of relevant issues such as intergenerational work, citizenship, the environment and so on.

It was pointed out that the **ESD is values driven** and time must be available to practitioners to understand the initiatives from a values perspective, so that they can integrate ESD into their practice and not experience it as more activity being imposed.

The development of an ESD plan for the sector was generally viewed positively and one that should be **integrated into the QQI** **system and Aistear and Siolta**, with those frameworks providing a good context for introducing developments. The review of Aistear was identified as an obvious place to introduce an ESD strategy, built into Aistear, and not just included as an add-on.

The Plan must be **relevant to providers** – they must ‘see themselves in it’ – and its timing must be considered so that it does not overwhelm already stretched providers by what is sought, either in activity or training demands.

The Plan must also consider where **responsibility for ESD** will fit in Centres/services which vary greatly in size – if implementation is required how does this work in small services, for example.

**ESD messages** across plans targeting different ages and stages should be consistently linked to maximise impact.

# Resource materials

It would be useful if material produced

* raised awareness – what ESD is and is about and how it fits with First 5
* provided practical guidance and examples, not just more documents
* makes introducing activity easy
* is in a range of formats to support ELC/SAC services, including written materials, videos, and interactive web-based resources
* is age and stage appropriate for maximum value
* offers guidance to help Centres/services evaluate where they are already within ESD goals
* offers guidance to Mentors who support ELC/SAC settings, to support implementation of ESD at local level

# Drawing on national and international experience

There is an opportunity to **use experience** to inform the strategy and a three-year plan, as well as making the experiences available to practitioners as a resource. Reference was made to organisations, such as Scouting Ireland, which have a well-developed curriculum on ESD, and to countries where the development of ESD strategies and activities in the Early Years and School Age settings is more advanced, with Australia and the UK mentioned.

# Q.4 Education and professional development of ELC/SAC practitioners

There was widespread support for the integration of ESD as a competence through all training and CPD, and this was viewed as essential in a successful roll out of ESD plans. A three-year plan must include a Training Plan and schedule; support for training providers support to develop effective approaches and modules; and support for practitioners to gain and maintain the necessary skills.

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Summary notes prepared by Caroline McCamley, &|Ampersand