



Parents of Children with Disabilities to be consulted on proposed changes to 'overage exemption' in free pre-school programme

Planned changes to exemption paused to allow for full consultation

Statement by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone

Wednesday 6th December 2017

Parents of children with disabilities are to be consulted on plans to change current rules of the free pre-school programme, according to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone.

Minister Zappone says while the proposals were intended to ensure optimal outcomes for children with a disability could be achieved, she has also been contacted by many parents concerned about the impact of the changes.

The Minister says these concerns deserve careful consideration – and while the consultation takes place the proposals for children with disabilities which were due to start in September 2018 will be paused.

Minister Zappone added:

“Everyone is entitled to be heard as we continue our path to truly accessible affordable quality childcare – that is the very core of my approach.

It is an approach which has delivered extra supports for 64,000 children, the establishment of the innovative Access and Inclusion Model for children with disabilities and the delivery of two full years of free pre-school education for all 3-year olds from next September.

Each of these steps have been welcomed. Our childcare policies are focussed on bringing best international practice to Ireland and that was the motivation behind planned changes to the free pre-school or ECCE programme.

The changes were based on expert advice from the disability, education and other sectors that the 'overage exemption' in the free pre-school programme was no longer needed – and did not serve the best interests of these children. They pointed to the fact that all children benefit from starting school with their peers, including those children with a disability, and progressing to secondary school with their peers. They reflected Ireland's law that all children should be in school by the age of six.

However I have become increasingly aware that parents, who must be central to decisions concerning their children, are concerned about the changes planned from September 2018.

In order to ensure those concerns are responded to, I am now pausing the changes and will shortly announce a consultation whereby all voices, including those of parents of children with disabilities, can be heard.

I do not want to predict the outcome of that consultation – but I will say that its results will be central to guiding our path forward.

Our other childcare changes continue to benefit more and more families and in the coming week I will take the next step by publishing a bill which will form the legislative backbone of our radical new approach to transform one of the world's most expensive childcare systems into the best.”

ENDS