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QDOSS continues to recognise the benefit to children of participating in an out of school service. Out-of-school services refer to a range of structured programmes, clubs and activities for school-age children and young people which take place within supervised environments. These services are very diverse spanning sports, dance, art, homework clubs, afterschool clubs etc taking place in a range of settings. Many out of school services are proven to enhance children's social and emotional development, educational attainment, prevent early school leaving and help children cope with significant transitions in their lives.

QDOSS is aware that many services within the sector have evolved in an ad hoc fashion and issues of sustainability, quality of service, professional development and regulation remain constant concerns. Since its inception in 2006, QDOSS has been calling for the development of a national strategy to provide guidance and leadership in this sector. While some progress has been made developing and improving the early years services and youth services, there has been little advancement for those providing out of school services particularly for the 6-12 age group. The issue of progressing out of school services is notably absent from the Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, national policy framework for children and young people launched in April 2014.

Following regional consultations with out of schools service providers and a national conference in April 2013, QDOSS is now calling for the following recommendations to be adopted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to progress improvements across the sector. In the interests of immediacy the recommendations must first apply to those services in receipt of statutory funding.

- 1) Development of a national strategy should initially apply to those services in receipt of State funding. This would include breakfast clubs and afterschool initiatives run in schools or crèches and other state funded afterschool programmes run in libraries, community centres etc. Establish an expert advisory group to compile this strategy.
- 2) Expedite the development of a regulatory framework and registration and inspection regime to enhance quality of service delivery. This is long awaited and much needed. Devising, improving and attaining quality standards is the shared ambition for all services and should be a condition for receipt of public funding. Work has begun on this within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and QDOSS is happy to contribute towards its development.
- 3) Enhance professional development of staff. The sector is characterised by staff being insufficiently valued and being offered low pay. Many have an early years qualification but not an afterschool care qualification. Similar to early years services, support all staff to have an appropriate Level 5 or 6 qualification (or its equivalent), specifically covering the afterschool and childcare module. Allocate a similar Learner Fund model to aid the upskilling of staff and staff leaders in this sector.
- 4) In recognition that out of schools services plays a key role in the social inclusion of children and families experiencing educational and social inequality, develop and expand appropriate integrated models of support for families. For example the OSCAILT* network of 21 DEIS primary and post primary schools established to support the roll out of a Dormant Accounts Scheme which provided funding for Limerick City DEIS schools to maximise use of premises and facilities.
- 5) Ringfence funding towards investment in services to move towards a multi-annual funding model to enhance sustainability of service providers.

QDOSS believes leadership in this sector is long overdue. Without leadership the sector continues to be underfunded and varying in quality in the services being delivered. These initial steps would have a positive impact for both staff and the children who avail of these services.

*The OSCAILT network is a partnership between the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project, Mary Immaculate College, the Department of Education and Skills and the primary and post-primary schools involved.