



BETTER FOR YOUNG FAMILIES | ÉIRE NÍOS FEARR  
— ALTERNATIVE BUDGET 2017 —

## BETTER QUALITY AND AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

The childcare crisis remains a critical issue for families across the State. Affordable and accessible high-quality childcare remains precarious for many parents and children. Childcare providers are finding it increasingly difficult to keep their doors open due to high costs in running their services. Childcare workers are finding it impossible to make ends meet on minimum wage salaries while extending themselves to burnout point. It is not sustainable. Sinn Féin is introducing a series of measures in our Budget 2017 proposals to alleviate the urgent childcare crisis for all those involved.

While addressing the urgent need for high quality universal childcare for families, we also fully support a parent's choice to remain at home with her or his child during the first year of the child's life and thereafter.

There is a long way to go in achieving an early-years model we can be proud of - one that is child- focused and which is part of a wider Early Years Strategy. In the absence of an Early Years Strategy, changes to the sector will continue to be ad hoc. We believe that the measures in our Budget 2017 proposals will make significant steps towards both improving the quality of childcare and providing financial relief for young families. Ultimately, we want to create a system that is universal and equal in its treatment of all children and parents, while supporting providers and educators in their provision of best possible care.

### Increase Maternity Benefit by €40 and Extend by 2 Weeks - Cost €65 million

Studies show that the presence of parents in the first year of children's lives is vital to their development. Maternity supports have been eroded significantly in recent years through a combination of cuts and taxation, with the result that many mothers have no option but to return to work early. Ireland ranks poorly on maternity pay, 32nd out of 34 OECD States.

### Subsidise Childcare for Children Aged 6 Months to 3 Years - Cost €111 million

Children between the age of 6 months and 3 years do not benefit from ECCE. We propose to provide a fund of €111 million in order to assist parents with the cost of this childcare. Parental fees would be reduced by €4,994 per child per year on average, or approximately €96 per week, if current participation rates are maintained. The subsidy would be higher where childcare is more expensive, and lower where less expensive. The scheme would be administered by Pobal's Programme Implementation Platform and it would be open to anybody in employment, education or training, regardless of means, with pro rata part-time provision.

Childcare facilities would have to sign up to certain criteria to avail of this payment, which would include the regulation of fees. Participation will likely increase, with a consequent reduction in the value of the average subsidy. However, for 2017 the pace of any participation increase will be limited by employment growth and the capacity of the childcare system. Future Budgets must continue to expand investment in universal childcare provision.

### Extend Learner Fund to Support Progression to Level 7 and 8 Qualifications - Cost €1.5 million

To enhance the quality of early education and care, those already working in childcare should be encouraged and supported to further their studies. This investment would be a large step towards the further professionalisation of the childcare sector, which would in turn provide workers and employers with further protections.

### Extend the ECCE Scheme to 43 Weeks - Cost €44 million

The current free pre-school year or ECCE contract is not fit for purpose as it does not allow sufficient margin for additional bills or costs. Many service providers operate at a loss, with many owner-managers taking no salary and staff signing on the dole during the summer months. Extending the programme by five weeks will, as an initial measure, contribute towards childcare costs for parents during the summer period for that age group and contribute to easing financial hardship for employees in the sector, who tend to avail of State benefits in summer months due to the precarious nature of 38-week contracts.

### Roll out of Síolta and Aistear - Cost €500,000

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education curriculum should be immediately rolled out through the County Childcare Committees (CCCs). This would ensure swift national coverage with minimum cost, since the CCCs have access to all childcare providers nationally, are linked to local training agencies and are supporting the administration of the Learner Fund. A directive should be issued to all relevant departments to this effect to ensure that all education and training boards and private training companies fully engage.

### **Increase the Higher (€9) and Lower (€6) Capitation Grants for ECCE Scheme - Cost €30.25 million**

Capitation rates are paid by the State to crèches and pre-schools for each child participating in the ECCE programme. A higher capitation grant is paid where the education and care is led by a level 7 graduate, a reflection of the quality provided in the crèche. However, the rates are inadequate and providers have begun to request 'voluntary' contributions from parents to make up the deficit. Sinn Féin proposes to increase capitation grants for the Free Pre-School Year by €6 per week, from €64.50 to €70.50, and by €9 for the higher capitation rate, from €75 to €84.

## **REDUCING THE COST OF EDUCATION FOR YOUNG FAMILIES**

### **Tackle Back to School Expenses - Cost €35.6 million**

The costs of sending children back to school have become a huge financial burden on low and middle income families. Research by Barnardos shows that the average cost of sending a child into first year of secondary school is €775. Sinn Féin has proposed a number of measures that would help ease this burden:

- » *Increase funding for School Books Grant by 30% - €4.8 million*
- » *Increase funding to the School Meals Programme by 40% - €16.8 million*
- » *Increase the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance by €50 - €14 million*

### **Increase Funding to the School Transport Scheme by €7 million**

Between 2008 and 2014 there has been a €14 million reduction in funding for school transport and new rules make it harder for children to access this service. Sinn Féin is providing an initial funding increase of €7 million in order to provide for a more accessible, flexible school transport system.

## **PUTTING A BRAKE ON RUNAWAY RENTS**

### **Introduce rent certainty measures linking rent increases and decreases with the consumer price index**

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are directly responsible for out of control rents. Latest Residential Tenancies Board rent figures (September 2016) show rents rising again by 10% with Dublin rents now 3.9% higher than at the peak of the boom in 2007. Last June Sinn Féin tabled our rent certainty bill. If passed this would have put a break on spiralling private sector rents. It would have saved working families up to €2000 per year.

## **GREATER SUPPORTS FOR LOW INCOME WORKING FAMILIES**

### **Increase Family Income Supplement Payments by 10% - Cost €41 million**

This payment supplements the incomes of parents in low paid employment. This measure will further support people on low income and in turn help to support their family.

### **Raise the Cut-Off Age of the One Parent Family Payment to 12 Years and Increase the Earnings Disregard to €120 - Cost €28.4 million**

This measure will go some way towards helping to support lone parents in the workforce. The current cut-off age is 7 years old which ignores the barriers faced by lone parents trying to access work.

### **Restore Farm Assist - Cost €6.6 million**

This measure reduces the assessment of means from self-employment, including farming, to 85%, and reinstates the deductions from income in respect of children that were discontinued in 2013.

## TAX RELIEF FOR FAMILIES

### **Abolition of Property Tax - Costs €440 million**

Many families are under severe financial pressure. The mortgage interest rates and motor insurance rip offs continue. Abolition of the family home tax will provide much needed relief to these families. It will save 1.8 million home owners on average €244 per annum. This saving will only increase in the years to come as the prices of houses increase and the temporary freeze on valuations ends.

### **Abolish Water Charges - Cost €58 million**

Domestic water charges have been the straw that broke the camel's back for a large majority of the Irish public. Double taxation for water is unacceptable and Sinn Féin will ensure its abolition.

The complete abolition of water charges alongside cessation of the water conservation grant would require €58 million of additional revenue.