

Cúram Leanaí Inacmhainne a Sholáthar

Fís le haghaidh Oideachais sna Luathbhlianta



DELIVERING AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

A VISION FOR
EARLY YEARS EDUCATION



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*Sinn Féin’s vision for
Early Years Education
and Childcare*
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haghaidh Oideachais
sna Luathbhlianta*
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Glossary of Terms

ACP	Association of Childhood Practitioners
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CCSP	Community Childcare Subvention Programme
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education (Ireland)
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ELC	Early Learning and Care
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EWSS	Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme
First 5	First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
JLC	Joint Labour Committee
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
NDP	National Development Plan
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAC	School-Age Childcare
TEC	Training and Employment Childcare Programme
TWSCS	Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child



1 Executive Summary

Parents need access to affordable, high quality childcare. As the cost-of-living crisis continues, the fact that parents are paying some of the highest childcare costs in Europe is putting families under huge pressure. It is pushing parents of young children out of the workplace and this is particularly impacting women.

Delivering affordable childcare needs to be an urgent priority. This is one area where government can take immediate action to ease the burden on hard pressed workers and families. Here, Sinn Féin sets out what can and should be done.

Through targeted policies and advocacy, Sinn Féin have significantly altered the national conversation to one that recognises Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a key pillar within Ireland's wider education system.

We know that a well-funded quality, reliable and affordable early years education and care sector has many benefits.



► **FOR THE CHILD**, it's fun and engaging; builds friendships, encourages trust, independence, self-reliance; develops language skills and is a positive space for them to be themselves.

► **FOR THE FAMILY**, it ensures that young children develop to the best of their abilities, socially, academically, and creatively in a safe and nurturing environment.

► **FOR THE WORKFORCE**, it ensures a viable career path that is valued, rewarding and recognises the professional qualifications of those working in the sector.

► **FOR PROVIDERS**, it enables predominately smaller, female owned and operated services to remain open and viable.

► **AND FOR WIDER SOCIETY AND THE ECONOMY**, it allows parents, particularly women, to return to the workforce leading to a greater and more diversified workforce contributing to the overall national economic output.

As the Covid-19 pandemic engulfed Ireland in March 2020, prolonged underinvestment in ECEC by successive Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and Green Governments was brought into sharp focus.

The public health emergency highlighted the legacy of prolonged privatisation of essential services, which inevitably led Ireland to sleepwalk into a privately-run system that cripples ordinary working families.

Both the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in their most recent sector quality review reports noted that Ireland continues to struggle to implement key measures around addressing the high cost of childcare.¹

¹ Submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the List of Issues Prior to Reporting for the fourth periodic examination of Ireland, IHREC, July 2020/ Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland Review on Sector Quality, OECD 2021

The Government's First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (First 5); Introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has signalled a shift in State engagement with the sector.

However, despite this, families continue to face eye watering costs. Coupled with a shortage of spaces in formal childcare settings, extremely poor wages and working conditions for staff; and a very challenging operating environment for providers have combined to create a perfect storm in childcare.

There has been sporadic and piecemeal investment in childcare over the past few decades, but public spending still stubbornly lags behind other OECD countries. Successive governments have only made fragmented efforts to tackle astronomical childcare costs, pay and conditions and support for providers.

Budget 2022 saw the Government pressured into addressing some key concerns Sinn Féin and others in the sector have outlined over many years – but yet again Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens missed an opportunity to adequately address the impending crisis facing this sector.

As we emerge from the public health emergency, it is clear that families and workers are facing serious challenges with the rising cost of living. From soaring energy prices to eye watering rents and escalating childcare costs, many households are struggling to make ends meet.

In this document, we outline the measures we believe are required to begin addressing the childcare crisis in a more holistic way. This policy is just one aspect of our wider agenda to facilitate quality early years education and childcare for children; create a robust sector that delivers rewarding careers and viable operating conditions for providers. It cannot be read in isolation; but considered in tandem with our proposals around improving the wider education sector, access to housing, eradicating child poverty and tackling the cost of living.

Sinn Féin wants to incrementally transform early years education and childcare into a fully-fledged public service that is affordable, accessible, quality assured and provides a rewarding and fulfilling career. We want to end high childcare costs and cut fees to ensure that they are affordable for families.

KEY COMMITMENTS:

- ✔ Over two budgets increase annual investment in early years education and childcare by €270 million;
- ✔ Reducing parents' fees over two years by two-thirds;
- ✔ Provide for the introduction of decent pay scales for staff in the sector (e.g., Mercer payscales).

► Benefits of Early Childhood Education for Children

From the moment a baby is born their education begins, they are ready to learn. Scientists know that around 90% of brain development occurs in the first five years of life, making early years education so important.²

Research from here and abroad shows the benefits of early years education and quality childcare, is well recognised within wider society. Children who avail of an early year's education gain substantial cognitive, behavioural, health and schooling benefits from access to an early years education. It is well recognised that these benefits are sustained well into adulthood.

We know policies that focus on the dual purpose of child development and increased economic activity, benefit a children's overall learning and development; whilst tackling disadvantage for parents and the family unit as a whole. It aids in reducing child and family poverty, improving gender equality in addition to promoting female employment and enhancing economic growth.

Covid-19 and public health measures introduced to combat it have had an unparalleled impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and particularly those who are experiencing domestic violence within the home.

Domestic violence is prevalent in Ireland, and children are often the invisible victims. The safe environment a creche or play school provides is a vital lifeline for many children, and it is often in these settings; that children can disclose distressing situations in the home.

► Equal Access to Early Years Education and Childcare

Unfortunately, the benefits for children and their families in accessing early years education and care are not universally distributed in Ireland. Most strikingly, not every working family has access to affordable childcare.

In the crucial year before school, too many vulnerable or disadvantaged children are missing out on sufficient hours of early education and childcare. This is particularly evident for Traveller and migrant children, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and children with additional special education needs.

Covid-19 was particularly devastating for children with special education needs who had their services substantially withdrawn. There appeared, at the time of the first and subsequent lockdowns to be no capacity within the system to maintain services nor the urgency or will required to reinstate services and devise specific responses for vulnerable children. It became clear very quickly that the Government did not have the will to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on our most vulnerable children.

Equal access to early years education and childcare is vital in combating child poverty; despite repeated interventions by Government to address child poverty levels in Ireland over the last decade, child poverty rates have



remained unacceptably high. Social Justice Ireland confirmed in their most recent poverty focus report, that 26.1% of all children are still living in poverty.³

Since its introduction in 2016, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has been very successful in ensuring that children with additional needs, with or without a diagnosis can meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme. Sinn Féin strongly supports inclusion and would continue to promote this scheme and develop into the future.

Unfortunately, the supports necessary to meet these significant unmet needs, as reflected in Pobal's most recent annual report, showed that only 21 services were operating by very or extremely disadvantaged areas. This is despite 2.9% of the population residing in these locations; clearly demonstrating that the services are just not there.⁴ We are failing the most vulnerable children by not providing the environment for community providers to either open facilities or operate by these communities.

► Putting Families First

Sinn Féin's proposals will put families first.

We know families and communities' benefit from young children's access to early years education and care. For many families, it is an essential means to enable parents, particularly women to participate in the workforce.

However, we know the cost of childcare remains a major barrier for some families, thus blocking access to this vital service or limiting families to fewer hours than other children. Accessible and affordable childcare is vital in supporting families experiencing challenges.

Lone-parent families are particularly vulnerable, recent CSO figures show lone-parent employment rates at 47.8%, compared to 70% for two-parent families.⁵ These

3 Regan, Mark & Maître Bertrand, ERSI, Child Poverty in Ireland and the Pandemic Recession, July 2020

4 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021, pg. 40

5 www.cso.ie Census of Population 2016 - Profile 4 Households and Families



same statistics confirm a 13% unemployment rate within this cohort, underlining the importance of specific intervention programmes. Clearly showing that lone-parent families are at greater risk of poverty and inclusive access to early years education and care is vital.⁶

For many families, childcare amounts to the same costs as an extra mortgage each and every month. When parents are asked to share their experiences of childcare; they are clear in what they would like to see change. Overwhelmingly the most common issue is affordability, followed closely by availability, and the mental impact and financial strain this places on the family.

Childcare fees in the region of €1,000 per child per month are completely unsustainable for any family. In 2020 Sinn Féin launched the 'My Childcare Story' campaign which aimed to give voice to the experiences of parents. Over 300 people took part and hundreds left comments detailing their own experiences.

The results were stark and shocking. Almost 80% said childcare fees are too high; 73% had issues securing a space for their child and almost 90% of women said they felt childcare costs have been a barrier to them returning to the workforce.⁷

6 Income, Poverty and Deprivation among Children – a Statistical Baseline Analysis, DCEDIY, 2020

7 Sinn Féin My Childcare Story, Nov 2020

► Early Years Educators

Early years educators are highly skilled professionals, and they play a vital role in Ireland's wider education sector.

Securing better pay and conditions is without doubt the greatest challenge facing the sector. Many early years educators are trapped in precarious contracts, working part-time on low pay and in insecure situations.

Unfortunately for staff, low pay and precariousness are the defining features of Ireland's early childhood education and care sector.

Throughout the pandemic, early years educators really stepped up to the unprecedented challenges posed by Covid-19; they reopened their classrooms for essential workers and vulnerable children when their colleagues in education continued to teach remotely.

Their role was pivotal in alleviating the stress and anxiety many parents felt during the pandemic, their skill, their professionalism and their continual contribution to the education of young children in this country has been without precedence.

Budget 2022 saw the first substantial shift of direction in government policy for many years with the announcement of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) to examine pay and conditions and a new core funding model. This shift was preceded by years of unwavering advocacy and lobbying by Sinn Féin and others to address the anomaly that sees highly qualified and skilled professionals paid little more than minimum wage.

► Service Providers

Ireland's early years education and childcare sector is a mix of private and community crèche's, play groups, Montessori, playschools, naionraí and childminders. The majority of these services (74%) operate as private businesses.⁸

This State's over-reliance on privately for profit owned and operated services has led Ireland to sleepwalk into a private market-driven model that leaves both providers and parents struggling to keep the sector viable. What we are anecdotally witnessing, post pandemic, is the proliferation of larger, corporate run childcare providers devouring smaller independent childcare operators.

Tusla recently confirmed that 799 early years education and childcare services have closed in the last five years, with ten closures in the first three months of 2022.⁹ A survey conducted by Big Start in late 2021 showed that concern for the future of services amongst Managers was directly related to the retention and recruitment of qualified staff. Of those who responded, more than 70% found it 'extremely difficult' to recruit staff in the past 12 months.¹⁰

These findings show the sector did not enter Covid-19 in a robust position and predictably existing pressures intensified, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) have highlighted that providers are facing into an unprecedented staffing crisis. The ECI are also concerned with recruitment and retention of staff, this fear was borne out in

8 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2020/2021, pg. 39

9 PQ14556/22, PQ23184/22

10 SIPTU Big Start Early Years Staffing Survey Report, New Deal for Early Years coalition, 2021

the startlingly statistic that 69% were unable to fill positions and just under half said it was difficult to retain staff.¹¹

These concerning developments illustrate there are considerable doubts over the medium-term viability of childcare services in Ireland.

The pressures on predominantly female led providers are without precedence in the Irish economy. They are regulated, overseen, and inspected by up to six state bodies.¹² The bureaucracy and resulting paperwork in some services warrants a full-time staff member which many services can ill afford. The reality is overwhelmingly, the majority of providers are operating in very difficult and stressful circumstances.

► Economy

The benefits to children notwithstanding, the economic benefit from an affordable and accessible early years education and childcare sector provides one of the most effective forms of fiscal stimulus. It also has the capacity to boost long-term labour participation rates of women.

Anecdotally we know that many women are locked out of the workplace because fees are too high. As mentioned previously, our online survey 'My Childcare Story' suggested the number of women locked out of work is a significant issue. Countless respondents highlighted, they couldn't afford childcare; that it wasn't worth their while; and that the system seemed geared against supporting or enabling their return to work.

As referenced above, 89% of those that answered our survey said they felt high childcare fees had been a barrier to them returning to the workforce.¹³

It is clear that early years investment has an integral role to play in laying the foundations for long-term economic growth and social progress. Paradoxically, Covid-19 focussed political minds on this vital dual-purpose role of a functioning early years education and childcare sector to the wider economy.

For a brief moment, the sector was valued and appreciated, and supports followed. Sinn Féin strongly maintains that the foundations have been laid by necessity, for a properly funded public early years education and childcare system. Our vision is to create an environment that enables parents to enter employment and/or remain in work, education, or training; and create employment through well paid, sustainable and rewarding careers in early years education and childcare as a priority.

11 Early Childhood Ireland, Early Years Sector Staffing Survey, May 2021

12 Tusla, DoE Early Years Education Inspectors (EYEI), EHO, Pobal, HSA and WRC

13 Sinn Féin My Childcare Story, 2020

2 Introduction

Sinn Féin wants to transform early years education and childcare into a properly funded public service. One that ensures children can develop to the best of their abilities – socially, academically, and creatively; provides families with affordable, accessible, and reliable early years education and childcare and, properly paid careers for early years professionals.

The following policy document is structured around three key areas; children and families, early years professionals and service providers.

A guiding principle throughout this innovative policy was to shift the national conversation to one that recognised early years education and childcare as vital within the wider economy and education system and to start the groundwork to transition to a properly funded public service model.

Over several sections we have set out what differentiates Sinn Féin's early years education and childcare policy from what Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Greens and Labour are offering.

Affordability is one of the key issues facing Ireland, UNICEF recently stated that 'a couple with an average income would need to spend between a third and a half of one salary to pay for two children in childcare.'¹⁴

This is unsustainable.

VISION STATEMENT:

To develop a public-funded affordable, quality, accessible and inclusive childcare model that focusses on the early mental and physical development of the child and contributes to a vibrant, healthier society and wider economy.

2 An réamhrá

Tá Sinn Féin ag iarraidh oideachas luathbhlianta agus cúram leanaí a athrú go seirbhís phoiblí atá maoinithe i gceart. Ceann a chinntíonn gur féidir le leanaí forbairt chomh maith agus is féidir leo – ar bhonn sóisialta, ar bhonn hacadúil agus go cruthaitheach agus a thugann oideachas luathbhlianta agus cúram leanaí inacmhainne, inrochtana agus iontaofa do theaghlaigh chomh maith le gairmeacha le tuarastal cuí do ghairmithe luathbhlianta.

Tá an doiciméad polasaí seo a leanas bunaithe ar thrí phríomhréimse; leanaí agus teaghlaigh, gairmithe luathbhlianta agus soláthróirí seirbhíse. Ba phrionsabal treorach sa pholasaí nuálaíoch seo an comhrá náisiúnta a aistriú go ceann inar aithníodh oideachas luathbhlianta agus cúram leanaí mar chuid ríthábhachtach den gheilleagar níos leithne agus den chóras oideachais agus chun tús a chur leis an mbunobair chun bogadh go múnla seirbhíse poiblí atá maoinithe go cuí. Tá sé leagtha amach againn i rannóga áirithe an t-idirdhealú idir polasaí oideachais luathbhlianta agus cúram leanaí Shinn Féin agus a bhfuil á thairiscint ag Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, na Glasaigh agus an Lucht Oibre. Tá inacmhainneacht ar cheann de na príomhcheisteanna atá roimh mhuintir na hÉireann,

dúirt UNICEF le déanaí ‘go mbeadh ar lánúin a bhfuil meánioncam acu idir trian go leith de thuarastal amháin a chaitheamh chun íoc as beirt leanaí i gcúram leanaí.’

Ní féidir dul ar aghaidh leis seo.

RÁITEAS FÍSE:

Múnla cúram leanaí inacmhainne, ardchaighdeán, inrochtana agus cuimsitheach a fhorbairt a dhíríonn ar luathfhorbairt intinne agus fhisiciúil an linbh agus a chuireann le sochaí bheoga, níos sláintiúla agus le geilleagar níos leithne.

3 Making Childcare Affordable

Childcare costs are putting parents of young children under huge pressure particularly at a time when we are experiencing an unprecedented costs of living crisis. Parents need access to affordable high-quality childcare. This is the norm in other European states, and we should expect no less here. Government failure to prioritise the delivery of affordable childcare is creating real hardship for families.

The OECD continues to challenge Ireland on its delivery of public investment for early years education and childcare, recently asserting that the State ‘still relies on a model that creates challenges for access, affordability and quality’.¹⁵

The failure of Government to address affordability and introduce fee controls as part of the NCS was a fundamental policy flaw. Without fee controls there is no guarantee that increased public investment translates into fee reductions for parents. Increased subsidies can simply be swallowed up by providers and fees continue to climb.

Sinn Féin have been continually calling for a radical shift in early years education and care policy to address ever increasing childcare fees. The lack of fee controls or caps has resulted in parents facing out-of-control fees.

What Ireland has witnessed over the past decade is an explosion of fees, with some families paying in excess of €1,200 per child per month, these amounts are at the conservative end. Anecdotally we know that some families pay in excess of €20,000 per annum for their childcare.

The Association of Childhood Practitioners (ACP) in their 2020 contribution to the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Children, specifically called for Government to make all ‘services affordable and accessible for all parents/ guardians through a progressive fees model, incorporating substantial fee reductions for all parents and full cost subsidisation for low-income households.’¹⁶

ECI have also consistently and repeatedly ‘highlighted to policy makers that



15 OECD Country Report: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality, Dec 2021

16 ACP Opening Statement, Oireachtas Committee for Children, May 2020



affordability, quality and sustainability are interlinked, and each should be fully and equitably addressed.¹⁷

However, it was not until 2019 when the previous Children's Minister, Katherine Zappone finally established an Expert Group to examine a new funding model for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC). Frontier Economics was commissioned to undertake research to support their work. A key aspect of this research was to 'review existing evidence on the costs incurred by families and the parental fees charged by providers.'¹⁸

What is most striking for parents is the length of time it has taken successive Governments to grasp that the State has a vital part to play in providing the services to facilitate a child's early education and care and crucially to ensure it is affordable for families.

Fee caps or fee controls have been a common feature across Europe for some time now. Ireland is an outlier in respect to fee controls.

It is estimated by the Department that parents pay approximately €400 million towards childcare fees¹⁹. Sinn Féin would provide two-thirds (€270 million approx.) in additional public investment on condition providers reduce fees for parents by two-thirds over two years.

A recent European Commission report showed that childcare fees are either capped or regulated in the majority of countries surveyed. Regulation differs from country

17 Press Release ECI, <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/>

18 New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, DCDEIY, Nov 2021

19 PQ reference 3650/22

to country, for example in Denmark parents' fees must not make up more than 25% of a settings estimated gross operating expenditure. Hungary bases their model on a family's net income; whereas Finland follows a policy that bases fees on a family's size and income, and cap fees at €289 per month. Norway caps fees at not more than 6% of the household's income.²⁰

This data, compiled as part of an EU wide review from 2019 highlights Ireland in particular, by allowing a market driven model to prevail has resulted in average monthly fees remaining stubbornly high and completely unmanageable for families.

Sinn Féin would offer early years and childcare services the option of entering a scheme where the State provides additional investment to cover some of the costs currently covered by parents, such as wages and overheads. In return providers will reduce fees for parents. This would be guaranteed through legislation.

There are numerous ways this can be achieved. A Sinn Féin government would work with the Department and providers to agree the optimal delivery mechanism. The Department recently announced their plans for the new core funding stream, conditional on an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) coming out of the JLC talks. It involves a fee freeze. We will be offering further investment above that on condition of a fee reduction, not just freezing fees at already exorbitant levels.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ Sinn Féin will increase annual investment by €270 million over two Budgets, on condition of a fee reduction of two thirds;
- ✓ Introduce fee control mechanism to accompany this investment via legislation;
- ✓ Build in policy mechanism to annually review fee structure and potential impact of inflation;
- ✓ Publish fee information on Department's website, accompanied by a national information campaign.

PRÍOMH-MHOLTAÍ:

- ✓ Méadóidh Sinn Féin infheistíocht bhliantúil de €270 milliún thar dhá Bhuiséad, ar an gcoinníoll go laghdófar táillí de dhá thrian;
- ✓ Tabharfar isteach meicníocht rialaithe táillí trí reachtaíocht chun dul leis an infheistíocht seo;
- ✓ Meicníocht pholasaí a chur isteach chun athbhreithniú bliantúil a dhéanamh ar struchtúr táillí agus ar thionchar a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ann ó bhoilsciú;
- ✓ Faisnéis faoi tháillí a fhoilsiú ar shuíomh Gréasáin na Roinne, mar aon le feachtas faisnéise náisiúnta.



4 Early Years Professionals

The early years and childcare sector employs approximately 31,600 highly skilled, almost exclusively female (98%) educators.²¹ Significantly, of the 14,987 staff, working directly with children, wages have only risen 1%, to €12.60, when compared to 2019/2020. As was the case in 2019/2020 one in two continue to earn below the living wage (€12.90).²²

Whilst significant progress have been made to increase the professionalisation of the workforce, the pay is so poor, people just can't afford to do the job. Early Years Educators have made great strides in increasing their qualification levels after, but this is not being matched with higher wages.

Staff still have very little job security and poor terms and conditions. The practice of signing on during the summer months is still widespread, with many services simply unable to afford to support staff for anything over and above 'core' hours.

As explored in previous sections, in spite of the high cost of childcare for parents in Ireland, educators on whom the quality of care depends are under-valued and under-paid. A staggering 97% of staff working directly with children hold a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 5 or higher and over two thirds (70%) hold a NQF Level 6 or higher.²³

There are growing concerns that the sector will continue to lose highly qualified staff to better paid and more secure careers. The announcement in October 2021 of an additional 1,165 Special Needs Assistants (SNA) posts for primary and secondary schools has sent shock waves through the early years education sector. Many services foresee an exodus of poorly paid early years educators to better paid positions as SNAs.

21 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report, 2020/2021, pg.93 and pg.105

22 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report, 2020/2021, pg. 113

23 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report, 2020/2021, pg. 107

Budget 2022 saw the announcement of a JLC to examine the pay and conditions of staff working in the sector. Sinn Féin welcomed this intervention but hold serious reservations as to whether a satisfactory outcome will be reached by the Government's own deadline of September 2022. Linked to a positive outcome is a new funding model of approximately €207 million for a full year.

An initial minimum rate of €13 has been reached through JLC discussions. We welcome any measure that seeks to set a minimum pay scale for this workforce and continue to monitor the JLC process.

SIPTU's Big Start campaign recently published their most recent Early Years Professional Survey that shows a worrying trend within the sector. It found that staff turnover has reached 40%, stress and staff burnout were reoccurring issues throughout their research.²⁴

The OECD recently commented on Ireland's need to take a more 'comprehensive approach to support all staff in their development, and to better recognise the needs and experience of the current workforce.' Focussing on the need for continual career enhancement of qualified staff and a comprehensive programme of guidance and mentoring from more experienced colleagues for newer colleagues. They identified the need to develop a broader range of professional learning in different types of settings.²⁵

In order for a quality early years education and childcare system to work, we must address the poor pay and conditions of those working in the sector. Crucially, there is no reward for obtaining a higher degree in early childhood education and care, educators who have attained a NFQ Level 7 earn an average of €14.77 per hour, this actually decreases to €14.12 for NFQ Level 8 and only marginally increases to €15.72 per hour for NFQ level 9/10.²⁶

This clearly shows we do not value education attainment in our early years education and childcare sector.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ Introduce decent pay scales for all staff (e.g. Mercer);
- ✓ Develop and explore the longer-term option of moving to a fully-fledged public service model.

PRÍOMH-MHOLTAÍ:

- ✓ Scálaí réasúnta pá a thabhairt isteach don fhoireann ar fad (m.sh. Mercer);
- ✓ An rogha níos fadtéarmaí a fhorbairt agus a chioradh maidir le bogadh chuig samhail seirbhíse poiblí lán-chuimsitheach.

24 SIPTU Big Start Campaign Early Years Professionals Survey 2021/2022

25 Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland, Review on Sector Quality, © OECD 2021

26 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report, 2020/2021, pg. 117



5 Service Providers

There has been a marked improvement in the quality and regulation of early years education and childcare in Ireland over the past decade. Evidence of this can be found in the high level of education attainment within the workforce and the level of inspection bodies that now regulate the sector.

There are approximately 4,527 early years education and childcare services under contract to deliver one of four DCEDIY funding programmes and some 169,579 children in their care.²⁷

Whilst huge strides have been made by those working in the sector to improve quality of care and lift the sector to a level of standard that is on par with our primary and post-primary education system, this has not been met with financial supports from Government.

Laying aside the once-off supports and reopening grants available during Covid-19, whilst welcome, were however preceded with years of inaction and an historic lack of investment.

Sinn Féin are cognisant that issues facing the sector as a whole are three-fold. We maintain that fees, pay and sustainability must be addressed in a holistic way and not in isolation. Our last two budgets have fully costed an approach that address high fees, focusses on wages and factors in supports for providers.

The pressures facing operators are significant; staff retention and recruitment, rising

operational costs and increasing paperwork are creating severe pressure points for many providers. Anecdotally we know that many owners/ managers opting to reduce their own salaries to supplement operational costs in their businesses.

During the pandemic providers demonstrated their commitment to young children and their families when they reopened their services to facilitate front line workers.

Approximately 3,900 services signed up to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) and subsequent Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) at the beginning of the public health emergency, demonstrating a clear commitment to their staff that they wanted to retain their highly qualified workforce.²⁸

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ Introduce an attractive opt-in scheme whereby service providers will be able to avail of additional funding (€270 million over two budgets) with public investment covering the majority of their costs.

PRÍOMH-MHOLTAÍ:

- ✓ Scéim tharraingteach rogha a thabhairt isteach ina mbeidh soláthróirí seirbhíse in ann leas a bhaint as maoiniú breise (€270 milliún thar dhá bhuiséad) le hinfheistíocht phoiblí a chlúdóidh formhór a gcostas.





6 UNCRC – Children’s Rights

Child rights are the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children everywhere are entitled to as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). These rights include the right to an education, to play, to access health care, to have a voice, to be protected from violence and abuse and to have an adequate standard of living.²⁹

Adopted in 1989, the UNCRC recognised that whilst children are entitled to the same human rights as adults, they also have very specific rights of their own.

It is 30 years since Ireland ratified the UNCRC. In this time Ireland has used the UNCRC as a framework to slowly change our laws, policies and services to ensure that all children can thrive in a nurturing environment.

Despite ratification in 1992, the UNCRC’s most recent report on Ireland’s progress (January 2016) found areas of serious concern. Many of these centred on access and inclusion.

For decades Irish social policy has been characterised as operating by way of a male breadwinner model, in that the provision of childcare services is relatively low, leaving households, particularly women, to provide these services themselves or to source them from the market if they can pay.³⁰

Consequently, quality and affordability have largely been left to the market. Although it may appear there are childcare options available to parents, these options are not adequately resourced, and crucially they lack cohesion and co-ordination.

It is clear Ireland has not enshrined the right to early years education for all children through public policy, but rather pursued a policy of labour activation, essentially meaning funding follows the market as opposed to adequately addressing a child’s needs.

29 Child Rights - UNICEF Ireland

30 ERSI/IHREC Research Series Report – Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland, 2019

7 Maternity, Parental and Paternal Leave

Evidence tells us children do better when they spend their first year of life with a parent. Maternity benefit is currently available for just 26 weeks and paternity benefit for two weeks.

Parent's leave entitles each parent to five weeks' leave during the first two years of a child's life. This will increase to seven weeks from July 2022. In the case of adoption, the leave is available within two years of the placement of the child with the family.

Where a person has enough PRSI contributions they may also be entitled to take parent's benefit for the duration of the leave, which is paid at the same rate as maternity and paternity benefit.

Sinn Féin have called for extensions to parental leave within our alternative budgets, as part of moves towards securing extended statutory leave and benefit entitlements so that children can be with a parent for the first year of their life.³¹



31 https://mcusercontent.com/ffc5ff2fa2294c89d2ff7598e/files/ab7decf5-d917-066d-2248-27d273afdcce/_Building_Better_Social_Protection_For_All_Sinn_F%C3%A9in_Alternative_Budget_2022_1_.pdf

8 Childminding

Childminders are an integral part of the wider childcare sector.

Several surveys and research, as well as anecdotal evidence show that many parents and children prefer childminding as opposed to centre based care.³²

At present only 77 childminders are registered with Tusla nationally.³³ Childminding Ireland has approximately 700 members who are fully Garda vetted; and an additional 1,300 childminders who are not members but regularly engage with their service. A further 750 childminders are currently engaging with their local County Childcare Committee (CCC) and are neither registered nor voluntarily notified.³⁴

Most sector stakeholders agree there are approximately 19,000 unregistered childminders working in the State. ECI estimates approximately 82,000 children per day are looked after by a childminder either in their own home or the child's home.³⁵

Childminders play an integral role in alleviating serious capacity issues in centre-based services and offer a unique service that suits many families.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ Invest €1 million in order to expand the Childminding Advisory Service with the appointment of an additional 15 Childminding Officers in County and City Childcare Committees.
- ✓ Recognise childminding in the home setting in the Child Care Act 1991.

PRÍOMH-MHOLTAÍ:

- ✓ Infheistíocht de €1.7 milliún a dhéanamh chun an tSeirbhís Chomhairleach um Fheighlíocht Leanaí a chur ar bun in athuair lena n-áirítear Oifig Feighlíochta Leanaí a cheapadh i ngach Coiste Cúraim Leanaí Cathrach agus Contae agus an Deontas Forbartha Feighlíochta Leanaí a mhéadú 50% go €1,500.
- ✓ Feighlíocht leanaí sa suíomh baile a aithint san Acht um Chúram Leanaí 1991.

32 Dept. Children and Youth Affairs (2017) Action Plan on School Age Children, Government Publications, p.62; Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector (2018)

33 PQ38127/20

34 National Childminding Action Plan, Dept. Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2021-2028), pg. 28

35 Disclosed at the Children's Committee, 25.05.2021 by Teresa Heeney, CEO, Early Childhood Ireland

9 School-Age Children (SAC)

SAC refers to a range of organised age-appropriate structured education and recreational programmes, clubs and activities for school-age children and young people enrolled in primary or post primary education (4-15). They take place within supervised environments during the times that they are not in school.

SAC services occur in a variety of different ways:

- **Within childcare services crèche/ full day care/extension of playgroup/ sessional care either privately owned or community based;**
- **Relative or Childminder in their own home;**
- **Purpose built school age childcare services;**
- **School based after-school care, and**
- **Community based projects.**

SAC was streamlined in 2019 with the introduction of the NCS, and is now administered through that scheme, facilities are inspected by Tulsa.

Approximately 52,000 children are availing of an after-school programme and 14,469 availing of a breakfast club.³⁶ These figures are based on 2019 figures and accurately reflect the essential nature of quality, affordable and accessible SAC services.

Presently after school services are struggling to remain viable. After school services are also more often offered by community providers in urban areas, both in term and out of term, 'when compared to their private counterparts 38% and 29% respectively'.³⁷

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ Reduce fees for parents by two-thirds over two years;
- ✓ Conduct a mapping exercise of all after-school services run by the state, its agencies, and private/ community providers, identifying gaps in provision;
- ✓ Explore policy programme with Dept. of Education to use school premises to facilitate school-age provision in areas of greatest need.

PRÍOMH-MHOLTAÍ:

- ✓ Táillí do thuismitheoirí a laghdú dhá thrían thar dhá bhliain;
- ✓ Cleachtadh mapála a dhéanamh ar na seirbhísí iarscoile go léir atá á reáchtáil ag an stát, a ghníomhaireachtaí, agus soláthróirí príobháideacha/pobail, agus bearnaí sa soláthar a aithint;
- ✓ Clár polasaí a fhiosrú leis an Roinn Oideachais chun áitribh scoile a úsáid chun soláthar aois scoile a éascú sna ceantair is mó riachtanas.

36 PQ30713/21

37 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report, 2020/2021, pg. 44



10 Capacity in Early Years Education and Childcare

Sinn Féin recognised well before the pandemic that investment in early years education and childcare was vital for a functioning modern economy. A wealth of evidence suggests that increased access to high-quality and affordable childcare has significant long-term benefits for children, their families, communities, and wider society.

Up until very recently the care and education of 0-5 years olds was largely viewed by the State as the sole responsibility of parents. Thankfully this has changed.

Ireland's early years education and childcare sector is made up of a diverse mixture of voluntary, community, and private services that provide excellent child-centred education and care and are led by an extremely dedicated workforce of highly trained and skilled professionals. The vast majority cater for the 2-6-year age cohort; offer the ECCE programme and are predominately sessional services (term time, mornings). As noted in previous sections, Ireland has relied heavily on and facilitated a market driven model of provision. As a result, private services now make up the majority (74%) of services and are run as for-profit enterprises, with community services accounting for the remaining 26%.³⁸

A worrying trend noted by Pobal is the decline year on year of availability of places across all counties. From 12% nationally in 2015/2016 to 5% in 2017/2018.³⁹ The latest report (2020/2021) showed a vacancy rate nationally of 21%, this is an increase on 2018/2019 figures.

³⁸ Pobal's Annual Early Years Sector Survey, 2020/2021, pg. 39

³⁹ Pobal's Annual Early Years Sector Survey, 2017-2018, pg. 69-70

However, this most recent figure must be caveated with the gap of provision evident in some parts of the country and reduced numbers due to the pandemic. In Dublin, Dun Laoghaire- Rathdown, remained a pressure point for vacancy rates, and County Carlow also recorded the lowest number of vacancies. Waiting lists remain stubbornly high, with an estimated 38,987 children reported to be on wait lists.⁴⁰

Ireland, despite the government's assurances, is approaching capacity in some parts of the country and completely surpassed it in others. Capacity in childcare was earmarked in the NDP 'along with housing, schools and health facilities as an integral part of national infrastructure.'⁴¹ However the reality is that the NDP alone cannot address capacity. We welcome an upcoming increase in capital investment as it is badly needed.

Further compounding the pressures on capacity is the rate of childcare closures. In the last five years 799 services have ceased operating, on the flip side 447 services have opened. That equates to a net decrease of 352 in the total number of facilities in the last five years.⁴²

Availability of spaces for babies (0-1), remains an area for real concern, as vacancy rates continue to decline year on year and now hover around 1% nationally. Demand of baby places is the highest of all the age groups – for every two babies enrolled in services, approximately three are placed on a waiting list (154%).⁴³ Parents continue to face a battle in sourcing suitable, affordable, and available care for their babies.



40 Pobal's Annual Early Years Sector Survey, 2020/2021, pg. 68/69/74

41 NDP, 2021-2030, DPER 2021

42 PQ14556/22; PQ19149/22; PQ 23184/22

43 Pobal's Annual Early Years Sector Survey, 2020/2021, pg. 73



This unequal level of provision has developed over time and has been facilitated by inadequate government policy which was recently noted by the OECD. They found ‘current public funding through the ECCE programme has created an incentive for providers to focus on the age group served by this programme and has attracted the most qualified staff to the programme, leading to a fragmentation of provision at the detriment of ECEC for the youngest children.’⁴⁴

Sinn Féin’s proposals, as detailed in this policy document, will seek to address this capacity crisis with additional public investment which will reduce parents fees, address pay and conditions and attract those who have left the sector to reopen previously closed services, open new facilities, whilst simultaneously making it attractive for those already in the sector, to remain.

The commercial real estate market is already witnessing strong demand from creche operators looking to expand and purchase or rent properties, in Dublin and its surrounds in particular. Our childcare scheme will help sustain existing capacity and further encourage expansion of capacity. This coupled with our proposals to extend maternity/parental benefit so that more babies can spend the first year of their life with a parent will relieve pressures on capacity particularly when it comes to the availability of places for babies.

We are cognisant that the cost of our proposals will be impacted by changes to demand. There will be behavioural change resulting from a significant reduction in fees charged and a possible shift from the use of childminders and or informal care arrangements. Demographics will also inform demand. While 2021 saw

an unanticipated reversal of the trend of declining births, the CSO forecasts underpinning the work of the Department until now suggested a significant decline in the number of children between the ages of 0-12 years up to 2028.⁴⁵

We are also cognisant that with greater associated labour participation comes the potential for increased tax receipts arising from employment effects and related decreases to expenditure on social welfare payments. As Frontier Economics put it in their paper commissioned by the DCEDIY 'the net cost may be lower than the gross cost if rises in parental (particularly maternal) employment increase tax revenues and reduce transfer payments.'⁴⁶ The ERSI made the same point in their Working Paper on childcare usage⁴⁷.



45 DCEDIY, 'Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028', pg. 137

46 2020, Working Paper 4, pg. 42

47 ESRI (2021) 'Working Paper No. 708. Childcare in Ireland: usage, affordability and incentives to work', pg 23.






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**DELIVERING
AFFORDABLE
CHILDCARE**

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