

CHILDCARE POLICY

SUMMARY

**Childcare should be provided as a universal right. It should be funded through a universally applied progressive taxation system.*

** In the immediate term, parents should receive a state subsidy for childcare so they only pay a fraction of the cost and fees. As in Denmark parents should pay at most 30% of running costs but services should be free to many low-income families.*

**Expand the learner Fund to provide support to allow childcare workers to professionalize to progress to FETAC levels 7 and 8. And increase pay levels for these workers.*

**There needs to be an increase in the regulation of all child-minders and after school services*

** Paid leave which includes maternity leave, should be structured in such a way that a parent is enabled to remain at home for at least a child's first year.*

**Paid paternity leave should be extended and balanced with maternity leave.*

People before Profit's childcare policy

Early education and childcare in Ireland; Investing in Children

Background

Although they can be treated separately, it is important to note that in practice childcare and education overlap to a large degree. Early childhood education and care services in Ireland are generally delivered outside the formal education system, by a wide range of private, community and voluntary interests that include crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, playgroups and daycare services. Government investment in these services comes largely from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs D/YCA.

Although children do not have to attend school until the age of six in Ireland, nearly all children begin school in the September after their fourth birthday. Almost 40% of four-year-olds and nearly all five-year-olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (sometimes called national schools).

Ireland has a young and changing population. A European Commissions Report of 2014 found that 9.6% of Ireland's population is under 6 years compared with an European average of 6.3%. Together with one of the youngest populations in Europe Ireland also has a comparatively high fertility rate. Moreover, Ireland is becoming increasingly culturally and religiously diverse from a relatively homogenous Catholic base, with about 12% of the population, according to Census 2011, having a non-Irish background.

People before Profit believes that childcare is a fundamental and universal right. All children have the right to education from birth under Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is linked to the maximum development of their capacities under Article 6 (2) of the same Convention. It is crucial that any policy addressing the needs of children should place the rights of the children and their families at the forefront, rather than pursuing narrow economic considerations.

Quality

The National Policy Framework on Children and Young People 2014-2020 promises many things including implementing a National Early Years Strategy for children up to the age of 6. This Early Years Strategy has yet to emerge. There has been much talk by the State about improving childcare services but this has been matched by very little action. There is therefore a huge policy vacuum regarding children under 3 years old living in Ireland. Government financial assistance is mostly, and poorly geared towards 3-6 year old children.

The main State support for children's early learning is a free Pre-School year called the ECCE (Early Childhood and Education) scheme, however, the quality is variable and uneven given the low investment and poor regulation of the scheme. Initially this was only available when the child reaches 3 years and 2 months of age, and often only available when the child has reached 4 years and 7 months of age. Since Budget 2015, however, children will be eligible for free childcare from the age of 3 to the start of primary school. Not only does childcare begin too late, it is far too short – available for only 3 hours a day, 15 hours a week. This does not even cover most part-time employment. Moreover,

it is not delivered over the whole year but over 38 weeks from September to June making child-minding a major concern over the summer months.

In comparison to many other states Childcare policy in Ireland is poorly developed and grossly underfunded. In terms of quality the 2008 Unicef Report Card which sets international standards for quality and accessible childhood services, placed Sweden at the top in terms of meeting 10 standards, while Ireland was ranked joint bottom meeting only 1 out of 10 standards (Barnados & Start Strong, 2012:2). In fact, many Scandinavian countries provide good working models that can and should be emulated. Their models entail positive factors including high educational attainment, low levels of child poverty, and high labour market access, including that of lone parents. This compares to the high poverty rate among one-parent families in Ireland with more than 20% at risk of poverty and 10% in consistent poverty (Barnados & Start Strong, 2012:7). Scandinavian countries also invest heavily in childcare: investing almost 1% of GDP in these services compared with an EU average of 0.8%, and the meager 0.25% in Ireland (OECD Family Database, 2012).

In addition to the problem of affordability and access to childcare services, child-minding in Ireland is largely unregulated. There is also no mechanism in place to ensure for the provision of quality services. Although there is a minimum qualification for early years professionals this is only for those working with the Free Pre-School year, encouraging nurseries to place their least qualified staff with them. High costs force many parents to employ au pairs on low wages. According to the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland 36% of au pairs report being exploited (MRCI, 2012). But it is not just au pairs who are underpaid, childcare professionals, predominantly women, are also underpaid and undervalued. Creche workers qualified to degree level may be earning as little as 18,000 per year (Examiner, 13/08/2015). As a result many of the best qualified are leaving the occupation. The working qualifications of childcare workers in Ireland also need to be increased, through state support, as well as their pay and working conditions improved.

There also needs to be an investment and development of after-school services in Ireland which remain expensive and unregulated. Such services also have many benefits including modifying the impact of poverty, acting as a protective factors against early school-leaving and fostering social skills. The provision of these services should not only promote children's development but also fit in with parents working hours. Holiday care remains a major problem for many families.

Affordability

Not only is Ireland failing to meet the quality criteria and childcare needs of the people in this country, it is also estimated to be one of the most expensive systems in Europe. According to the OECD (2014) childcare costs account for almost 40% of the net income of the average wage, the highest cost of any of the 34 member states. This can be compared to the OECD average of 12% of net income. The average cost of fulltime childcare can vary between 800-1200 a month depending on location. It has been estimated that it costs up to €2,035 a month to keep a baby and toddler in childcare (13/08/2015 Independent). This means that a minimum salary of 30,000 is required to meet such costs that are comparable and sometimes greater than a second mortgage.

Despite Budget 2015 there was no mention of increased funding or support for children up to the age of 3. The reason why fees are so high in Ireland is simple: because the Government invests so little in childcare. The Government's main form of investment in early childcare is the ECCE scheme. In 2014 about 67,000 children availed of this scheme at a cost of €173.8m (18% of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs overall budget). However, the overall approach of this scheme is not child centred.

The focus continues to be on compliance by service providers with efforts concentrated narrowly on the Free-Pre School (ECCE) year rather than the quality and care and daily experience of children in early years settings as a whole. The introduction of this scheme is far too late. Most international evidence points to the fact that the child's learning and development is fastest before the age of 3 years, and it is here where subsequent learning is shaped (Sylva et al 2008; Start Strong, 2012). The Nobel economist, James Heckman, has argued that the rate of return on educational investment in children is even greater in children's first 3 years than in the pre-school year (Start Strong, 2012). It is in these early years that children learn to learn. Early exposure to quality childcare is crucial for the development of social, behavioural, learning and linguistic skills. The OECD's 2009 analysis of the international Pisa rankings shows that educational attainment among 15 year olds is higher for those who attended pre-primary education with the highest for those who attended high quality, inclusive early education systems, supported by public investment. Ireland ranked below average (Barnardos & Start Strong, 2012:3). Access to quality crèche and childcare service can therefore make a huge difference to children's learning and development. Most international evidence suggests that children do better in later life if they start childcare at the age of 2 (Sylva et al 2008; Start Strong 2012:3).

Most families in Ireland receive no financial assistance with childcare costs with the exception of Child Benefit which since Budget 2015 stands at €140 which is still lower than it was before the recession of 2007 having been consistently cut. Some low-income families receive help with costs through the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme, but only if they live near a community that operates such a scheme. High childcare costs mean that less than a third of children under 3 are enrolled in childcare services in Ireland, compared with 50% in France for example. Exorbitant childcare costs also create a huge barrier for parent's accessing employment, and especially lone parents. They prevent many from families from escaping from a situation of poverty, and their children, from child poverty. Young children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are thereby prevented from accessing developmental and learning supports necessary to make a good start in life.

Social values

Such high childcare costs and the low level of support affect both parents but especially women who are traditionally considered as being primarily responsible for staying at home and looking after children. However, such notions are now rightly seen as outdated. The Government, however, has made little practical effort to confront the reality that women also seek and need to work. According to the Baby Brain Study more than 3,000 new mothers leave the workforce force annually. Costing Irish companies €68m a year in recruitment and training costs. Another study found 63% struggling to meet childcare costs with 84% of stay at home mothers wanting to work but remaining trapped by childcare costs (Independent 13/08/15). This should not be seen as a women's problem but a parenting problem. In addition, to this we also need to acknowledge the needs of migrant families who not only tend to have lower incomes, but lack the support provided by extended families to look after their children

Parental Leave Policies

In comparison to most other EU countries that provide at least one year of maternity or parental leave for parents, maternity leave in Ireland is only paid for 6 months with an additional option of unpaid leave for 2 months. The 14 weeks parental leave available remains unpaid. In Norway, Sweden, there is an entitlement to a year's paid leave at 80% of previous earnings. Paid paternity leave is also longer.

Since Budget 2015 father's of newly born children will now get Paternity paid leave for 2 weeks at €230 a week. Though this is a small step in the right direction there is still an onus on the woman to take care of the child. In Germany, for example, the parents can take up to 3 years shared parental of which 14 months is funded at 67% of the parent's wage.

Policy recommendations

- * People before profit aim to introduce a comprehensive set of measures and public investment to improve the quality and access of early years services. High levels of public subsidy are required.
- * Childcare should be provided as a universal right rather than through targeted subsidies. It should be funded through a universally applied progressive taxation system.
- * More investment in childcare and education is fundamentally necessary. We shall provide a capitation grant per child to crèches to subsidize high quality care.
- * The aim of childcare in Ireland should be based on progressive universalism in which early years services receive a large subsidy with parents needing to pay only a fraction of the cost and fees. As in Denmark parents should pay at most 30% of running costs but services should be free to many low-income families.
- * PBP will ensure that all children can access and participate in early years care and education independently of wealth.
- * Children should have a right to a place in an early care and education service and an after-school service as in Norway and Sweden
- * Conduct a quality audit across all early years services to provide baseline data for the implementation of National Early Years Strategy
- * Publish a rights-based National Early Years Strategy that will be accompanied by an adequately resourced implementation which should have the Child's best interests at its core.
- * Over the next few years PBP will respond to the affordability of childcare by reaching the EU average of 0.8% of net GDP income spent on these areas, and eventually to the 1% of GDP UNICEF target. Not through tax credits which do not benefit the most at need.
- * Review qualifications with those working with youngest children
- * Expand the learner Fund to provide support to allow childcare workers to professionalize to progress to FETAC levels 7 and 8. And increase pay levels for these workers.
- * There needs to be an increase in the regulation of all child-minders and after school services
- * Promote the importance of childcare and values attached to it as something to be shared by parents.
- * Encourage parents to participate in the organization and structure of crèches and make the latter more accountable to the former so that they can respond to their, and their children's, needs.
- * Supporting parents to care for their children with advice services supported by Public Healthcare Nurses
- * Improve access for children with special needs to childcare services.

- * Improving work-life balance for parents so that parents can work and bring up their children. These should be balanced with children's rights and universal entitlements. In Sweden parents can work part-time until the child is aged 8.
- * Improve the integration of care, education and after-school services by aiming for joined-up service provision and building strong connections between early care and education services, primary schools and after school services.
- * Paid leave which includes maternity leave, should be structured in such a way that a parent is enabled to remain at home for at least a child's first year.
- *Paid paternity leave should be extended and balanced with maternity leave.

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