



Towards a Scandinavian childcare system for 0-12 year olds in Ireland?

**Barnardos and Start Strong
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1. Introduction

Speaking in the Dáil on 18 April 2012, the Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton TD, said that she would only proceed with plans to reform the One Parent Family Payment by 2014/15 if she got a “credible and bankable commitment” by the time of this year’s Budget that the Irish Government would put “a system of safe, affordable and accessible child care in place, similar to what is found in the Scandinavian countries to whose systems of social protection we aspire”. In making this commitment, Minister Burton referred to the need for “adequate child care” both for children’s safety and to enable “a parent to make the first steps back to the workplace”.

Barnardos and Start Strong have worked together to prepare this short paper that compares the current provision of childcare and after-school services in Ireland for 0-12 year olds with the Scandinavian systems to which Minister Burton referred.

Scandinavian childcare is widely regarded as being among the best in the world, and the outcomes for children and families are very positive. Educational attainment is high, child poverty rates are among the lowest in the world, and there is a high labour market participation rate among parents, including lone parents. But a Scandinavian childcare system comes at a cost – the level of Government investment in childcare in the Scandinavian countries is far higher than in Ireland.

Barnardos and Start Strong would warmly welcome a bankable Government commitment to develop a Scandinavian childcare system in Ireland. In this paper we identify the key features that this would involve and we make recommendations on initial steps that should be taken to move in this direction. However, we are under no illusions about the scale of change and additional investment that would be required. In the current economic climate, a Scandinavian childcare system is likely to remain a long-term goal, rather than a short-term prospect. The Minister’s proposal to reform the One Parent Family Payment should therefore be postponed well beyond the proposed 2014 /15 timetable.

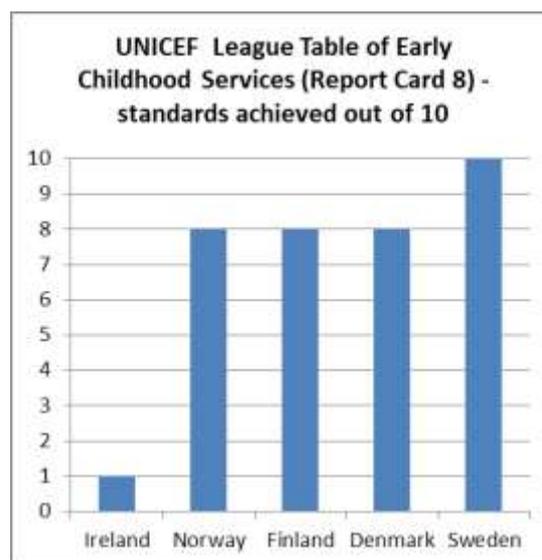
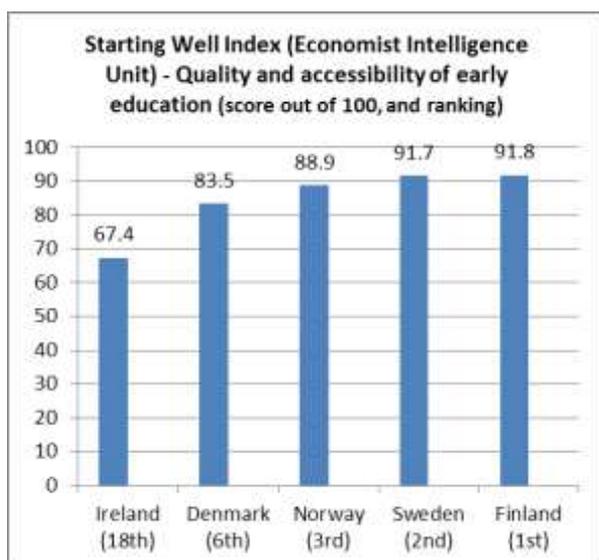
2. Comparing Ireland and the Nordic countries

This section uses international data sources, principally the OECD, to compare childcare provision in Ireland with the Nordic countries, in particular Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. We first look at the level and quality of provision, and the level of investment, before comparing outcomes.

Level and quality of provision

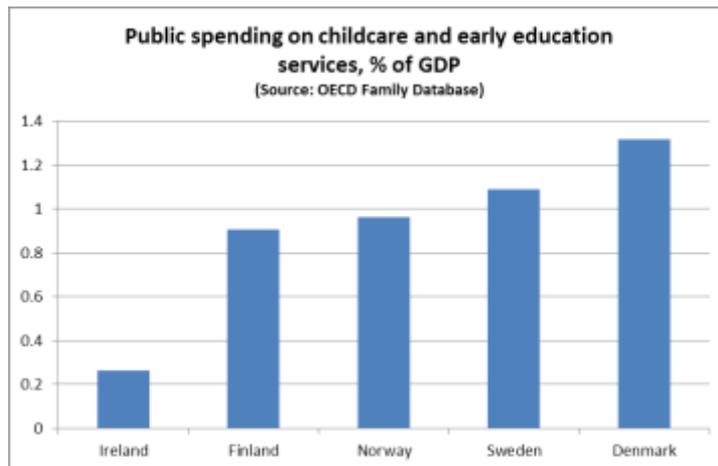
Given the lack of comparative data on after-school services, the focus here is on early childhood care and education services. Two recent international surveys of early care and education have positioned Ireland well down the international league table. The Nordic countries, by contrast, are all at or near the top:

- The 2012 Starting Well Index, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit, attempts to rate the quality, affordability and accessibility of early childhood education services. Finland, Sweden and Norway receive the top 3 scores in the world. Ireland comes well down the ranking in 18th place, between the Czech Republic and Hong Kong.
- The 2008 UNICEF Report Card set 10 international standards for high quality, accessible early childhood services. Of the 25 countries studied, Ireland came joint bottom of the league table, with only 1 out of 10 standards met (though some progress has been made since 2008). Sweden came top, meeting all 10 standards, while Denmark, Finland and Norway followed close behind, meeting 8 standards each.



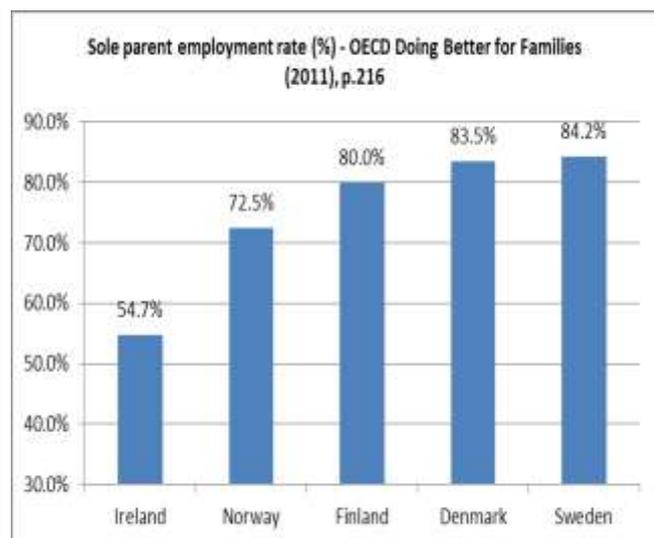
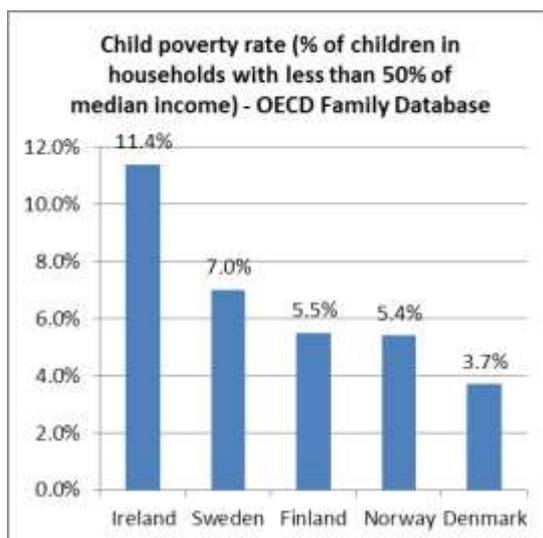
Public investment

Undoubtedly, the high ratings achieved in the Nordic countries reflect the continued high level of public investment in childcare and early education services. According to the OECD Family Database (2012), all the Nordic countries invest approximately 1% of GDP in early years services annually. In Ireland, the figure is just one quarter of that.

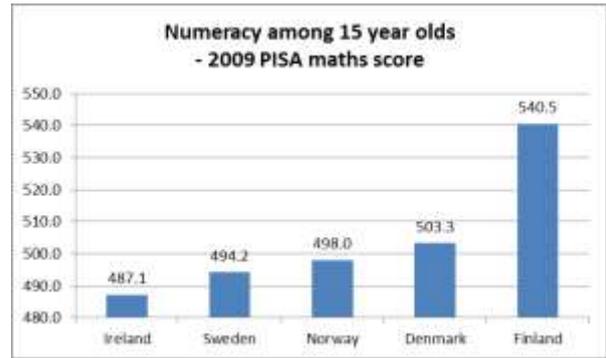
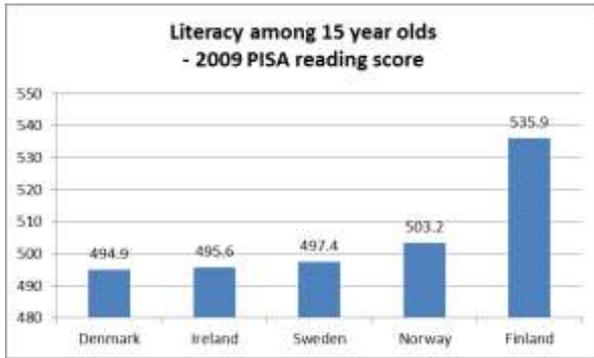


Outcomes

While child poverty and labour market participation are affected by many factors, there is no doubt that high quality, affordable early years and after-school services are essential both to the reduction of child poverty and to the labour market participation of parents, especially lone parents. While Ireland's performance in relation to both issues is poor by international standards, the Nordic countries' care and education systems have made possible some of the best outcomes in the world. Denmark has the lowest child poverty rate among all OECD countries.



Literacy and numeracy are also affected by many factors, but the OECD's analysis of the 2009 international PISA rankings shows that educational attainment among 15 year olds is higher for children who attended pre-primary education, with the highest attainment in countries with high quality, inclusive early education systems, supported by high levels of public investment. On the PISA literacy and numeracy rankings, Finland is among the highest performing countries in the world, while Ireland is at or below the OECD average.



3. The policy context in Ireland

The care of 0-12 year olds outside the family home and schools is underdeveloped in Ireland by international standards, especially in comparison to the Nordic countries. In Ireland:

- While the Free Pre-School Year was a very positive step forwards, quality is variable.
- Outside the Free Pre-School Year, childcare costs are among the highest in Europe.
- After-school services are unregulated and often unavailable.
- Paid parental leave in Ireland is short, and there is minimal support for services for under-3s.
- The high cost and lack of availability are especially problematic for one-parent families.

Early care and education in Ireland

The quality of provision in Ireland's early care and education services is variable, and affordability and accessibility remain serious problems for a large proportion of families with young children.

While a small proportion of staff are graduates, the standard qualification level (FETAC 5) is low and 24% of staff are below this level. And though Ireland has an excellent national quality framework (Síolta) and curriculum framework (Aistear), these have not been rolled out. As a result, the quality of early care and education services is very variable. Measures to improve quality have largely focused on the Free Pre-School Year, with almost no support for the development of quality services for under-3s.

Much early care and education is carried out by childminders, but childminding remains largely unregulated – and is completely unregulated for school-age children. Start Strong estimates that only 1% of paid childminders are currently subject to regulation and inspection. There are minimal quality supports, and most childminders are not even required to be Garda vetted.

The high cost of early care and education remains one of the core obstacles for parents in taking up employment. Costs in Ireland are amongst the highest in Europe, amounting to more than 50% of the net income of some families. The average cost of a full-time place for one child is around €750 per month. Most families with young children receive no financial assistance with childcare costs, other than Child Benefit, which has been cut significantly. Often, work simply cannot pay enough to compensate families for the high cost of care. This is especially true for one-parent families struggling on one income.

The availability of subsidised early care and education does not fit with families' needs. The Free Pre-School Year is provided for 3 hours per day – insufficient even for most part-time employment – and only during school terms. The Community Childcare Subvention is only available to families that live close to a community service participating in the scheme.

Maternity leave is only paid for 6 months, parental leave is unpaid, and there is no statutory paternity leave. The gap from the end of parents' leave entitlement to a subsidised place in an early care and education service is between 2 and 3.5 years, depending on the age at which a child starts the Free Pre-School Year.

The benefits of early care and education

The evidence shows that children's experiences in their early years have a long-lasting effect on outcomes. The evidence also shows that positive outcomes depend on the quality of relationships and interactions between young children and the adults caring for them – both within families and in settings outside the home.

The EPPE/EPPSE study in England (Sylva *et al.*, 2012) has shown that the benefits of high quality early care and education persist to at least age 14 in relation to both academic outcomes (especially maths and science) and social-behavioural outcomes (e.g. motivation, self-confidence, empathy, impulsiveness, anti-social behaviour). As with previous research, the study has found that there are only significant, lasting benefits for children who attend early care and education services that are of high quality.

After-school services in Ireland

Investment in after-school services has been historically underdeveloped in Ireland. There is no national policy, or legislative framework, and service provision is ad hoc, expensive, unregulated and varying in quality standards. The level of training and qualifications varies significantly among staff and there is a heavy reliance on volunteers and fundraising.

After-school services include structured sessions operating in a variety of settings (schools, community halls, youth centres etc), providing enriching opportunities such as sports, dance, art or music classes, homework clubs and social and personal development programmes. They may operate during afternoons, weekends or holiday time. According to the Growing up in Ireland study, 75% of 9 year olds are involved in organised sports clubs (84% boys) (67% girls) and 47% are involved in structured cultural activities (65% girls) (31% boys). As these activities can be expensive, children from poorer backgrounds are more likely to participate in youth clubs / after-school clubs.

However, while a large proportion of children are engaged in some such activity, these activities often do not fit with parents' working hours. Holiday care is a major problem for many families with school-age children. Furthermore, given the array of services on offer and the number of children availing of them, issues of affordability, availability, regulation and staff qualifications need to be addressed to ensure high quality services are achieved.

Both the NESF (2005) and National Women's Council of Ireland (2005) reports called for greater investment in this sector and saw it as a crucial component of providing subsidised care to children aged 0-14 years of age meeting the dual purpose of being directly beneficial to the child but also enabling parents to stay in or re-enter the labour market.

The benefits of after-school services

The benefits for children can be significant, including modifying the impact of poverty, acting as a protective factor against early school leaving, fostering social skills, and social support for positive mental health. These services can be particularly effective in acting as a bridge for children who are finding the transition from primary school into secondary school difficult.

After-school services support children's well-being and development, but they are not just an extension of school. Diversity of activities and approaches helps to meet children's varied interests and needs, helping children develop life-skills and improving their social and emotional capabilities. In turn, they can indirectly support children's academic achievements, including reducing the risk of early school leaving.

One Parent Family Payment

The poverty rate among one-parent families in Ireland is high, with more than 20% at risk of poverty and nearly 10% in consistent poverty. Budget 2012 brought about significant changes to the One Parent Family Payment. As a result of these changes, by 2014 a lone parent in receipt of the payment since April 2012 will lose this payment when their youngest child reaches the age of seven. For those claiming the One Parent Family Payment since before April 2012, they can retain the payment till 2015 when their youngest child turns seven. In the absence of quality, affordable, accessible early years and after-school services, this move is likely to increase welfare dependency among one-parent families and increase poverty levels further. The majority of lone parents are already in work or want to work but the ongoing lack of supports such as reliable and affordable early years and after-school care present impossible challenges that the Government cannot address by 2014 /15.

The implementation of this move is, according to Minister Joan Burton, contingent on a comprehensive system of "Scandinavian" style childcare being in place. It is very doubtful that such a system will be in operation by 2014 /15 given the level of investment required, but steps can be made to move along this road. Investing in early years and after-school services is critical to enabling lone parents to combine employment and the care of their children. However, an attempt to rush into early years and after-school services schemes that rest on low-quality provision or on targeted services that stigmatise lone parents would be regressive and would not result in services that meet children's normal developmental needs.

4. Scandinavian childcare systems

There is no single "Scandinavian" system, but there are features that are common to all the Nordic countries, in varying degree. It should be stressed that these features are interconnected, drawing on a shared commitment to children's rights, a broad understanding of "education", recognition of the importance of quality in childcare and early education services, and a shared view of the role of the State in ensuring the availability of quality, affordable services. The following policy approaches are common to the Nordic countries' provision of both early care and education services and after-school services:

High quality services. The provision of high quality services is central to the Nordic model of both early care and education and after-school services. The quality of these services rests above all on the skills and experience of staff. Those working in both early care and education and after-school provision are recognised as professionals, with high levels of qualifications. Quality standards are high in services for children right through the age-range 1-12.

- The proportion of contact staff in early years services who have a three-year graduate qualification ranges from 30% in Finland to 60% in Denmark.
- In both Denmark and Sweden, after-school services are staffed by "pedagogues" who have a 3-3.5 year tertiary qualification.

Universally available services. The Nordic countries share a strong focus on children's rights and universal entitlements.

- Children are entitled to a place in an early care and education service and an after-school service – just as they are entitled to a place at school – regardless of whether their parents are working. In Norway, there is a legal right to a place in an early care and education service for every child from the age of 1. In Sweden, every child between the ages of 1 and 12 has a right to a place in an early years or after-school service.
- After-school services are viewed as an integral part of the care and education system for all children. Enrolment rates in after-school services for 6-10 year olds in Scandinavian countries range from 53% in Norway up to 86% in Denmark.

Affordable services. While fees may be charged, both early care and education services and after-school services are affordable to all, with high levels of public subsidy.

- While the Nordic model typically involves some free pre-school provision, other early years services receive a large direct subsidy, with parents paying only a fraction of the cost, and fees means-tested to ensure they are affordable to all. In Norway, there is a cap on parental fees of approximately €300 a month in both public and private early care and education services. In Denmark, parents pay at most 30% of the running costs, and services are free to many low-income families.
- After-school services are similarly subsidised to ensure they are affordable to all, with a broad social mix. In all the Nordic countries, after-school services are heavily subsidised. In Sweden, parental fees for after-school services are capped at 2% of family income, with a maximum fee applying.

Joined-up service provision, rooted in a broad understanding of "education". The Nordic models are based on a broad understanding of education, encompassing *all* ages and both schooling and after-school services, with the integration of care and education across the age range 1-12. Those working in both pre-school and after-school services are viewed as "pedagogues" – a term understood to imply a holistic understanding of care and education, supporting children's full development, including social and physical skills.

- In Sweden, there is a single, broad curriculum for both school and after-school services that supports children’s all-round development and links to the early years curriculum. There is a single teacher training system for pre-schools, schools and after-school services, with a common core training for staff working right through the 1-12 age range.
- There is joined-up service provision, with pre-schools, schools and after-school services working together, sometimes on the same site. In Sweden, the pedagogues in pre-schools, schools and after-school services operate in teams, planning activities together, and working together during the course of the day.
- There is joined-up governance of services, at both local and national levels. In both Norway and Sweden, the Ministry of Education has responsibility not just for schools, but for all early years services and after-school services.

Family-friendly work policies. The Scandinavian model combines family-friendly work policies such as parental and paternity leave with publicly subsidized early years facilities. Leave policies and entitlements to early years services are linked.

- Through paid leave – combining maternity leave, paternity leave and paid parental leave – a parent is enabled to remain at home for at least a child's first year. In Norway, Sweden and Denmark, there is an entitlement to a year’s paid leave. In Norway and Sweden, payment is at 80% of previous earnings, throughout this period.
- In none of the Nordic countries is there a gap between the ending of paid leave and the beginning of an entitlement to subsidised childcare.
- Strong work-life balance policies make it easier for families to balance work and care responsibilities, both in children’s early years and their school years. In Sweden, parents are entitled to work part-time (75%) until a child is 8 years old.
- Leave policies in the Nordic countries support gender equality in caring responsibilities, with mothers and fathers able to share paid parental leave, and a proportion of paid leave reserved for fathers.

After-school services in Sweden

The provision of after-school (“free time”) services in Sweden is comprehensive, spanning 6 to 12 year olds, and is available after school hours and during the holidays. It is mainly children aged 6 to 9 who attend these activities. Over 70% of children in this age-group are enrolled in an after-school service. A factor in this is undoubtedly the low fees charged.

After-school services are available in a number of settings but the majority attends after-school centres which are generally integrated into and have the same management as schools. The services are regulated by the Education Act, which outlines the conditions necessary to meet the needs of children, including the composition and size of children's groups, premises, staff and the general environment. All these services share the same, broad curriculum, aiming to stimulate the pupils' development and learning as well as offer meaningful play, leisure time and recreation.

The services fall into the following categories:

- Leisure-time centres (*fritidshem*) are often associated with a school but are open year round. Their opening hours are set to meet the needs of parents and children.
- Family daycare (*familjedaghem*) is run from a childminder’s home. It may be a childminder who takes pre-school children during the day or somebody who specialises in minding school age children.

- Open leisure-time activities (*öppna fritidsverksamheten*) require no enrolment and are for older children only – ages 10 to 12. They can be used in conjunction with the other options above but there is less supervision of children, in order to encourage child-led recreational activities, which is why they're unsuitable for younger children.

The different services are managed jointly at local level. A school principal may be the head of not just a *grundskola* (compulsory school for children aged from 7 to 16) but also the associated pre-school class (*förskoleklass*) for 6 year olds, after-school services linked to the school (*fritidshem*), and in some cases local pre-schools for 1-5 year olds (*förskola*) and even local childminders (*familjedaghem*), who are generally employed by the local authority. In some areas, there are "integrated schools" and "whole-day schools" that offer a full-day service for children from 1 to 12 years old.

5. Lessons for Ireland

Movement towards a Scandinavian system of childcare would involve a series of linked reforms in Ireland, including:

- *Prioritising the quality of services to ensure that all childcare services – both early years and after-school – make a strong contribution to children’s well-being and development.* Central to the achievement of high quality standards is the professionalisation of the workforce. Movement towards the Scandinavian model would involve moving from the current situation where many staff are unqualified and there are very few graduates towards a situation where the majority of those working in early years and after-school services are graduates with professional qualifications.
- *Introducing universal entitlements to both early care and education services and after-school services.* This would require the Government to ensure that such services are available and accessible to all children. In relation to early care and education, while there are now a large number of places across the country, there is no entitlement to a place. In relation to after-school services, provision across the country is limited and a universal entitlement would require a large increase in the scale of provision.
- *Extending public subsidies to make both early years and after-school services affordable to all families.* While the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme does reduce costs for some families (both early years and after-school childcare provision), it is only available in community services that participate in the scheme. While subsidies could be means-tested, as is done in the Nordic countries, the subsidies would have to be sufficient to ensure services are affordable to all. Linked to this is the sustainability of many after-school services given their heavy reliance on fundraising activities and volunteers.
- *Building strong connections between early care and education services, primary schools, and after-school services.* Co-locating early years services and after-school services on the same site as primary schools can help cooperation between services, and can support continuity for children and enable siblings to remain together. However, it may not be sufficient and it must be managed carefully to ensure after-school services are not seen as “more school”. The level of cooperation achieved in Scandinavian countries involves these different services working closely together, with a broad understanding of “education” shared by all.
- *Strengthening family-friendly work policies.* Movement towards the Scandinavian model would include the extension of paid parental leave towards the UNICEF recommendation of a year’s paid parental leave in a child’s first year, and enhancing work-life balance policies to make it easier for parents to meet childcare needs at the same time as seeking employment.

6. Conclusions / Recommendations

We agree with Minister Burton that the Scandinavian childcare systems are ones to which Ireland should aspire. They are consistently ranked the best in the world in terms of quality and accessibility. And the outcomes in terms of the reduction of child poverty, educational attainment, and the labour market participation of lone parents are also among the best in the world.

However, the scale of change required to bring Ireland's early years and after-school services up to the standards achieved in the Nordic countries is large. The changes are achievable – and we urge the Government to take steps to move in this direction – but they will take time and will require substantial public investment.

While a bankable commitment would be very welcome, achieving it by 2014 /15 does not seem credible, especially in the current economic climate.

In the short term, for Budget 2013, we therefore urge the Government to:

- Improve the quality of early years services through rolling out the SÍolta quality framework and Aistear curriculum framework and through maintaining the higher capitation grant for those services offering the Free Pre School Year that employ staff with graduate qualifications, to incentivise professionalisation.
- Maintain funding to ensure the continuation of the Free Pre School Year but also extend this incrementally to a second, earlier year.
- Withdraw the changes proposed for the One Parent Family Payment. Until such time as we have comprehensive early years and after-school services, one parent families must continue to receive the payment until their youngest child reaches secondary school.
- Make no further cuts to community after-school services, to protect a sector already seriously damaged by previous budget cuts – a sector vital to working with some of the most marginalised children in communities across Ireland.

For the longer term, practical steps can be taken towards achieving a Scandinavian system of early care and education and after-school services. These include:

1. Investing in children:

- Steadily increase public investment in early childhood services and in after-school services and supports, moving Ireland progressively towards the UNICEF target of 1% of GDP.
- Finalise and resource the National Early Years Strategy, with an emphasis on enhancing the quality, affordability and accessibility of services and supports for all young children under 6 in all settings.
- Develop a national after-school services policy that would oversee the roll out of subsidised after-school services across the country. An emphasis must be placed on regulation of services to ensure quality standards and greater professionalization of the sector.

2. High quality services:

- Increase minimum qualification requirements over time, moving progressively towards a graduate workforce for those working in early years and after school services.
- Regulate all paid childminders.
- Regulate after-school services.

- Roll out the Síolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework in all early years services. Reform the inspection system to refocus it on a broad understanding of quality, with appropriately qualified inspection teams.
- Roll out the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers in all early years and after-school services.

3. Universal, affordable services:

- In addition to commencing a second, universal Free Pre-School Year for 2 year olds, introduce a subsidy for both early years and after-school services, with a tiered fee-structure that reflects parents' ability to pay and that ensures the cost of childcare is not a barrier to parents' employment.
- Ensure there is no gap between the ending of paid parental leave and the beginning of an entitlement to subsidised care and education.
- Explore the feasibility of introducing an Extended Schools Programme across the country. This initiative has proven very successful in other areas such as Nottingham as it utilises school buildings before and after school times and links with services already operational in the locality. It requires schools to synchronise activities with other schools and service providers to ensure comprehensive coverage of services for school-aged pupils.

4. Joined-up services:

- At local level, ensure that early years services, schools and after-school services work closely together, supporting children's transitions and working from a shared, broad understanding of "education".
- At national level, strengthen links between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Education and Skills. For instance, ensure activities towards implementing the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy occur in early years and after-school services settings as well as in the school, and are coordinated.
- Support the important role that early years and after-school services play in fostering positive mental health, within the framework of *Your Health Is Your Wealth: A Policy Framework for a Healthier Ireland 2012-2020*.
- Provide for children who have additional support needs in inclusive, mainstream services, whenever this is in the child's best interests.

5. Family-friendly work policies:

- Move towards the international standard of at least 1 year's paid leave after the birth of a child.
- Introduce 2 weeks' statutory paternity leave.
- Strengthen work-life balance, for example through a right to flexible working arrangements for parents (such as reduced or flexible hours), making it easier for parents to combine work and care.

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