



Early Years

Quality **Affordable** Accessible

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Early Years #GE16 is a campaign to ensure affordable, accessible, quality early years services and to strengthen family leave.



Quality

Despite the enormous childcare prices paid by parents in Ireland, the quality of childcare in Ireland is very mixed. Many services are in breach of minimum standards. Qualification levels among staff are low, as are wages and working conditions, meaning staff turnover is high and children sometimes don't get to know the people looking after them.

We need a **new model** of early years services.

There are around 20,000 **childminders** in Ireland, caring for about 50,000 young children (under 6). Less than 1% are notified to Tusla (the Child and Family Agency). Most childminders are exempt from regulation, inspection and Garda vetting, and work without support. Only those caring for 4 or more pre-school children are required to notify Tusla. Childminders are regulated in other countries. Scotland, for example, has 6,000 registered childminders, all of whom undergo police checks and inspections.



Affordable

Children do best when cared for at home for at least the first year, but our current family leave policies don't support this and lag well behind other European countries. Combining paid maternity and the recently announced 2 weeks' paternity leave, parents can have up to 28 weeks' **paid leave** in Ireland. On average European countries give 18 months' paid leave to parents.

Irish parents pay some of the highest childcare **costs** in the world. OECD figures show that on average 2-parent families (both parents working) with 2 children before school-age pay $\frac{1}{4}$ or more of take-home pay on childcare. For one-parent families, it's even more. Average costs across the EU are less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of what Irish parents pay.

Quality is critical. Low quality services can harm children. Following a 20-country study, the OECD concluded that the best way to achieve affordability and quality at the same time is through **subsidised childcare places**. Tax credits would do nothing for quality. As well as which, those families in most need of support may get little or no help from tax credits, and tax credits can simply push up prices for everyone.



Accessible

The current system means that many families with low incomes **cannot access** subsidised childcare, which means many parents cannot afford to work. The Government recently committed to reforming subsidised childcare, but we don't know what that will look like.

There will be increased supports for children with disabilities in the pre-school year. The enhanced supports are welcome, but do nothing for children outside of the pre-school times. Nor do they do anything for children with other **additional needs**, such as children who do not speak English or Irish at home.

Make a promise to children

If elected, I will...

Make early years a priority by increasing investment to ensure affordable, accessible, quality early years services and by continuing to strengthen family leave.

Increase investment to the OECD average (0.8% GDP) within the lifetime of the next government, moving to the UNICEF benchmark of 1% of GDP within 10 years.



Quality

Link public investment to quality
– Invest in quality improvements, higher qualification levels, and professional wages for staff. Reform the current inspection system. Link increased funding to higher quality, and cut public money from childcare providers who do not meet basic standards.

Regulate childminders, to provide protection for children. Bring childminders into public funding schemes.

No child should be in a poor quality service.



Affordable

Develop **subsidised quality childcare**, to make high quality childcare affordable for all.

Subsidised quality childcare means parents can afford to work and know that their child is well cared for.

Introduce at least 6 months' **paid parental leave**, to be taken after existing (paid) maternity leave provision, available to either parent.

That way a child can be cared for at home, by a parent, until at least their first birthday.



Accessible

Ensure **sufficient subsidised places** in all areas of the country.

Make subsidised places available through all providers, including regulated childminders.

Ensure **enhanced support** is available for all children who need it, whatever the child's age or background.

No child should be excluded because they have additional needs.

Investment

- *Increase investment in early years services each year, to reach the OECD average within 5 years, and 1% GDP in 10 years.*
- *Link that investment to quality.*

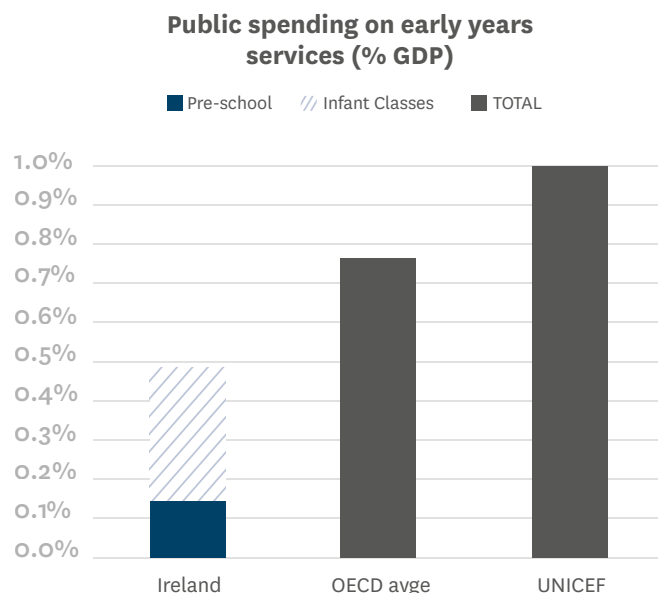
Public investment in early years services in Ireland is very low by international standards:

- Ireland invests less than 0.2% GDP per year on pre-school services.
- If you add in investment in 4-5 year olds in infant classes of primary schools, the figure rises to 0.5% GDP.
- But even that is well below the average investment across OECD countries, which is 0.8% GDP.

1% GDP is the UNICEF international benchmark for investment in early years services. New Zealand, France, the UK and the Nordic countries all invest more than 1% GDP.

These figures do not include paid leave for parents (maternity or parental).

Here too Ireland's record is poor by international standards.



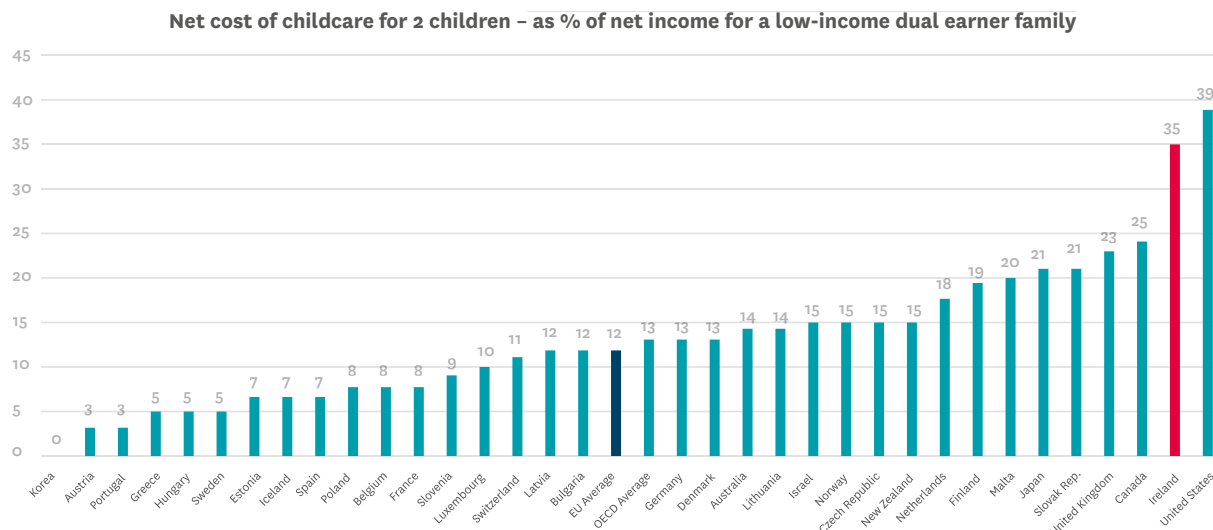
What should the Government do?

- **Increase investment** in early years services each year, to reach the OECD average of 0.8% GDP within 5 years, and 1% GDP in 10 years.
- Improve the **quality** of early years services, as only high quality services bring long-term benefits to children. Link increased funding to higher quality, and cut public money from childcare providers who do not meet basic standards.
- The key to quality is the adults working with the children. Investment must focus on professionalisation: higher qualifications, salary scales and better working conditions.

Affordable, quality childcare

- *Develop subsidised quality childcare*
- *Link funding to quality*
- *Cap prices*

Irish parents pay some of the highest childcare costs in the world. OECD figures show that on average 2-parent families (both working) with 2 children before school-age pay $\frac{1}{4}$ or more of take-home pay on childcare. For one-parent families, it's even more. Average costs across the EU are less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of what Irish parents pay.



Source: OECD (2014) Benefits and Wages: Statistics, <http://www.oecd.org/els/benefitsandwagesstatistics.htm>

- Subsidised quality childcare means parents can afford to work and know that their child is well cared for.
- Quality is critical. Children only benefit from childcare if the quality is high. Low quality services can harm children.
- Following a 20-country study, the OECD concluded that the best way to achieve affordability and quality at the same time is through subsidised childcare places, as these give the State 'steering control' over the quality of childcare. Tax credits would do nothing for quality. As well as which, those families in most need may get little or no help from tax credits, and tax credits can simply push up prices for everyone.

What should the Government do?

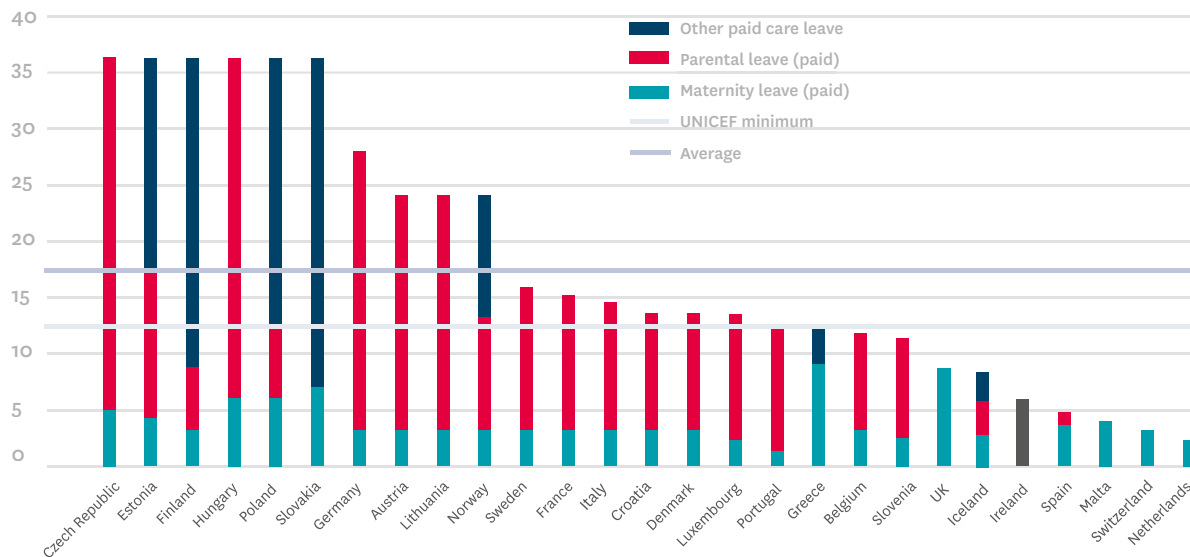
- Develop **subsidised quality childcare**, to make high quality childcare affordable for all. Reduce costs for lower-income families through extending subsidised childcare places – with subsidies related to income – and cap prices to prevent fees rising.
- Tie public funding to the quality of services, to achieve the 'double dividend' of affordability and quality. **Link increased funding to higher quality**, and cut public money from childcare providers who do not meet basic standards.
- Pay capitation grants to cover the gap between parental fees and the cost of delivering quality childcare. The key to quality is the adults working with the children. Investment must focus on professionalisation: higher qualifications, salary scales and better working conditions.

Family leave

- *Introduce 26 weeks' paid parental leave*

- Children do best when cared for at home by their parents for at least the critical first year of life. UNICEF recommends 12 months' paid leave as a *minimum*.
- Paid parental leave would help parents combine work and family life, reduce stress levels, and give parents more time and energy to nurture their children.
- Longer paid leave benefits businesses through helping them retain parents as employees. If the leave is paid by the State, there are no additional costs imposed on businesses. Longer paid leave is standard in many successful European economies.
- Combining paid maternity and the recently announced 2 weeks' paternity leave, parents can have up to 28 weeks' paid leave in Ireland. While some unpaid leave is available, most families cannot afford to take it.
- Paid leave in Ireland is the 5th shortest in Europe. Combining maternity, parental and other family leave, on average European countries provide 18 months' paid leave.

Length of paid leave for parents (total months)



Source: P. Moss ed. (2015) 11th International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2015.

What should the Government do?

- Achieve at least 1 year of total paid leave for parents within the next term of Government, by incrementally introducing **26 weeks' paid parental leave** – open to either parent – at the end of the 26 weeks' maternity benefit.
- A further 6 weeks' leave each year would cost an additional €63m each year.
- Support the sharing of care through reserving at least 1 month of paid parental leave as a 'father's quota'.
- To ensure parents can afford leave, while minimising costs to business, the State should pay for parental leave on the same basis as Maternity Benefit.

Childminding

- *Regulate all paid childminders not related to the children they care for*
- *Open childcare funding schemes to regulated quality childminders*

- Childminding is one of the most common forms of childcare in Ireland, valued by many families as the best option for their children.
- There are about 20,000 childminders, who care for about 50,000 young children (under 6).
- Most childminders are exempt from regulation, inspection and Garda vetting, and work without support. Only those caring for 4 or more pre-school children are required to notify Tusla.
- As of April 2015, just 154 childminders were notified to Tusla, i.e. fewer than 1%.
- Childminders are regulated in other countries. Scotland, for example, which has a similar population to Ireland, has 6,000 registered childminders, all of whom undergo police checks and inspections.

What should the Government do?

- **Regulate** all paid childminders who are not related to the children they care for. Require childminders to undergo Garda vetting, receive a home visit, have insurance, and do basic training in first aid, child protection, and quality awareness.
- Open up all **childcare funding schemes** to childminders who meet equivalent quality standards to centre-based services.
- Provide **supports** to regulated childminders, including through developing local childminder networks and a childminding advisory service.



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