

# CASE *study*: IRELAND



## Pregnancy to Age 3 in Ireland

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This material is part of a compilation of various case studies from across Europe that show different facets of early childhood development, and the types of policies and interventions that we are promoting through the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign.

**first years**  
*first priority*

**A FAIR START  
FOR *every* CHILD  
IN EUROPE**

## INTRODUCTION – COUNTRY CONTEXT

The early years sector in Ireland has experienced a period of unprecedented change in recent years<sup>1</sup> moving from predominantly informal, ad-hoc home care unsupported by the state, to a far more regulated and structured provision. Ireland did not begin the move towards a formal early childhood education and care system until the late 1990s with **Preschool Regulations** first introduced in 1996<sup>2</sup>. But female participation in the workforce rose through the 1990s and reached 55.7% by 2018<sup>3</sup> increasing the need for care outside the home for children from birth to six.

Following decades of under-investment, Ireland has therefore increased government spending through a variety of funded programmes: the introduction of The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Year Services) Regulations on a legislative basis in 2016 and a new Quality Regulatory Framework in 2018 to improve the quality of the early years sector. In addition, Ireland's first National Early Years Strategy, First 5 A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028, was launched in November 2018.

### Policy Framework: Pregnancy to Age 3

- **Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020** was the first national children's policy framework and the first whole of Government approach. It established a cross-sectoral National Advisory Council to co-ordinate government policy across five national outcomes. The Government also committed to increase investment in high-quality ECEC, prioritising families on low incomes<sup>4</sup>.
- **National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026** provides a new integrated model of care, with three pathways of care, based on the principle that childbirth is a natural, physiological process.
- **National Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016-2021** includes a target of an annual 2% increase over five years in breastfeeding rates which at 15% is lower than the European average 25% (WHO, 2013)<sup>5</sup>.
- **The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016** put in place the measures pre-school childcare settings must have to ensure the health, safety and welfare of children attending their services on a legislative footing. All settings are now required to notify Tusla, The Child & Family Agency that they are providing a service.
- **First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families**, is Ireland's first ever National Early Years Strategy published in November 2018 and followed by a cross-government implementation plan published in May 2019. The strategy identifies positive play-based early learning as one of four high level goals and identifies a range of actions to address affordability, accessibility and quality of early learning and childcare services.
  1. A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring, including a commitment to expand parental leave in the first 12 months
  2. A new model of parenting support
  3. New developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce

1 [Ireland: Early Childhood Education and Care](#). Eurydice Network Website. Updated on 22.05.18

2 [Context of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland](#). Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework in the Child and Family Agency website (date not available)

3 Callaghan Niamh, Kate Ivory and Oragh Lavelle. '[Social Impact Assessment: Female Labour Force Participation](#)'. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. October 2018, p.2

4 [Ireland: Early Childhood Education and Care](#). Eurydice Network Website. Updated on 22.05.18

5 [Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland: Health Service Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 - 2021](#). Health Service Executive: Breastfeeding. 2016, p.5

4. Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, including a new funding model
  5. A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.
- **New National Childcare Scheme (October 2019)** This new scheme aims to replace the current Community Childcare Subventions and streamline existing targeted schemes into a single scheme providing both targeted and universal subsidies for children aged 6 months to 15 years by October 2019. The scheme aims to:
    - Promote a reduction in child poverty
    - Enable positive child development outcomes
    - Encourage labour market activation
    - Lead to improved quality in the early learning and childcare sector

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC<sup>6</sup>) in Ireland continues to be delivered through a market model of provision consisting of 75% private and 25% community service providers<sup>7</sup>. To date, government policy reform has focused on children aged 3 plus with the introduction of a universal two-year free preschool programme, available to pre-school children from the age of 3 years. With the publication of Ireland's first National Early Years Strategy in 2018 and the introduction of the [National Childcare Scheme](#) (NCS) (previously named the Affordable Childcare Scheme) in October 2019, Early Childhood Ireland highlights the need for greater financial investment in, and political support for, improved outcomes in the period from pregnancy to age 3.

Nevertheless, parental care continues to be the dominant form of care for preschool children in Ireland with 62% of children being cared for by a parent<sup>8</sup> and a further 20% by a relative or family friend. Of those children attending centre-based care, children under 3 represent just 18% of all children registered, with only 2% of children under 1. From 2017 to 2018 there was an increase in demand for places for babies, with waiting lists rising and settings reporting a drop in the vacancy rates for babies<sup>9</sup>. In 2016, Early Childhood Ireland's [Doing the Sums Report](#) pointed to a worrying trend in the early years sector toward an ECCE-only model as baby and toddler rooms could not compete with the predictability and dependability of the revenue stream provided by an ECCE room. Many services were choosing to limit, or remove entirely, the availability of childcare services outside of the ECCE programme.

The cost of childcare in Ireland remains among the highest in the EU. Low-income families and lone-parent families are more likely to be unable to access formal childcare due to affordability<sup>10</sup>. The availability and cost of full-time childcare presents barriers to female labour market participation and hinders efforts to reduce child poverty<sup>11</sup>. While investment has increased in recent years, from €260 million in 2015 to €574 million in 2019<sup>12</sup>, overall spending remains low by international standards with just 0.5% of GDP on ECEC (versus the OECD average of 0.8%)<sup>13</sup>. This falls to 0.2% of GDP if spending on primary school for under 6s is taken out.<sup>14</sup>

6 In the context of Ireland, it is common to see both Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). They both refer to the same services.

7 [Ireland: Early Childhood Education and Care](#). Eurydice Network Website. Updated on 22.05.18

8 [Module on Childcare](#). Central Statistics Office. 06.06.2017

9 [Early Years Sector Profile Report 2017/2018](#). Pobal. November 2018, p. 32

10 Grotti, R. et al. '[Technical Paper on Social inclusion and access to care services in Ireland](#)'. Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Dublin. February 14, 2019

11 [Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2018 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2018 Stability Programme of Ireland](#). Council of the European Union: 9201/1/ - COM(2018) 407 final. 15.06.2018

12 O'Brien, Carl. "[Half a billion euro surplus in State training fund 'unacceptable'](#)". The Irish Times. 1.06.2019

13 [Ireland: Starting Strong IV: Early Childhood Education and Care Data Country Note](#). OECD, 2015

14 [Parliamentary Question to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs Early Childhood Care and Education Data](#). Irish Parliament. Written answers on Tuesday, 12 February 2019

The most used type of non-parental childcare in Ireland is a childminder or au-pair, with children spending an average of 27 hours in this type of care compared to 25 hours in centre-based care<sup>15</sup>. It is estimated that there are 19,000 childminders throughout across Ireland. However, there are fewer than 100 childminders registered with the national child and family agency, Tusla. In 2019, Early Childhood Ireland's second annual Childcare Barometer found that **87%** of Irish adults are in favour of Garda vetting and basic training requirements for childminders. Meanwhile, *First 5* commits to supporting the registration of childminders in order to avail of subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme.

Quality matters most in determining whether or not early childhood education and care has a beneficial and persistent impact on a child's development<sup>16</sup>. Ireland's two Quality and Curriculum Frameworks, *Síolta* and *Aistear*<sup>17</sup>, inform and support the provision of early childhood education and care for children under 6 years. Quality assurance however is currently an issue for under 3s as there are no inspections that focus on the quality of the curriculum delivered to this cohort. While all services are expected to be compliant with the 2016 Regulations, the focus of inspections for children under 3 centres on the themes of governance, health and safety and premises and facilities. *First 5* sets out a commitment to pilot education focused inspections in early years settings for children under 3 years of age.

The Department of Education and Skills 2010 Workforce Development plan acknowledged the strong evidence base that early childhood experiences have a critical impact on the well-being, learning and development of children, and that the skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes of the workforce delivering early years services was a determining factor in the quality of those experiences.

Since 2010, Ireland has seen the introduction of a minimum Level 5 qualification in early childhood education and care on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)<sup>18</sup>, and a contractual requirement for a Level 6 qualification to deliver the ECCE programme with a view to improving quality of provision for children over 3. A new national Continuous Professional Development infrastructure is currently in development and the Learner Fund provides financial support for those working in the sector to *upskill*. The workforce has upskilled since 2010 when 71% of the workforce had a qualification level equal to or higher than NFQ Level 5 to 94% by mid-2018<sup>19</sup>.

Despite this increase in qualification levels and taking on greater professional responsibilities, there has been little to no real improvements in staff wages, working conditions or professional status. While incentivisation schemes have been introduced to encourage the employment of graduates in the ECCE Scheme there have been no such schemes for staff caring for children under 3 with the result that this age group are less likely to be cared for by a graduate. The most qualified personnel are more likely to be working with children aged 3 to 5<sup>20</sup>. The quality and consistency of early years staff are a critical factor in providing quality experiences to babies and children. There is an ongoing recruitment and retention crisis, largely due to the precarious terms and conditions of the sector leading to an annual staff turnover rate of 24.7%<sup>21</sup>.

15 Module on Childcare in Q3 2016. Central Statistics Office. 06.06.2017

16 Kennedy, Fiachra and Mary Clarke. "Prevention & Early Intervention Series, Focussed Policy Assessment No.5 Early: Learning & Childcare". Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. November 2018

17 In Ireland, there are two early childhood frameworks—*Síolta* and *Aistear*. While similar in many ways, ***Síolta*** (National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education) is concerned with all aspects of quality in early childhood, whilst ***Aistear*** (Early Childhood Curriculum Framework) focuses specifically on curriculum.

18 Launched in 2003, the NFQ was developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland as a means of comparing training and qualifications between institutions of education at all levels. The framework consists of 10 "Levels", ranging from Certificates at Level 1 which signify initial learning to degrees at doctoral level.

19 Early Years Sector Profile Report 2017/2018. Pobal. November 2018, p. 10

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

In April 2019, the Department of Education and Skills published 'Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland'. There is also a professional award criteria and guidelines currently in the consultation process for Level 5 and Level 6 Awards. This will lead to improved quality and consistency across programmes in terms of content and delivery and will lead to clear professional pathways. For the first time, early years sector practitioners will have access to a suite of professional awards from entry level qualifications at Level 5 to honours degree level.

Furthermore, in 2019, as part of the commitment set out in the Implementation Plan for First 5, the Department of Children & Youth Affairs established the Workforce Development Plan Steering Group to assist the department achieve its target of a 50% graduate-led workforce by 2028. This group is tasked with addressing the terms and conditions of employment for the workforce, creating a high level vision for the early years workforce and completing a skills forecast to address the ongoing recruitment and retention challenges in the sector.

Early Childhood Ireland and other organisations have contributed to the upskilling and training of the workforce including initiating a Diploma course which led to a demand for accredited training. European Nova project funding was used to deliver a 'train the trainer' course to deliver accredited training to staff working in the sector. These Quality Improvement Programmes informed Solta, the national quality assurance framework and Aistear, the national curriculum framework for early childhood. In addition, Early Childhood Ireland collaborated with the National University of Ireland Maynooth to develop a Level 8 Degree Programme in 2011 with a view to improving the quality of pedagogy and practice in early years settings.

It is also critical that both policy and practice are subjected to supportive monitoring and evaluation and well-designed research.

- **The Nurture Programme - Infant Health and Wellbeing** is being evaluated in order to inform the future development of the programme and to identify the learning for other system-change initiatives within health and public sector services.
- The 2014 evaluation of the **Area Based Childhood Programme**<sup>22</sup> highlighted the need to focus on the first three years of a child's life, support parents and professionals working with children and families, and additional resources to facilitate better inter-agency working and community engagement. Key recommendations from this report have been reflected in First 5. The new **Poverty and Social Inclusion: An Integrated Strategy 2019-2025** must be informed by commitments set out in *First 5*.

2020 should have seen the first year of full implementation of the National Childcare Scheme, as well as the significant advancement of two separate actions identified in the First 5 strategy to progress a new funding model and to examine and plan for workforce development for the sector. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the Scheme and other funding programmes were suspended for 3 months, and the start dates of other initiatives were delayed until October. The latter will now not be completed until early-mid 2021. There have been more immediate impacts on early years settings which Early Childhood Ireland identified in new, qualitative research<sup>23</sup>; but we will not know the medium or long-term impacts on provision for birth-3-year olds for some time.

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22 Hickey, C., O'Riordan, A., Huggins, S. and Beatty, D. National Evaluation of the Area Based Childhood Programme: Summary Report. 2018. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Centre for Effective Services

23 Early Childhood Ireland. 2020. Dealing with the Pandemic: the case of early years and school age childcare providers in Ireland. Dublin: Early Childhood Ireland - available online [here](#).

## Lessons Learnt & Recommendations

Historically, Ireland has had a fragmented approach to early childhood development with limited inter-agency working across key stakeholders. Ireland has an infrastructure deficit leading to a lack of affordable childcare and insecurity for parents. Recent developments have reflected a recognition of the critical importance of high-quality early years provision. The *First 5* National Early Years Strategy has taken on board key recommendations from evaluations of the ABC and The Nurture Programmes, but **further investment**, as well as a **robust implementation** plan is needed to realise the ambitious proposals set out in the strategy.

The National Childcare Scheme, if planned and implemented properly, has the potential to transform service provision Ireland for under 3s. However, **without adequate resourcing at both national and local level** this will not be achieved. Sufficient resourcing is needed to support systems change as the child and family support workforce are not systematically linked from the antenatal stage to age 3. The commitment in the *First 5* strategy to double expenditure on early years is not sufficient to achieve the ambitious targets. Ireland invests approximately 0.1% GDP in the early years sector (2015)<sup>24</sup>. This is significantly below the OECD average of 0.8% GDP. If real change is to be achieved, investment must be aligned with the UNICEF international benchmark of 1% GDP<sup>25</sup> for Ireland to catch up with most of our EU neighbours. Early Childhood Ireland's Barometer 2020 indicates there is continuing strong public support for increased government investment in early years.



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<sup>24</sup> Ireland: *Education at a Glance*. OECD Indicators. OECD Publishing, 2018

<sup>25</sup> Bennet, John. *Innocenti Working Paper: Benchmark for Early Childhood Services in OECD Countries*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. October 2008

## The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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**National Coordinators:** Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).