

**Social
Democrats**

A New Deal for Parents

*Getting it right for
children, for families*

*Hope for better.
Vote for better.
Vote Social Democrats.*

#VoteforBetter

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Introduction

Parenting is the most important job that any of us will ever do. After all, the future of our country depends on it.

Yet, in Ireland, we do so little to support parents. We are so far behind other countries in terms of childcare, parental leave, supports for new parents, and basic public services for children.

The Social Democrats believe that parents deserve a break. Parenting should be more than just about surviving week to week or an ongoing battle to ensure your child gets the services they are entitled to.

We want a **New Deal for Parents**.

The New Deal puts parents and children at the heart of Government policies. It will support those parenting, in all forms of families, by allowing them more time with their children, more help with the cost of raising a family, and more peace of mind over their children's future.

Below, the Social Democrats are proposing a range of measures including the following:

- Introducing a **right to flexible work** options
- **Helping with the costs** of raising children
- Respecting and **supporting all childcare choices**
- **Public services parents can count on** in areas such as Education and Health
- **Ending Child Poverty**
- Promoting **healthy and active lifestyles**
- Protecting children **on-line**

Improving flexible work options for Parents

The Social Democrats have a strong commitment to **extending and vastly improving entitlement to Parental Leave and flexible work options** in Ireland.

Ireland lags far behind most other EU countries in terms of both paid and unpaid parental leave. This is not in the interests of employers, workers or children. Our leave system should be providing far better support and flexibility for parents.

In the last Dáil we published a Bill which extended unpaid parental leave to six months and raised the qualifying age from 8 to 12 years, and we fought hard to get it through the Houses of the Oireachtas. **As a result, new parental leave entitlements came into force in September of last year.**

Based on feedback on this Bill we believe there is huge public demand to extend both paid and unpaid parental leave much further. **Parents want the option of spending time with their children while also retaining a right to return to their employment.** This is not too much to ask.

The Social Democrats favour the **extension of paid parental leave** so that in conjunction with paid maternity leave, paternity leave and existing paid parental leave, the **first 12 months of a child's life can be covered by paid leave.** The amount of leave would be set at the level of Maternity Benefit and would be state-funded. It would be shareable between parents.

We would like to see the overall amount of paid and unpaid parental leave extended to the European average of around **100 weeks per child.** We would also like to see the general child qualifying age for unpaid parental leave extended to 16 years. We will significantly relax the qualifying criteria on how parental leave can be taken as the rules are currently far too strict.

It is clear from the uptake of the existing limited flexible work options that there is a high demand for these options. In addition, there is **growing interest among workers and employers in providing for a 4-day working week.** This is already available and promoted in many other countries and the outcomes have been generally very positive. The demand for more flexible working is especially strong from parents of young children, those caring for an older

person or a family member with a disability, and generally where people are seeking a better work/life balance.

We will establish a Commission to research, **trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work** including working from home, term-time working and a 4-day week, and to ensure that it works for parents, families of all types, and for large and small employers.

We also recognise that parents of children with disabilities and certain carers have particular demands on their time and require further flexibility. We will **raise the qualifying child age for unpaid parental leave to 16 years and to 18 years for children with disabilities**. We will provide for this and other flexibilities through a **new Family Leave Act** in consultation with representatives from those sectors.

Supporting All Childcare Choices

Irish parents pay some of the **highest costs in the world for childcare**. Despite some recent improvements, childcare remains a huge expense for many families.

The Social Democrats have supported the recent introduction of the National Childcare Scheme. However, the scheme as currently constituted, falls far short of meeting the needs of those parenting and the very expensive costs of raising a family in Ireland.

According to Pobal childcare costs continue to rise with the average fee for a full-time place now at €184 p.w, €110 p.w for a part-time place and €73 p.w for a sessional place. In each case the rate of increase is above the general rate of inflation so it's a case of a bad situation becoming even worse. Costs are significantly higher in urban areas, with average full-time weekly fees now over €200 per week in parts of Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare. **For many Irish parents, especially those with more than one child, childcare represents the cost of a second mortgage.**

In addition, many parents don't qualify for support under the scheme either because their income is not deemed low enough or their child is not deemed young enough.

These major gaps significantly raise the cost of living for such families and represent a very significant barrier to employment, especially for women and people parenting b. **Parents have a right to expect that like other developed European countries, childcare should be accessible, affordable and adequately supported by the state.**

However, the Social Democrats also recognise that it is **not just parents using the formal childcare sector who face high costs**. And neither are these high costs confined to just the youngest families.

Many families adjust their childcare arrangements as their families and work arrangements change over time. Many take time out of work to care for their family, use a Nanny/Au Pair, the formal childcare sector, or family members, or move in and out of childminding.

A 2017 CSO report on the childcare choices for children aged 0-12 yrs (see Table below) showed that 70% of children were minded by a parent, 16% by family or a friend, 13% by a crèche, and 10% by a childminder. For pre-school children, 62% were minded by parents, 19% in the formal childcare sector, 17% by a family or friend, and 13% by a Childminder.

Types of Childcare Used	% of children aged 0-12	
	2007	2016
Parent / Partner	75	70
Unpaid relative or family friend	9	16
Paid relative or family friend	3	3
Childminder / Au Pair / Nanny	9	10
Creche / Montessori / Playgroup / After-school facility	9	13
Other	1	1

Source: CSO, July 2017 – Figure add up to more than 100% as some families use multiple types of childcare.

Most of these choices entail costs, either directly or through **income-foregone**. So, it's **important that all childcare arrangements are respected and supported by the state**.

In addition, the Social Democrats are keen to ensure that the childcare sector is placed on a sustainable footing and that **childcare workers are valued both in terms of wages and training**. This is not only in the interests of the workers themselves but also parents and children.

The Social Democrats will introduce **four key childcare measures** to help parents to support their families:

1. As above, we will introduce **additional paid parental leave** from the end of maternity and paternity leave to the child's first birthday.
2. We will provide a **new Early Years Payment to cover children from the end of paid parental leave until entry into preschool**.
3. We will **significantly improve support under the National Childcare Scheme** to allow far more families with children under the age of 12 to qualify and to improve supports under the universal element of the scheme.

Parents with young children who have not yet reached pre-school

age would be given the choice of the Early Years Payment or assistance under the National Childcare Scheme.

We would set aside funding to ensure that no parent is worse off when transferring from existing community childcare subvention schemes to the new National Childcare Scheme

4. We will **improve direct funding to the childcare sector to help improve employment conditions and training, and to improve sustainability.**

We will also seek to reduce the administrative burden on the sector through direct assistance from County Childcare Committees.

We will **deal with insurance hikes in the sector through significant reform of Ireland's claims regime and the regulation of insurance companies.**

We will introduce a single Early Years and School Age Childcare Agency. If childcare fees continue to increase in line with subsidies, we will introduce measures to cap them.

It is the long-term aim of the Social Democrats to **establish a national public childcare service** and as a first step we would **pilot this public provision** of childcare in areas where there are the most acute shortages.

Supporting Parents through Better Public Services

Education

The Social Democrats are committed to the introduction of **truly free Primary and Secondary Education**. This would mean investing in schools to improve school capitation grants, school transport, and book schemes to ensure that schools **end the practice of seeking voluntary contributions from parents**.

We will also ensure that school managers adopt a principle of cost-minimisation in relation to school uniforms and other school costs.

We will invest in **new primary school teachers, supports for special needs**, and strive towards the full commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 so that parents with children with special needs do not need to be eternally campaigning for their child's rights.

Healthcare

Our Sláintecare proposals will provide for the **expansion of frontline primary care services**.

It will mean that **basic services that are key to a child's development such as public health nursing, speech and language therapy, and eye, ear and dental services will be significantly improved** so that parents can rely on them if their child needs them.

Research by Barnardos has shown that thousands of children still wait very lengthy periods for basic health services such as speech and language services. Our own research has highlighted **completely unacceptable waiting times in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, in psychology and many other streams of child health services**. These waiting times would be significantly reduced under our proposals.

Please see our other General Election policy and manifesto documents on education (forthcoming) on health ([A Health Service: When you need it, as you need it](#)).

Parental Support:

We will campaign for better direct supports for parents and improve peer supports.

We would like to extend existing initiatives whereby mothers/parents in the same community that have children in the same month are invited to come together 1 day per week for advice on parenting. This takes place over 1 month - from that point, if parents wish to continue to meet, they can.

As part of the full roll-out of Sláintecare we will provide **additional funding for public health nursing** and we would like to see some of this investment going to **dedicated child and family public health nurses**.

Investing in public health nursing will also allow for a **much sharper focus on breast-feeding**. We are keen to take a number of measures to support breast-feeding by ensuring maternity services are properly resourced to support new mothers, by extending entitlement to breaks to breast-feeding mothers, by requiring large workplaces to provide breast-feeding rooms and a small fridge for breast-feeding mothers who wish to pump, and by **establishing a breast-milk bank in the Republic**. Ultimately, we would like to move towards the much-heralded Australian model for support for first-time mothers.

Ending Child Poverty

It's a huge indictment of our country that about 100,000 of our children grow up in consistent poverty. In practical terms, this means they live in a household with a very low income and go without basics such as adequate food or heat, or they face social exclusion.

This is simply **unacceptable**. Allowing children fall behind so early in life stores up huge problems for the future, and it costs society dearly in the long run.

As an over-riding aim the Social Democrats want a **clear target set down in the next Programme for Government that consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated as early as possible within the lifetime of the next Dáil**. This is very readily achievable. This is a make or break issue for us entering Government.

We feel strongly that the **Taoiseach needs to lead a cross-Department approach on ending child poverty** and should be directly accountable for achieving that target.

We also feel that we need to significantly **improve how we measure child poverty. Current measures are completely inadequate**. The focus on income is far too crude and there should be a far greater emphasis on actual outcomes for children. In particular, the effect of homelessness, parental health or addiction issues, the high cost of living or the absence of key health or education public services are not adequately factored into how Ireland currently measures child poverty.

Some of the main measures we advocate include:

- **Set official all-of-Government target of ending Consistent Child Poverty by the early 2020s** – led by An Taoiseach; Change the recently published Roadmap for Social Inclusion to incorporate this specific goal.
- **Replicate targeted area-based investment** similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving

learning and well-being outcomes.

- **Provide free primary education** to all children to cover the costs of transport, books and classroom resources.
- Increase **funding for TUSLA and recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff** to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- Expand the National Childcare Scheme (as above).
- Introduce a new **Early Years Payment** for all parents of young children and support the introduction of paid parental leave and extended unpaid parental leave (as above).
- Increase the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.
- **Improve funding to the DEIS programme** and target the needs of disadvantaged students outside these areas.
- Expand the number of **special needs assistants**.
- Prioritise housing and **end the practice of children living in hotel rooms, hubs, and other emergency accommodation**.
- **Extend the school meals programme** on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food.
- Implement a range of programmes and initiatives of **support to parents in the critical 0-3 stage of development**, focusing on parental well-being and early infant development.
- Roll-out Sláintecare which will provide for the **expansion of frontline primary care services, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and public health nurses**.
- Introduce a statutory Child Maintenance Service.
- **Poverty-proof all Budgets** and set against the targets of the new Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Promoting Active and Healthy lifestyles

One in four of our children are overweight or obese – with marked differences depending on family income. Three in four adults over 50 are overweight or obese. **Ireland has the fourth highest level of overweight and obese men in the EU and the seventh highest for women.**

We have a problem. It's time we faced it.

Obesity in children is almost entirely preventable. There are multiple factors involved including diet and nutrition, food affordability, education, activity and exercise.

We need action in a host of areas including promoting active lifestyles, portion-sizes, the availability and affordability of high calorie food/drinks, weight management programmes, parental and child education, food labelling, reformulation of food and drink, marketing and advertising restrictions, taxes, and public health campaigns.

A key factor is also the amount of quality time available to parents – this impacts on parents ability to cook proper food, the amount of activities their children can be involved in, and the amount of time children spend on screens. It is one of the reasons why the Social Democrats have placed so much emphasis on extending leave and flexible work options for parents.

The national action plan on obesity – A Healthy Weight for Ireland - sets a very good framework for the problem but is very weak in terms of concrete actions, timelines and budgets. It is over-reliant on voluntary codes of practice and does very little to address the bombardment of our children with inappropriate food marketing through broadcasting.

The Social Democrats will address these weaknesses by drawing up a **new national plan for obesity**. To ensure there is proper buy-in from all Departments, this plan will be headed by the office of An Taoiseach, and Departments would have to report to An Taoiseach through a new National Implementation Office.

As part of this plan we will:

- Introduce a **ban on all food advertising aimed at children**.
- Improve labelling and nutrition information on food and drinks, and the public's understanding of it.
- Introduce a **sweet snack tax**.
- Ensure that “**no fry zones**” are put in place within 400m of all schools, where practicable, as has happened in Wicklow.
- **Ban vending machines** in schools.
- Require all schools to have **healthy food policies** and provide guidelines on school lunches.
- Increase **exercise time** in schools.
- Invest heavily in **sport and recreation**, ensuring that there are grant allocations on an annual basis and that qualifying criteria are strongly skewed towards driving participation.
- Promote **safe cycling** as a viable option for children.

Protecting Children on-line

The digital age brings both opportunities and significant challenges for children and parents.

Children are far more exposed to on-line material, social media and computer gaming with many companies seeking to improve their commercial reach by actively and in some cases aggressively targeting children.

The Social Democrats wish to **protect children from over-zealous consumerism and marketing**, and to provide parents with better information on how to deal with on-line bullying issues, social media concerns, and over-use of computer games.

The Social Democrats commit to:

- Supporting the roll out of the new **Digital Rights Commission**
 - Developing a new **National Strategy on Children’s Cyber Safety and On-line Bullying**
 - Much better public awareness campaigns for parents and children on **on-line safety issues and digital well-being**
 - Enacting legislation to reflect the Law Reform Commission’s recommendations in its publication, “Report on Harmful Communications and Digital Safety”.
 - Ensuring the continued **prohibition of the use of children’s online data for commercial marketing purposes** by keeping the ban on the practice of ‘profiling’ for under 18-year-olds.
 - Developing new public health guidelines and awareness campaigns for the maximum length of time children of various ages should spend playing computer games.
 - Establishing a **review of how loot boxes and some in-game purchases are targeted at children**, a review of the extent to which they constitute gambling and a review on whether or not these should be banned in games with certain age-ratings.
- We would also set down a requirement for a new warning system on computer games sold over-the-counter to alert parents

that the game includes in-game purchases and/or loot boxes.

- Introducing new regulations to prevent over-the-counter sales

of computer games to children who are under the age-rating for the game (as in Britain)



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