

Rising to the Challenge

Delivering world-class early childhood education and care for babies, children and families in Ireland.

Budget 2019 Submission

Introduction

In advance of Budget 2019, Early Childhood Ireland commissioned RedC to learn more about the views of the Irish people on childcare¹. In the first opinion poll of its kind, we garnered invaluable information about what the public want, need and expect from early childhood education and care policy in Ireland.

Our inaugural **Childcare Barometer** found that:

- 75% of Irish adults believe the education of babies and children under 5 is as important as the education of children over 5;
- Almost 7 in 10 adults agree that parents should be financially supported to stay at home with their child for the first 12 months of the child's life;
- 72% of 18-44-year olds believe that childcare should be free in Ireland.

There is strong public support for increased government investment in the early years. While Minister Zappone and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) have been successful in securing some additional resources, this would need to increase at least ten-fold in 2019 and beyond for Ireland to catch up with most of our EU neighbours. As the leading early years organisation, Early Childhood Ireland will be launching a campaign to secure public and political support for major increased investment for the first years of a child's life. Meanwhile, Budget 2019 represents an opportunity for the government to show that it also accepts the need to address the historical under-investment in this critical period of young children's lives. The right to education and care of under 6s should allow the same certainty for parents and children as is the case for those aged over five. Putting the interests of babies, young children and their families at the centre of its considerations would allow the current as well as future governments to move Ireland from the bottom to the top of world rankings on provision of quality early years.

Early Childhood Ireland is calling on Government to commit to increasing budget allocation for childcare by a minimum of €250 million (approximately 0.1% of GDP) every year over the next five years. This should be achieved through a combination of direct investment into the early childhood education and care sector by DCYA and indirect investment to the benefit of early years by other relevant departments.

¹ The term 'childcare' is used to denote the provision of early childhood care and education (ECEC) by registered and regulated early years services, including formal, centre-based, preschool and afterschool services run by both community organisations and private providers and childminders.

Budget 2019 Recommendations

National Early Years Strategy

The National Early Years Strategy is a unique opportunity to identify the needs, opportunities and best interests of every child in Ireland from birth to 6 years of age, with special focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC). The Strategy must recognise a high quality, universal, and accessible ECEC system as a right for all young children. It must reflect the State's role in reducing pressures on parents and families, enhancing the capacity of parents and families to promote and uphold their children's rights, and resource ECEC settings to support and maximise the quality of children's earliest experiences. The evidence informed policies set out in the Strategy must be accompanied by an implementation plan and timeframe and be met with the necessary funding by all the Government Departments charged with their delivery. The Strategy must serve as the roadmap for the future direction, development and funding of ECEC in Ireland.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Well-Paid Family Leave

As part of the important journey towards well-paid family leave in the first year of a child's life, introduce four weeks' paid parental leave, which can be shared by parents following maternity and paternity leave entitlements.

Increase all existing and future family leave entitlements to meet the European Commission definition of well-paid leave, which is a minimum of 66% of normal earnings.

-Lead department: Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

Independent Review of Costs

Ensure the findings of the independent review of the cost of providing quality childcare, commissioned by the DCYA and available to the Minister in June 2018, informs budgetary allocation for the early years sector in 2019. In particular, the findings must inform the funding and continuing development of the Affordable Childcare Scheme.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Professionalisation Plan

A professionalisation plan for the early years workforce is needed without delay. This should address current challenges and support future-proofing the sector. Given the terms and conditions that most of the sector is in a position to offer, recruitment and retention are already severe pressure points.

Sustainability Funding

Building on sustainability efforts in the previous two Budgets, an additional **€500,000** to be made available to support private and community providers whose viability is under threat.

Establish a separate, dedicated sustainability fund to support services for whom the continuing provision of childcare for under 3s is at risk. The fund, with an initial budget of **€3.5 million**, would be designed to support these services to continue providing ECEC services to under 3s.

Publish clear eligibility criteria for both sustainability funding mechanisms.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Infrastructure

Having established Better Start National Early Years Quality Development service as the national lead to plan, coordinate, quality assure and implement the new CPD infrastructure:

- Draft and publish a CPD strategy for the early years sector in consultation with key stakeholders. Align the strategy with national policy objectives that enhance the experiences of all children in childcare settings such as: promoting inclusion, improving quality through the implementation of Síolta and Aistear frameworks, reducing regulatory non-compliance in Tusla inspections and identifying areas of improvement through DES inspections;
- Agree a programme of early years learning and development to be subsidised and incentivised by Government over a 3-5 year timeframe, which will be monitored and evaluated;
- Develop an implementation plan, in consultation with key stakeholders and delivery partners;
- Develop an evaluation framework;
- Establish a funding mechanism to support the implementation of the plan and to fund participation;
- Explore the development of a professional registration system for early years professionals;
- Build capacity to develop and deliver high quality EY (CPD) learning and development.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Capacity Planning

Develop a capacity plan for the early years and school age childcare sector based on evidence of need and forthcoming Universal Design guidelines for the sector. This should set out the numbers and locations for provision. It should include measures to address the most effective mix of efficient setting size needed, subject to geographic and other factors.

Establish a dedicated service to monitor the establishment and closure of early years facilities to ensure there are sufficient numbers of services operating in areas where there is a demand for places. Monitor areas of oversubscription and low enrolment numbers to ensure early years places are available for all children and there are not multiple services with low enrolment.

Make Capital Funding available to services to meet identified capacity needs, including the retrofitting of services to Universal Design standards and to cater for the under 3s.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme

Establish, as a matter of urgency, a High-Level Working Group with DCYA, Tusla, and childcare stakeholders to address the structural and staffing challenges facing service providers in the implementation of the lower age of entry into the ECCE programme.

Building on the success of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in the ECCE programme, extend the targeted AIM supports to ECCE children for the duration of their day in services, be that sessional, part-time or full-time provision.

Publish the cost of introducing AIM to the under 3s and children in school-age childcare.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

The Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS)

Provide all services participating in the ACS with a dedicated tablet device programmed to give parents direct access to the 'Parents' Portal'. This should be wall-mounted with an accompanying 'How to' information poster guiding parents through the application process and facilitating on-site support to parents where needed.

Ensure that the 12-month review of the ACS, currently provided for under section 26 of the Childcare Support Bill, undertakes child poverty proofing to ensure the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families are not penalised in their access to quality childcare by a disproportionate focus on parental labour market activation. As an interim measure to support child development outcomes, increase the maximum 'standard hours subsidy' to 20-hours of childcare per week.

Increase the maximum universal subsidy for children before the start of ECCE by €10 per week, i.e. up to €30 per week for a child in full-time care in 2019.

If the ACS is implemented in September 2019, a fully resourced Communications Strategy designed to speak to the needs of both providers and parents must be rolled out no later than January 2019.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Childminding

Ensure that only appropriately regulated and inspected childminding services are eligible to provide Government funded schemes, such as the Affordable Childcare Scheme.

With an initial budget of **€2 million**, implement the recommendations in the Childminding Working Group Report without delay and ensure funding is ringfenced for inspections.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

School Age Childcare

Ensure that only appropriately regulated and inspected school age childcare services are eligible to provide Government funded schemes, such as the Affordable Childcare Scheme.

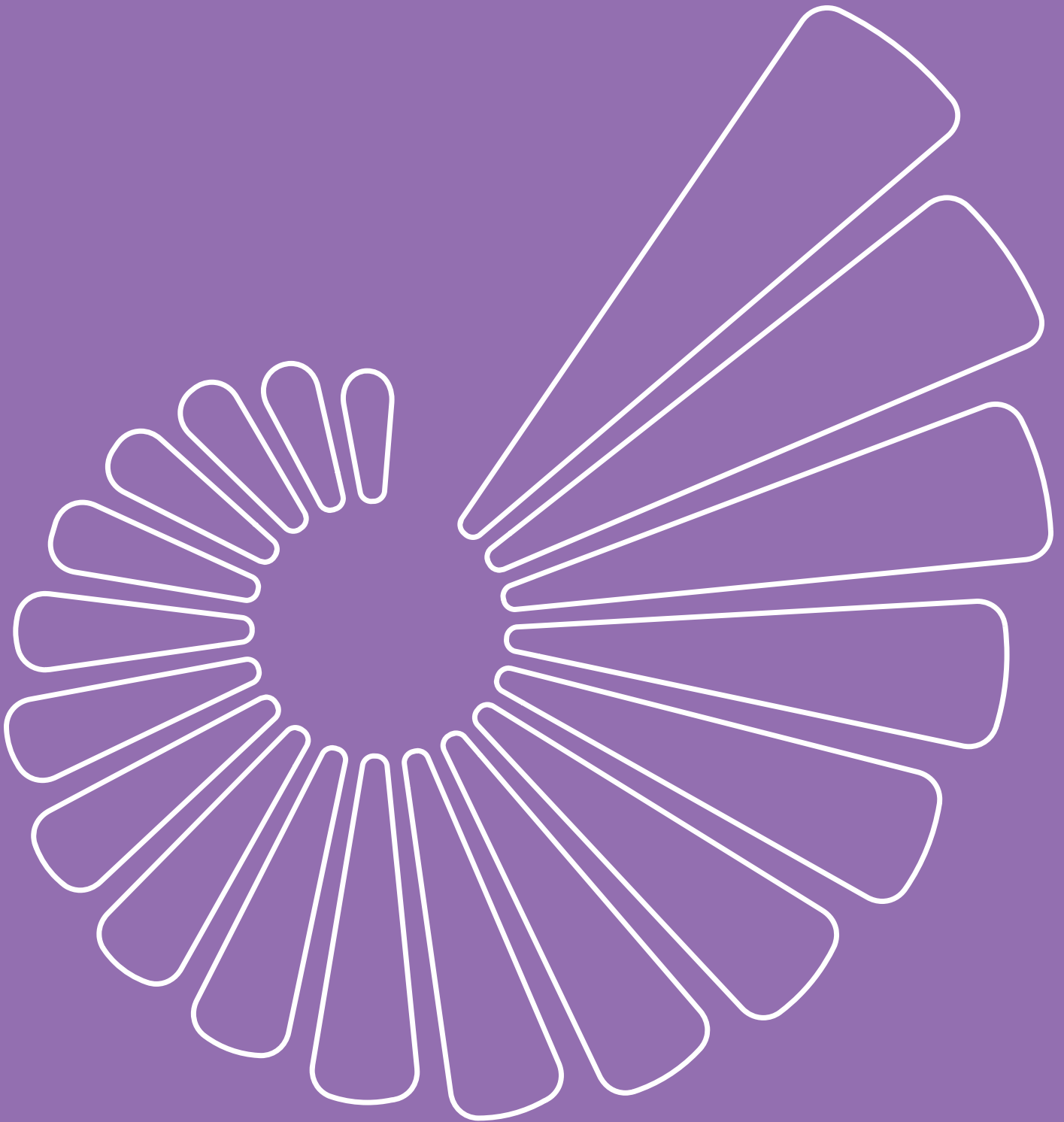
With an initial budget of **€2 million**, implement the recommendations in the Action Plan on School Age Childcare without delay and ensure funding is ringfenced for inspections.

-Lead department: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Commercial Rates

Early childhood education and care services are educational institutions and essential social infrastructure. All settings should be exempt from commercial rates and relieved of an unfair, unequal and inconsistent financial burden.

-Lead department: Department of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government



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