



Submission to the open-ended intergovernmental
working group on an optional protocol to the Convention
on the Rights of the Child

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Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the open-ended intergovernmental working group on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation in Ireland. We work in partnership with our members to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years, School Age Care settings, and childminders' homes. We advocate for an effective and inclusive Early Years and School Age Care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children and services.

As the main focus of our organisation's work concerns early childhood, our submission will cover Questions 1, 3 and 4 with answers specific to all children under the age of six in Early Years settings.

Question 1

What are the main barriers to public pre-primary education available free to all in law, policy, and practice in your country and what is their impact on the rights of the child? Please consider the specific situation of marginalised children and those in vulnerable situations in your response.

There are many barriers to the provision of public pre-primary education available free to all in law, policy and practice in Ireland. As long as these barriers exist, they impact on children's holistic rights including non-discrimination, education, expression, to be heard, and to play and participate in social and cultural activities.

Barriers in law

Currently, there is no legislation in Ireland which provides for public pre-primary education that is free to all, nor is it compulsory to attend a pre-school setting. Ireland's Early Years strategy, [First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028](#), includes a commitment to "introduce a universal legal entitlement to pre-school," however, this commitment has not yet been delivered.

Barriers in policy

As outlined above, there is currently no specific policy where public pre-primary education is free to all children, nor do we have a policy which makes it compulsory to attend a pre-school setting. There is a government commitment to introduce a universal legal entitlement to a pre-school setting.

Lack of progress on the pre-school commitment: Ireland's Early Years strategy, [First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028](#) includes a commitment to "introduce a universal legal entitlement to pre-school¹." This commitment has not yet been delivered. Providing a universal legal entitlement to a pre-school place would ensure increased participation levels in Early Years settings for all children, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage.

Investment: Currently, Ireland's investment in Early Years is at an unprecedented level, (exceeding €1.37 billion in 2025), however, in comparison to other countries our investment level in Early Years is quite low. Ireland spends less than 0.2% of its Gross Domestic Product

¹ First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028, Government of Ireland, 2019

(GDP) on early childhood education, compared to 0.9% of GDP on average across OECD countries².

Capacity/accessibility: There is no policy in Ireland that commits to delivering an adequate or specific number of pre-primary education places. A barrier for many families accessing pre-primary education is the difficulty in securing an Early Years place. Latest available data on capacity in Ireland’s Early Years settings for children under the age of six show that in 2023/2024 there were over 65,500 children on waiting lists for an Early Years place.³

Affordability/accessibility: Affordability is a significant barrier to children accessing Early Years services in Ireland. Childcare costs for parents remain among the highest in the OECD countries.⁴ Notwithstanding the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme (see below), (a free universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within an eligible age range providing 15 hours per week for 38 weeks in the year), affordability is a barrier for parents whose children are not eligible for the ECCE Programme or whose children require full-time Early Years care and education.

Privatised system: 75% of Early Years settings in Ireland are run by private providers, and 25% are run by community providers. In its review of the Early Years system in Ireland, the OECD reports that this “existing model of private provision creates challenges for access, affordability and quality,⁵” while “at the same time, community-based providers, which often serve more disadvantaged children and may have difficulty raising sufficient fees from parents, seem to be struggling to be financially sustainable⁶.”

Supports for children with additional needs: The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a suite of supports designed to ensure that children with a disability can access and meaningfully participate in the free pre-school programme, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. While these supports are welcome, they are limited to children who participate in the ECCE Programme, which is only available to children between the ages of 2 years and 8 months, and 5 years and 6 months.

Recently, the government expanded the AIM Programme to enable ECCE-enrolled children with additional needs to remain for a full day in the setting and outside of term-time if they choose to do so. This is a welcome improvement, but it does not provide for all children under the age of six with additional needs in Early Years settings.

Barriers in practice

Pre-school additional costs: A review of the free pre-school programme, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, reports that although ECCE “is principally free of charge, some underlying costs still appear to prevail⁷,” such as booking deposits and school trips. One in ten parents surveyed for the review found these costs “difficult” or “very difficult” to afford⁸.

² OECD, 2024. *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD Publishing

³ Pobal Early Years Sector Profile 2023/24, [Capacity](#)

⁴ OECD, 2021. *Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality*, Paris: OECD Publishing

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ An Independent Review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme in Ireland, DCU and Stranmillis University College, 2024

⁸ *ibid*

Other barriers

Child poverty and the enrolment gap: The number of children living in consistent poverty in Ireland rose from 4.8% in 2023 to 8.5% in 2024⁹. Children experiencing disadvantage in Ireland are less likely to attend an Early Years setting. 54% of children from birth to 2 years of age from high income families in Ireland are enrolled in a formal¹⁰ Early Years setting, while only 7% of children of the same age from lower income families are enrolled in a formal setting¹¹. In 2022/2023, “74% of Traveller children and 64.7% of Roma children entered junior infant classes in primary school from the ECCE programme or other preschool setting, compared to 92.3% of the general population.”¹²

Staff recruitment and retention: Due to the poor pay and conditions for Early Years educators, many Early Years settings have difficulty recruiting and retaining staff; staff turnover rates are as high as 54% in some areas¹³. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff can lead to a reduction in the services provided to children in Early Years settings. They can also delay capacity and expansion plans for providers.

Question 3

What are examples of innovative and sustainable financial mechanisms to support the full and effective implementation of public pre-primary and secondary education available free to all children in your country?

In an effort to improve access and participation in Early Years for children experiencing disadvantage, and to provide free or reduced fee costs for children under the age of six in Ireland, the government has introduced several financial mechanisms.

1. **Equal Start** is a funding model with a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in Early Years and School Age Care for children and their families who experience disadvantage. It prioritises settings in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

Equal Start priority cohorts include children and families living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller children, Roma children, children experiencing homelessness and children in the International Protection system.

Supports under Equal Start include funding for additional staff time; Family Link Workers; the appointment of Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists; speech and language supports; and a nutrition programme.

2. The **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme** is a free universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within an eligible age range. It has a participation rate of 96% each year and is optional.

Although the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) is free, it offers a limited number of 15 hours per week, at a maximum number of three hours per day, for 38 weeks per year. It is also limited to children between the ages of 2 years and 8 months, and 5 years and 6 months

3. The **National Childcare Scheme (NCS)** provides financial support to help parents meet the costs of childcare, providing universal and income-related subsidies.

⁹ Central Statistics Office, 2024. *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)*, s.l.: Central Statistics Office

¹⁰ Registered Early Years settings.

¹¹ OECD, 2024. *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD Publishing

¹² Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030, Government of Ireland, 2024

¹³ [Policy in Action](#), Early Childhood Ireland, April 2025

Children can also be referred for an NCS Sponsor Referral subsidy, based on child welfare, child protection, family support or other specified grounds. In cases of Sponsor Referral, the parent will pay no fees to the childcare provider. Of the 220,000 children who benefitted from the NCS in 2024, fewer than 4% had their place funded under the NCS Sponsor Referral.

4. The [Access and Inclusion Model \(AIM\)](#) is a suite of supports designed to ensure that children with a disability can access and meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme and early learning and childcare more broadly. Where universal supports are not enough to meet the needs of an individual child, targeted supports are available to ensure the child can meaningfully participate in pre-school. Supports include equality, diversity and inclusion training; Continuing Professional Development courses for educators; expert educational advice and support; therapy support; and additional funding to the pre-school to fund extra support. AIM is only available to children availing of the ECCE Programme. It is not available to all children in Early Years settings.
5. [Core Funding Scheme](#) is a funding stream paid directly to Early Years settings to help cover their operating costs. It is intended to improve affordability, quality, inclusion, and sustainability. It is also meant to support the development of a partnership relationship between Early Years settings and the State that reflects the public good dimension of Early Years education and care.

The government has provided Core Funding totalling €331 million for this programme year (September 2024-August 2025). As part of the agreement to accept Core Funding, settings must agree to keep their fees at a certain level. 92% of settings in Ireland have signed up to Core Funding.

Question 4

What steps is the Government taking to remove barriers and make public pre-primary and secondary education available free to all, including through the allocation of adequate resources and cross-sectoral and international cooperation? Please provide examples of specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programmes.

At an international level, Ireland has signed the following agreements, which may remove barriers for children accessing Early Years education:

- The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- The [European Child Guarantee](#)

At a national level, the government has endeavoured to remove barriers to pre-primary education with the following proposals:

Legal entitlement to pre-school: Ireland's Early Years strategy, [First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028](#) includes a commitment to "introduce a universal legal entitlement to pre-school." This commitment has not yet been delivered.

Investment: Despite Ireland being at the bottom of the list of OECD countries for spending on Early Years education¹⁴, the amount that Ireland has committed to spend in 2025 is

¹⁴ OECD, 2024. *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD Publishing

unprecedented, exceeding €1.25 billion. In its [Programme for Government 2025](#), the government promised to “continue to grow State involvement and investment in the sector.”

Capacity/accessibility: In an effort to increase capacity in Early Years settings, the government has recently established a Forward Planning and Delivery Unit within the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to identify areas of capacity need and better forecast demand for Early Years places.

The government has also provided [capital grants](#) to eligible Early Years settings to improve, expand or extend their existing facilities. It has also increased Core Funding year-on-year since its inception in 2021, which has given rise to an expansion of places since the scheme was first introduced.

Affordability/accessibility: To reduce the cost of childcare fees for parents, the government introduced the National Childcare Scheme, which provides financial support to help parents meet the costs of childcare, providing universal and income-related subsidies (see above). Parents of children who avail of NCS Sponsorship (see above) do not pay fees.

Supports for children with additional needs: Recently, the government expanded the Access and Inclusion (AIM) Programme (see above) to enable ECCE-enrolled children with additional needs to remain for a full day in the setting, including out of term-time, if they choose to do so. This is a welcome improvement.

Child poverty and the enrolment gap: the government has set up a [Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office](#) in the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) “to coordinate government actions that reduce child poverty and foster children’s well-being.”

Under [Equal Start](#), the funding model to support access to and participation in early learning and care for children who experience disadvantage, the Family Link Workers will work with families to improve enrolment and attendance at Early Years settings.

Quality in pre-schools: Ireland has a regulatory framework enforced by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, and by the Department of Education, which monitors standards and quality in Early Years settings. In 2016, the government published a [Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education](#) to embrace, promote and embed the principles of inclusion in Early Years settings and to help create inclusive Early Years environments for young children. All regulated Early Years settings follow a strong rights-based curriculum framework, [Aistear](#), and quality standards in Early Childhood Education, [Síolta](#), which outlines standards in areas such as the Rights of the Child; Play; Interactions; and Environments.