Submission to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality Statement of Strategy

May 2025

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Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality Statement of Strategy.

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.

The new Statement of Strategy is expected "to reflect and be informed by the Government's commitments in the *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future*, in addition to key Departmental policies and objectives."[1] This submission will focus on one of the Department's areas of responsibility, namely Early Years and School Age Care.

Vision for children in government policies

Two significant policies for children in Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* and *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*, have an overarching vision for children and young people which "which fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people[2]" and where "all babies' and young children's early years will be valued as a critical and distinct period which should be enjoyed.[3]"

Programme for Government 2025

For the Early Years and School Age Care system, the *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future* commits to the provision of "affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare" by improving capacity; implementing Equal Start; continuing with the Employment Regulation Order for educators; and by ensuring that Childminders play a significant role in Early Years and School Age Care. It also commits to introducing an Earn and Learn apprenticeship model and an Early Years and School Age Care Action Plan.

Early Childhood Ireland proposals

Make Early Years and School Age Care a Right

To align with the government's vision for children and young people, Early Childhood Ireland believes that every child in Ireland should have access to high-quality Early Years and School Age Care as a right. This means guaranteed provision for children in centres or in childminders' homes within their own communities.

[1] Public Consultation on Statement of Strategy
[2] *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-202*
[3] *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*

Implement our 4 Policy Priorities for the Early Years and School Age Care system

Despite significant policy developments and initiatives that have led to an Early Years and School Age Care budget of over €1.3billion in 2025, our system still faces many challenges such as staff recruitment and retention, capacity issues, and the need for better capacity planning.

Early Childhood Ireland recommends the following four policy proposals, which, if implemented, could be transformative for children in Early Years and School Age Care, and their families. They would improve quality; staff retention and recruitment; capacity problems; and bring us in line with our European counterparts in the areas of investment and family leave.

1. **A Sustained and Sustainable Workforce**
   - ✓ As a first step towards a publicly funded model, and to elevate the status of Early Years and School Age Care to that of Primary education, a date should be set by government for bringing Early Years and School Age Care graduates within public sector pay and conditions, in line with teachers.
   - ✓ Implement the Continuous Professional Development actions in Nurturing Skills by 2030. This would enhance professionalisation and attract and retain a high-quality Early Years and School Age Care workforce.
   - ✓ Give statutory recognition to 'non-contact time' to support planning, reflective activities, documentation, and communications with parents.

2. **Capacity Planning**
   - ✓ Implement the Better Data recommendations from Partnership for the Public Good to "monitor the impact of supports to tackle disadvantage on specific cohorts and groups of children."
   - ✓ Initiate a system of national and local 2-year and 5-year planning cycles, to ensure there are enough Early Years and School Age Care places, in settings and Childminders' homes, for children in their own communities.

3. **Five-year plan with a new investment target**
   - ✓ Publish a 5-year plan with a new investment target to ensure that the targets of the overarching Early Years and School Age Care policies (First 5, Nurturing Skills, Partnership for the Public Good) will be achieved by 2030.
   - ✓ This 5-year plan must be achieved with comprehensive consultation with current providers, including childminders.

4. **Family Leave**
   - ✓ Guarantee 66% of a parent/guardian's income during the first year of a child's life to enable them to stay at home during this crucial period.

Establish the Single Agency

Early Childhood Ireland is concerned that the Programme for Government 2025 did not mention the previous government's commitment to "establish an agency….to assist in the expansion of high-quality childcare, spearheading leadership, best practice and innovation, and professional development in community and private settings. It will also be tasked with developing career paths for childcare staff [and] will be responsible for expanding Síolta[4]."

We are also concerned about the pace of the agency's establishment which is still in the design and planning phase.

The creation of a Single Agency has the potential to underpin the Early Years and School Age Care system in Ireland, reduce fragmentation, duplication and inefficiencies, and would go some way to paving a road to a more efficient, accountable, and high-quality system that benefits children, families, providers, and stakeholders alike.

We would like to see a goal on the establishment of this vital agency in the new Statement of Strategy.

[4] Programme for Government, 2020

Appendix 1: Vision for Children in *First 5* and *Young Ireland*

The vision of *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* is for "all babies' and young children's early years will be valued as a critical and distinct period which should be enjoyed. Families will be assisted and enabled to nurture babies and young children and support their development, with additional support for those who need it. Those providing services for babies, young children and their families will be equipped to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing. Community contexts will help babies and young children make the most of their early years and fulfil their potential."
The vision for *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* is to make Ireland a country which "fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people."