



# Early Childhood Ireland Barometer 2026

Policy Developments and  
Public Attitudes to  
Early Years and School Age Care





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# Introduction and Current Context

## About Us

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading national children's advocacy and membership organisation. We work in partnership with Early Years and School Age Care settings to ensure that every child is thriving and learning. We advocate for an effective and inclusive system which values, supports and invests in childhood, children and services.

Early Childhood Ireland has a rich history of member support work, training and strong advocacy that spans over five decades. In 2012, two compatible organisations, the Irish Preschool Play Association (IPPA) and the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA), merged to form Early Childhood Ireland with a combined heritage of over 50 years.

Today Early Childhood Ireland is the largest membership organisation involved in Early Years and School Age Care. We are dedicated to ensuring that every young child is thriving and learning in settings - both centres and childminders' homes. The longevity of the organisation and its continued commitment to this important role is a testament to our leaders and our members.

## Early Years and School Age Care in Ireland

There are close to 5,000 Early Years and School Age Care settings in Ireland. All of them are governed under regulations which cover a range of areas such as child safeguarding, adult-to-child ratios, hygiene and many other areas. Alongside settings, there are an estimated 13,000 childminders. Childminding is currently being put on a more formal footing in Ireland.

## Settings

Unlike in other countries where there is a specific type of setting for children from age one to three years and a different type for those aged three to six years, Irish settings are more varied and include:

- Full day care – commonly called crèches
- Sessional – often preschools which deliver the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme but also have children attending outside the 3-hours provided by the Scheme.
- ECCE-only – preschools that deliver the ECCE programme only
- After-schools – settings that welcome children in the afternoon, once school is finished

To add to the complexity, it is also the case that there are children who attend settings but only at specific times (i.e. for the ECCE Scheme). There are also Sessional and Preschool settings that welcome children in the afternoon.

## Funding

All of this is supported but also further complicated by the current funding supports, which include:

- The ECCE programme, which itself incorporates the Access and Inclusion Model for children with additional needs.
- The National Childcare Scheme (NCS), which supports two types of subsidies to families, reducing fees. The NCS also provides a 'Sponsorship' element for specific groups of children.
- Core Funding, which since 2022 has provided additional funding for settings.
- Equal Start, which is in place since 2024 and focusses on accessibility to Early Years for disadvantaged children

Early Childhood Ireland has produced Explainers on the funding programmes which can be accessed on our website: [www.earlychildhoodireland.ie](http://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie)

## Policy Development

The complexities of the current system mean that it is very challenging for any government and for a single government department to achieve transformation as quickly as Early Childhood Ireland, our member settings, staff, and families would like.

In the last decade, there has been considerable progress within Ireland's Early Years and School Age Care system, owing to both political and Departmental leadership.

Led by the Department of Children, the most significant development has been the First 5 strategy which as well as outlining proposed initiatives which cross government departments, in areas such as health and education, also contains substantial commitments for the Early Years and School Age Care area.

Some of these have been met or further developed by other policy processes, including:

- Nurturing Skills
- Partnership for the Public Good
- National Action Plan on Childminding

Since early 2025, the current government's programme also promises to deliver a number of relevant commitments.

# Barometer 2026

It is against this context that Early Childhood Ireland is revising our annual Barometer. From this year, we will continue to publish the findings of a national opinion poll conducted by RED C, which measures public sentiment about Early Years and School Age Care. We are also evaluating progress on the commitments made across the main policy areas, as well as in the Programme for Government. Next year we will add the recently published 'Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan' and offer an assessment of its progress in 2026.

Early Childhood Ireland believes that the overall direction of the current policies is the right one, but we are keen to encourage greater understanding and closer evaluation of the Early Years and School Age Care system in Ireland. For our organisation, the early and ongoing care and education of young children is a public good, which needs constant policy, political and public attention.

## Methodology and Scope

Part one of the Barometer includes the full findings of an opinion poll conducted by RED C between 13-18 February 2026, online with 1,007 adults aged over 18 years. This is the ninth poll we have commissioned from RED C.

The sample size was quota controlled by age, gender, socio-economic status and region in order to ensure a fully representative sample. In all respects the poll was completed to the opinion polling guidelines set out by both ESOMAR and AIMRO.

The margin of error on a sample size of 1,007 is +/- 3.2%.

In part two, we assess the delivery of key commitments and any delays or lack of progress across the relevant policies. Public sources were reviewed, including Parliamentary Questions, Progress and Implementation reports published by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, publicly available Minutes of Steering Groups and of other relevant fora.

## 2026 Opinion Poll Results

For the ninth year, Early Childhood Ireland commissioned a national opinion poll from RED C. It was conducted between 13-18 February with 1,007 Adults aged 18 years and over. The margin for error is +/- 3.2%.

The results include topics which span years and some new ones. The latter were selected by Early Childhood Ireland to measure public opinion on areas which are new.

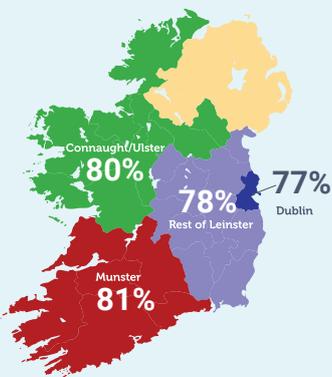
All of the statements are chosen to assess support for or knowledge of the areas which we believe are critical for the further development of the Early Years and School Age Care system in Ireland in the best interests of children.

Every child should be guaranteed access to high quality and inclusive Early Years and School Age Care in their community.

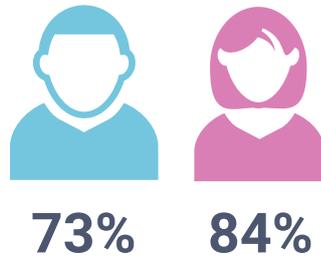
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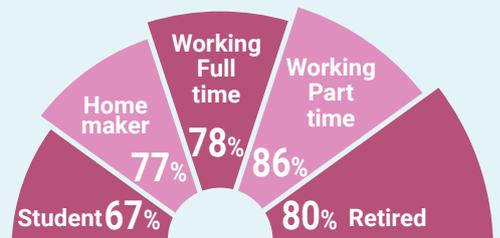
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Gender



Work Status



Age

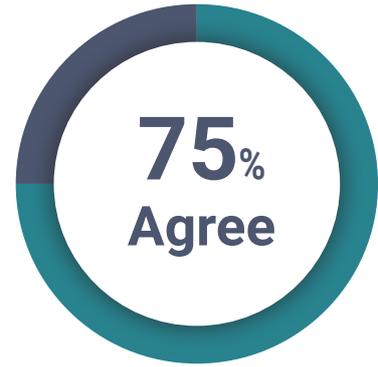


Adults with children aged yrs

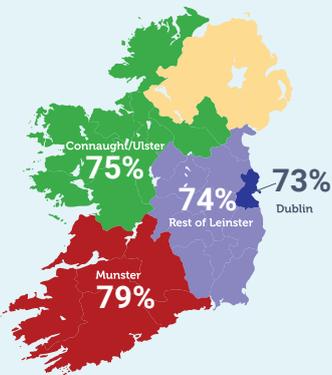


Similar to primary education in Ireland, Early Years education should be available free to all children.

All Adults



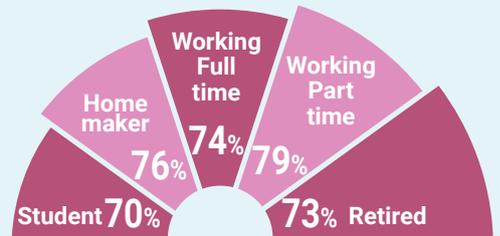
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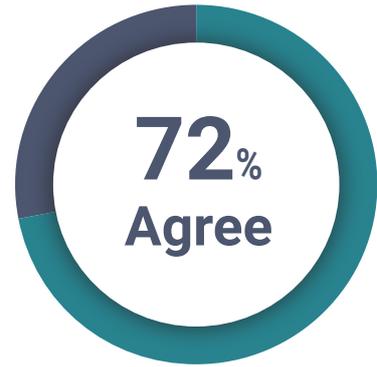


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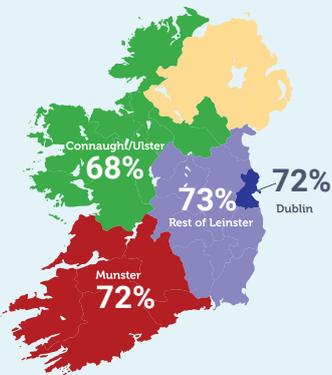


The Ombudsman for Children's remit should be extended so that complaints about crèches can be made to its Office.

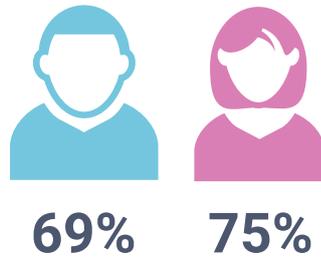
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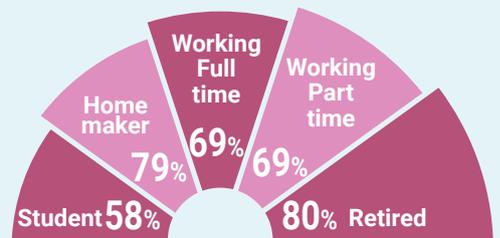
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Work Status



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Adults with children aged yrs

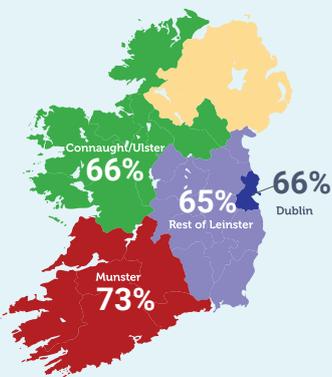


The education of children under 5 is as important as the education of children over 5.

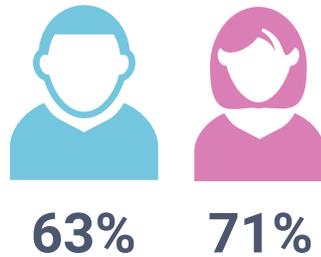
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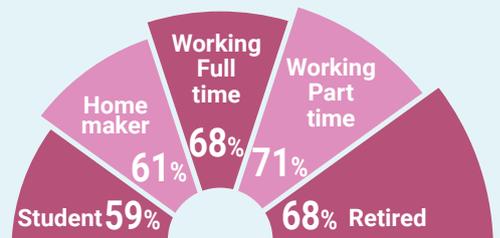
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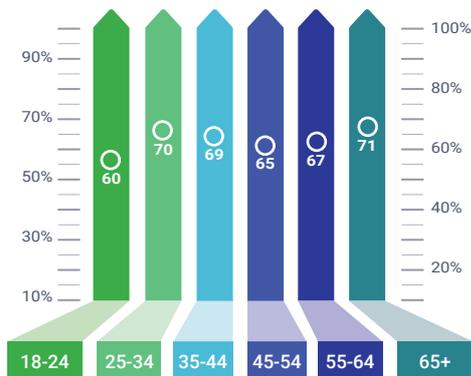
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Work Status



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Adults with children aged yrs

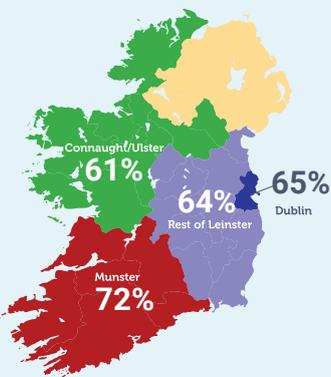


All parents should be financially supported to stay at home with their child for the first 12 months of the child's life.

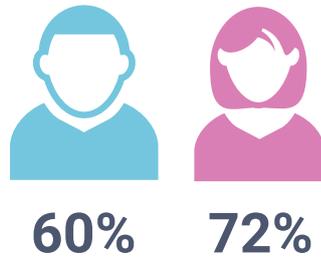
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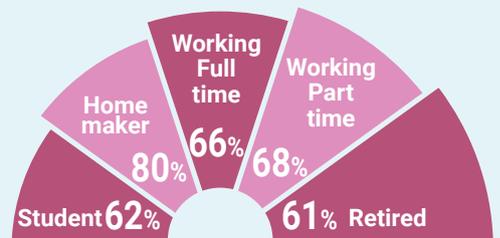
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Gender



Work Status



Age



Adults with children aged yrs

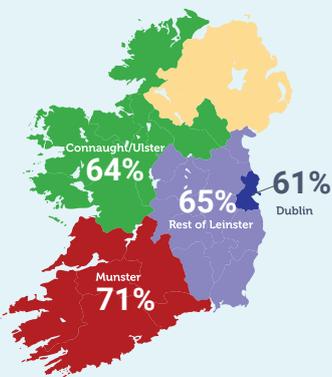


The current government should propose that Ireland moves to a Nordic model of Early Years and School Age Care provision and seek Oireachtas-wide support to achieve this.

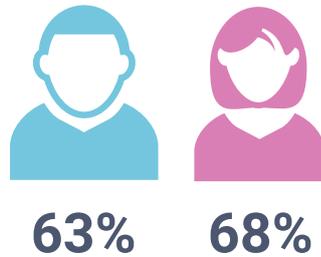
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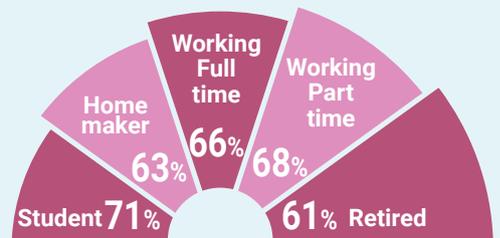
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Gender



Work Status



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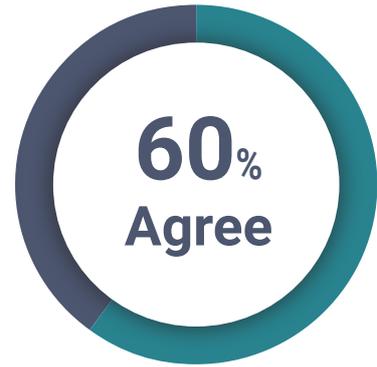


Adults with children aged yrs

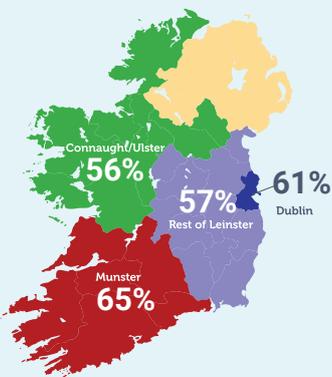


I believe all employers should be legally obliged to top-up wages when the parents of new babies are on maternity or paternity leave.

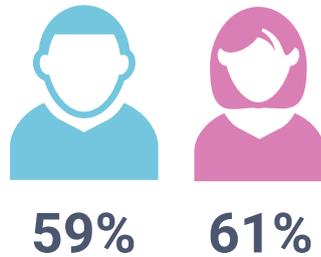
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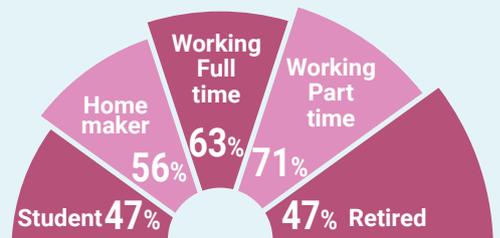
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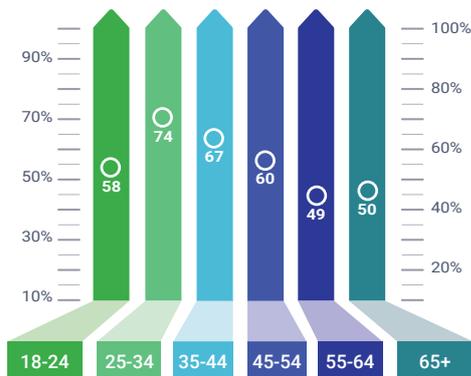
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Work Status



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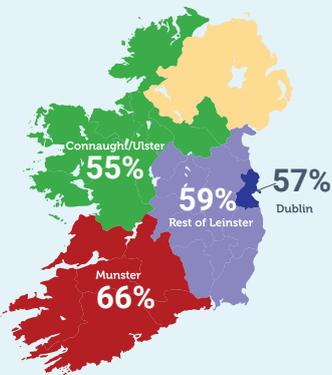


Parents should only pay toward the care of their children in line with their overall income.

All Adults



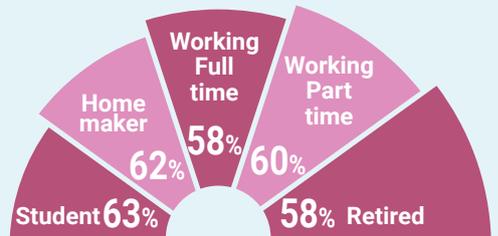
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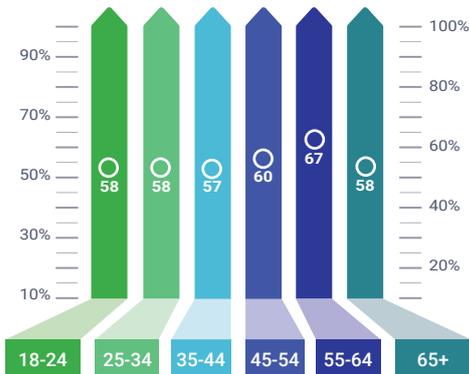
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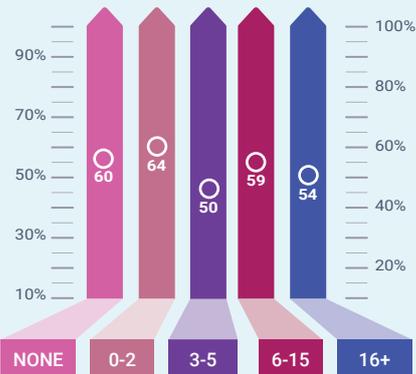
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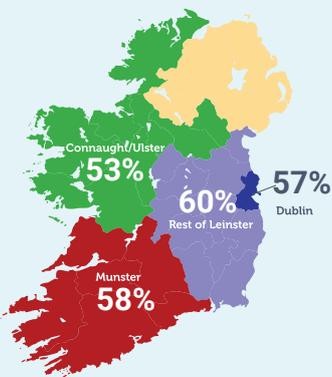


The quality of Early Years care for children is more important than affordability of crèches and childminders for parents.

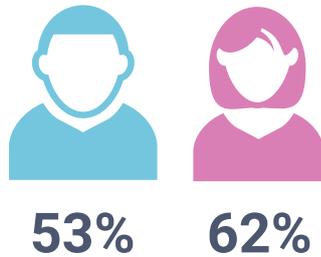
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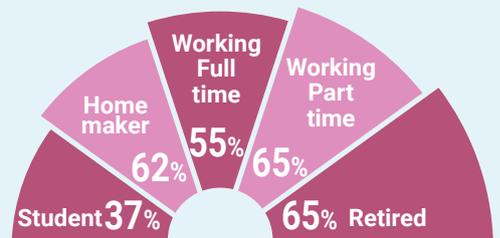
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Gender



Work Status



Age



Adults with children aged yrs

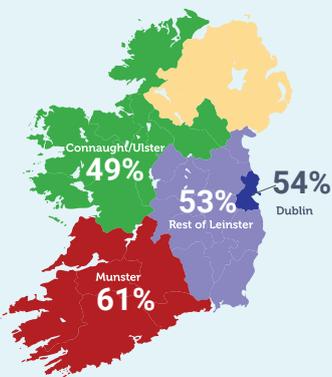


Staff in crèches who have university degrees that are aligned with teaching qualifications, should have the same terms and conditions as teachers in primary schools.

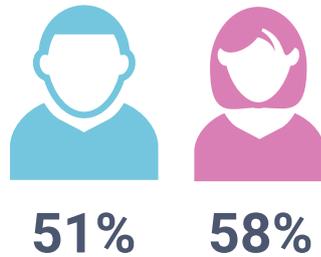
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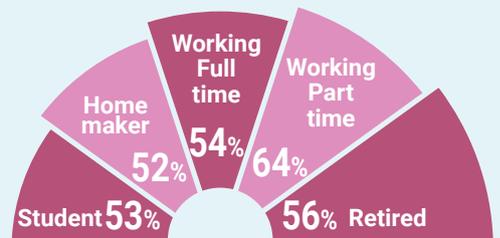
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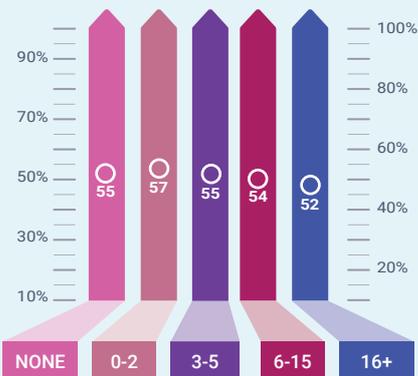
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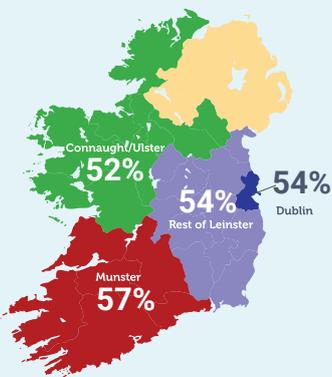


As with teachers, the government should pay the wages of staff in crèches.

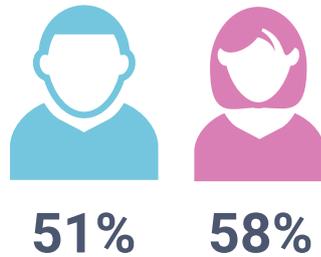
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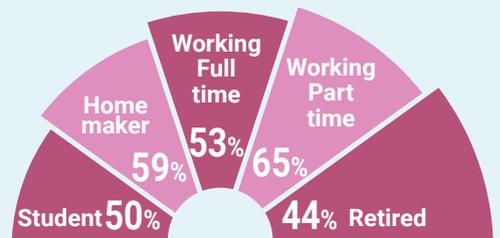
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Gender



Work Status



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Adults with children aged yrs

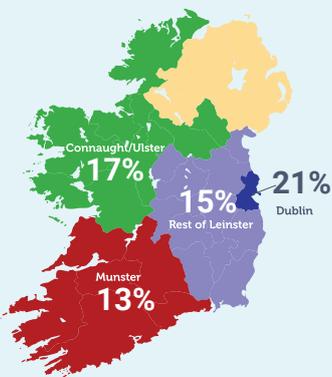


I have a strong understanding of what high-quality provision means when it comes to what crèches provide to young children in Ireland.

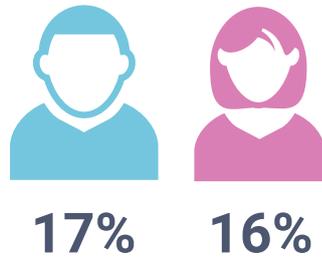
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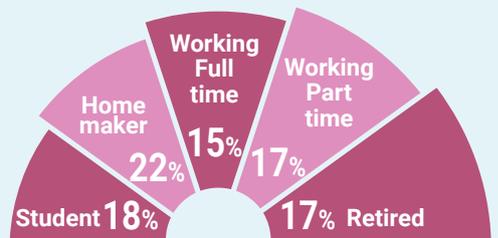
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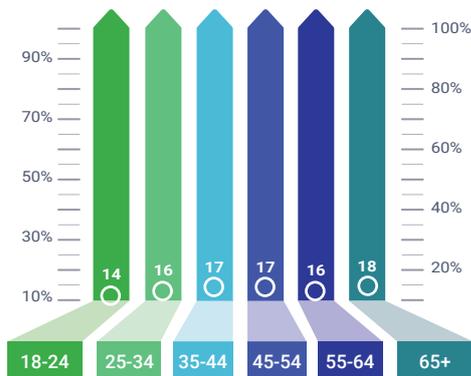
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Work Status



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Adults with children aged yrs

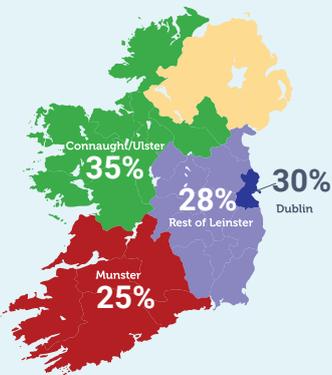


The government is doing enough to regulate childminders who look after children in their own homes.

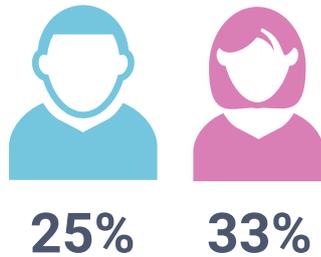
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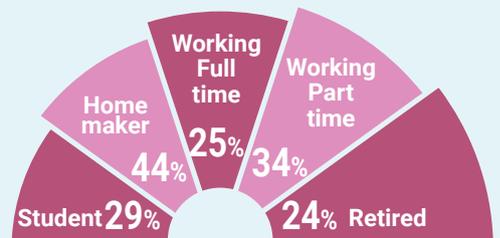
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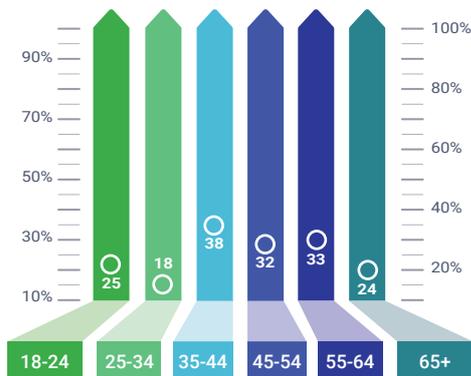
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Work Status



Age



Adults with children aged yrs

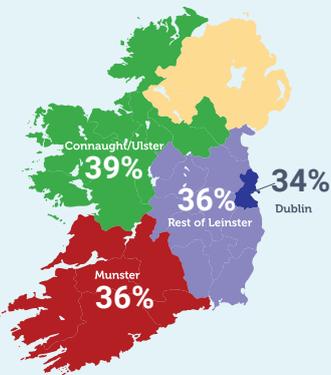


The government is already spending enough on Early Years and School Age Care in Ireland.

All Adults



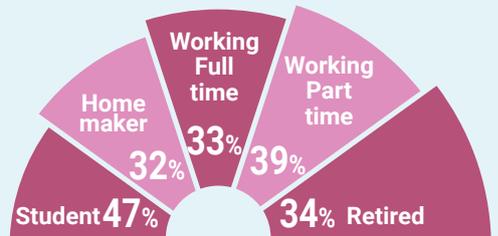
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Gender



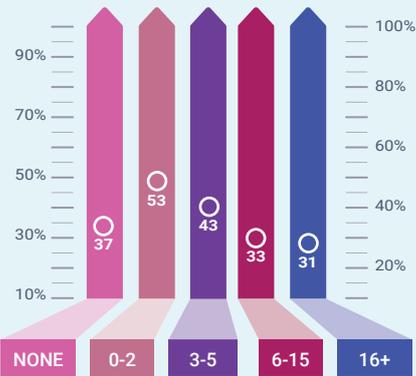
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Adults with children aged yrs

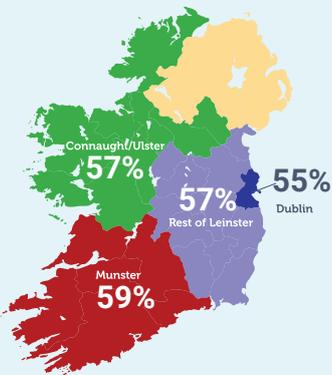


There are up to 40,000 children on crèche waiting lists across the country. The government is doing enough to address this.

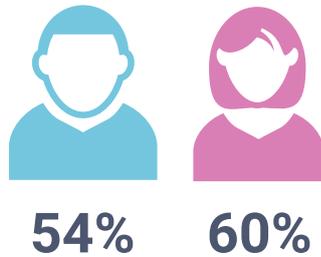
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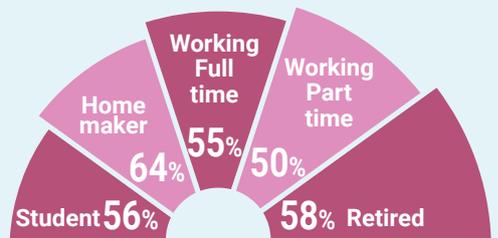
Regional



Gender



Work Status



Age



Adults with children aged yrs



# Assessing Policy Progress

A key part of Early Childhood Ireland's work is to monitor the progress of national Early Years and School Age Care policies approved by successive governments. Currently, there are four central policies in implementation.

- ◇ *First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*
- ◇ *Nurturing Skills, The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028*
- ◇ *National Action Plan for Childminding, 2021 – 2028*
- ◇ *Partnership for the Public Good - A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare*

Alongside these central policies, we also monitor the progress of commitments outlined in the current Programme for Government, 'Securing Ireland's Future'.

## Methodology and Scope

In this section of the Barometer, we assess delivery of key commitments and any delays or lack of progress.

Sources reviewed include Parliamentary Questions, Progress and Implementation reports published by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, publicly available Minutes of Steering Groups and of other relevant fora.

## First 5

First 5 is a whole-of-government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan to help make sure all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life. It provides a cross-government approach to support children and their families in the early years of life. First 5 commits to major initiatives on family leave, children's health services, parenting supports, child-friendly communities and Early Learning and Care services among a broad range of actions. The First 5 strategy is the first of its kind, and our focus is on the commitments made to advance the Early Years and School Age Care system.

### Delivered

- €1.3 billion investment in 2026, which builds on the €1 billion investment target that was met in 2023, five years earlier than anticipated.
- Introduction of Equal Start.

- Rollout of My Little Library.
- Administration of Parent and Toddler grant.
- Review of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme.
- Introduction of Core Funding and new fee management system.
- Completed research on the ELC and SAC needs of parents who work atypical hours and live in rural communities and developed recommendations.
- Development of supply management unit.
- Introduction of new strand of Sustainability Funding for Partner Services.
- Delivery of Building Blocks Expansion scheme.
- Publication of revised Department of Education Guidelines for the use of School Property.
- Extension of the Access and Inclusion Model to children in the universal two-year pre-school ECCE programme. This involves providing targeted supports to children with disabilities outside of time spent in the ECCE programme, throughout the year.
- Review of the National Childcare Scheme sponsorship provision.
- Publication of Action Plan for Administrative and Regulatory Simplification.
- Update of Aistear.
- Establishment of a SAC training and qualifications advisory group.
- Introduction of childminding regulations and availability of NCS to childminders.
- Development, publication and implementation of Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.
- Removal of the three years' experience requirement to attract the graduate premium under Core Funding.
- Updated Employment Regulation Orders.

## In Progress

- A review of the Parent and Toddler grant is currently in progress.
- Guidance and information for parents and families on Early Years and School Age Care is underway with the production of a documentary programme planned.
- An update of the National Planning Guidelines for the development of Early Years and School Age Care settings is underway however progress is slower than expected.

- Work is underway to extend AIM to children under three years of age. Consideration will also be given, at a later stage, to extending AIM to children attending School Age Care.
- Making CPD and resources available in Irish is ongoing.
- Design and implementation of the planning phase for the establishment of a dedicated state agency for Early Years and School Age Care is being progressed.

## Delayed actions

- Develop a national policy statement on the use of digital technologies and digital learning in Early Learning and Care, building on OECD (2023) Empowering Young Children in the Digital Age.

All actions under this goal have been delayed according to the 2025 Implementation report for First 5. The latest report advised that “Public consultation will take place in 2025. Research regarding the Digital Knowledge, Skills and Competencies of Irish Early Years Educators will take place in 2025.” The OECD review and research in an Irish context will inform the public consultation and development of a policy statement. A National Policy Statement will be developed following the consultation.<sup>1</sup>

- Undertake a consultation process on terminology relating to the ELC and SAC sectors.

All actions under this goal have been delayed. The 2025 Implementation report stated that “The project was initiated in 2024. A review and frequency analysis of existing terminology in registered service names, media content and approved academic qualification titles has been completed. It is planned to commence a consultation process in 2025.”<sup>2</sup>

- Introduce comprehensive regulations and a Level 5 qualification for SAC.

Several actions have been delayed under this goal. According to the 2025 Implementation report, “A series of introductory SAC eLearning modules are in development and due for completion in 2025. The SAC Advisory Working Group will support the development of these eLearning modules. Preparatory work on the development of the comprehensive SAC Regulations commenced in Q4 2024, with further work taking place in 2025. Work on developing Professional Award Type Descriptors for a Level 5 SAC award is ongoing.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Goal D, p. 160, 95557-Department\_of\_Children-First\_5\_Annual\_Implementation\_Report\_2025-v4.pdf

<sup>2</sup> Goal D, p. 150 95557-Department\_of\_Children-First\_5\_Annual\_Implementation\_Report\_2025-v4.pdf

<sup>3</sup> Goal D, p. 158 95557-Department\_of\_Children-First\_5\_Annual\_Implementation\_Report\_2025-v4.pdf

- Develop a national policy statement on outdoor learning and play in ELC.

All actions under this goal have been delayed. The latest update provided from the 2025 Implementation report states that “A RfQ will be undertaken in 2025 for the completion of a literature review on international and national literature on play in ELC and SAC settings. A National Policy Statement will be published following the completion of this literature review.”<sup>4</sup>

- An ELC Online Database to facilitate planning and development of ELC services, building on experience in developing the Primary Pupil Online Database (POD). Having regard to appropriate data protection and data sharing arrangements, this will facilitate the monitoring of children’s progress as they transition from ELC through to the primary education system and onwards to post-primary and beyond.

All actions under this goal have been delayed. The established method of the ELC Online Database was due “to be scoped in 2025.”<sup>5</sup>

- Undertake an end-of-year-three evaluation of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and, subject to evaluation findings, consider additional measures through the NCS and core funding levers to further decrease the cost of ELC to families, with a particular focus on those on the lowest incomes and to reduce the administrative burden associated with the scheme.

All actions under this goal have been delayed. The 2025 implementation plan stated that it was “due for completion Q2 2025 - Development of the review parameters is at an advanced stage. Review to commence in 2025. To be further informed by the Programme for Government. Preparations are currently underway for the Request for Tender (RFT) for the NCS review.”<sup>6</sup>

In response to a Parliamentary Question (PQ) on January 13, 2026, Minister Foley states: “This year the Department will commence an independent evaluation of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). This evaluation will examine how the Scheme has performed to date and will identify any potential enhancements to further support families and improve affordability.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Goal D, p. 159 95557-Department\_of\_Children-First\_5\_Annual\_Implementation\_Report\_2025-v4.pdf

<sup>5</sup> Goal D, p. 181 95557-Department\_of\_Children-First\_5\_Annual\_Implementation\_Report\_2025-v4.pdf

<sup>6</sup> Goal C, p122. , 95557-Department\_of\_Children-First\_5\_Annual\_Implementation\_Report\_2025-v4.pdf

<sup>7</sup> Childcare Services – Tuesday, 13 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

- The First 5 Implementation Team will carry out a three-year review of the Strategy with a view to developing a further implementation plan for the following three years.

Publication of the three-year review was due in 2025. However, this has not been published. In a PQ reply on 24 February, Minister Norma Foley advised that “Development of the Phase 3 implementation plan is currently in progress. The First 5 Open Policy Debate took place in June 2025. It provided an opportunity to reflect on the progress made since the publication of the strategy, to reflect on priorities for the coming years, and to enable stakeholders to contribute to the development of the new Implementation Plan for 2026-2028. Currently, the Department is liaising with relevant stakeholders to determine key outputs and actions for the coming years ... The Annual Implementation Report 2025 is due for publication in the coming months.”<sup>8</sup>

- Work to bring together the functions carried out by Tusla’s Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education (DE) Inspectorate’s Early Years team into a single body that provides integrated care and education inspections is underway. However, all actions have been delayed. A Steering Group was due to be established in Q1 2025 with the aim of bringing a policy proposal to Government by Q4 2025.
- The development of a single, integrated quality framework for Early Years to replace Síolta and the two existing inspection frameworks has also been delayed.

## Nurturing Skills

Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028, sets out a series of actions to meet the workforce related targets in First 5.

Commitments in Nurturing Skills are organised under five pillars:

1. Establishing a career framework.
2. Raising qualification levels.
3. Developing a national Continuing Professional Development system.
4. Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity.
5. Moving towards regulation of the workforce.

Successful delivery of commitments under the five pillars will be supported by three “key enablers” that are identified in Nurturing Skills:

- Improvement in pay and conditions of employment.

<sup>8</sup> Departmental Strategies – Tuesday, 24 Feb 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

- Coordination of the quality support infrastructure.
- Ongoing engagement with the profession.

## Delivered

- Introduction of mechanism for the funding of Early Years educators to undertake Level 7/8 programmes.
- Reformation of service funding to remove the exclusive link between higher capitation payments and the ECCE programme.
- Development and implementation of new childminder-specific regulations.
- Launch of Nurturing Skills hub and website.
- Introduction of Core Funding.
- Completion of research into diversity in the Early Years and School Age Care workforce.
- Establishment of a Joint Labour Committee.
- Introduction of additional staffing contribution.
- Development of a national infrastructure for CPD supports.
- Development of a core indicator set for monitoring progress of implementation.
- Participation in the 2024 OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey.

## In Progress

- Within the framework of the National Action Plan for Childminding, development and commencement of the roll-out of a funded childminder-specific Foundation Training Programme as a pre-requirement for registration with Tusla.
- Actions related to leadership are being progressed including strengthening training and supports for managers and staff with leadership responsibilities. Scoping for the role and responsibilities of the Family and Community Coordinator has commenced as part of roll out of Equal Start, while LINC training continues to be rolled out.
- Actions related to raising qualification levels in Early Years are ongoing however actions related to raising qualification levels in School Age Care are progressing more slowly. The most recent progress report stated that an advisory Group on School-Age Care Qualifications and Training has been established, and the development of a training programme was due to commence in early 2025. Actions related to raising qualification levels for childminders are underway.

- Several actions related to supporting recruitment, retention and diversity are developing slower than planned. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training is being rolled through AIM and Equal Start and was due to be updated in 2025. The Department has run two tender processes seeking research on alternative entry pathways with no successful researcher identified. Alternative next steps on this are unclear. Internal research on English language requirements in other jurisdictions has been completed. Research was due to be commissioned in 2025 on specific English language requirements in Early Learning and Care and their impact on the sector.
- Progress towards achieving a graduate-led Early Years workforce by 2028 is being monitored.

## Delayed actions

- Commission research into good practice in effective induction processes, including ELC and SAC contexts internationally – was due to commence in 2025.

In February 2026, a reply to a PQ stated that “an initial internal research project into good practice in effective induction processes has commenced with a view to issue RFQ for research in the coming months. A public consultation process will be commenced following completion of initial research project”.<sup>9</sup>

- Carry out a public consultation process on the development of an induction process.

The 2024 Annual Monitoring Report on the Implementation of Nurturing Skills stated that this was delayed due to commence in 2025.<sup>10</sup>

- Develop a short special purpose SAC award to meet the minimum Level 5 requirement to practice in SAC for Practitioners with qualifications in related disciplines, including ELC.

A reply to a PQ on 24 February 2026 gave the following update on actions related to School Age Care:

“A key commitment of Nurturing Skills is to increase the number of qualified practitioners and introduce minimum qualifications for School Age Childcare, similar to Early Learning and Care. In 2025, research commenced to inform the development of a new Level 5 award in School Age Childcare. The research is due for completion in Q1 of 2026 and the findings will guide next steps and the requirements for the proposed award.

A School-Age Childcare Advisory Group on training and qualifications was established to support the development of training and qualifications in School-Age Childcare and the

<sup>9</sup>Departmental Policies – Tuesday, 24 Feb 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>10</sup> Annual\_Monitoring\_Report\_on\_the\_Implementation\_of\_Nurturing\_Skills\_2024.pdf

incremental introduction of minimum Level 5 in School-Age Childcare Regulations.

Three introductory eLearning modules related to SAC are in development, they will support the implementation of the National Quality Guidelines for School-Age Childcare. They are currently in the final stages of development and being translated into Irish. They will be available on the Nurturing Skills learning hub in early 2026.

The Department recently finished a consultation on the development of comprehensive school age regulations. This consultation will assist with the development of appropriate school-age regulations. It is expected that new regulations supporting the quality of school-age services will come into effect in the first half of 2026.

The Department will continue to progress the commitments made in relation to school-age childcare under Nurturing Skills.”<sup>11</sup>

- Seek to adjust initial professional education programmes at Level 5 and higher to encompass both ELC and SAC.

This has been delayed pending the development of Professional Award-Type Descriptors for a new Level 5 School-Age Childcare award.<sup>12</sup>

- Develop and introduce a mechanism for the funding of SAC Practitioners to undertake a Level 5 SAC award and special purpose course that meet the Level 5 requirement.

As of yet, this has not been commenced, and the 2024 Annual Monitoring Report states that “Funding for Level 5 School-Age Childcare can be included in new funding when the programme is developed.”<sup>13</sup>

- Support the development of initial professional education programmes or modules for SAC that are conducted through the medium of Irish.

The 2024 Annual Monitoring Report states that this action has not yet started and that it is “pending the development of a School-Age Childcare award.”<sup>14</sup>

- Develop a national policy on the Key Person approach across ELC and SAC settings, and develop training and resources for its initial roll-out.

According to the most recent Annual Monitoring Report, this action has yet to be started.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Departmental Policies – Tuesday, 24 Feb 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>12</sup> Departmental Policies – Tuesday, 24 Feb 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>13</sup> Annual\_Monitoring\_Report\_on\_the\_Implementation\_of\_Nurturing\_Skills\_2024.pdf

<sup>14</sup> Annual\_Monitoring\_Report\_on\_the\_Implementation\_of\_Nurturing\_Skills\_2024.pdf

<sup>15</sup> Annual\_Monitoring\_Report\_on\_the\_Implementation\_of\_Nurturing\_Skills\_2024.pdf

- Examine the scope to use micro-credentials in CPD opportunities in ELC and SAC.

According to the most recent Annual Monitoring Report, this action has yet to be started.<sup>16</sup>

- Ensure the approach to careers information has a particular focus on information and supports for potential entrants to the workforce from minority groups and men, as well as Irish language opportunities.

This was due to be addressed as part of the development of a Nurturing Skills Communication Strategy. Action 54 states the government's intent to: "Develop a stakeholder engagement and communications plan to ensure the contents of the Workforce Plan are widely understood across the sector (including development of a website dedicated to the Workforce Plan) and to support ongoing direct engagement with the ELC and SAC workforce."

- Should a professional association for Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners be established with sufficient organisational scale to carry out the core functions expected of a professional association, seek appropriate opportunities for engagement and consultation with it.

As stated in the 2024 Annual Monitoring Report, no association has yet reached a sufficient organisational scale to carry out the core functions expected of a professional association.<sup>17</sup>

- A mid-point review of Nurturing Skills was due to be carried out by 2025, which would inform the development of a second implementation plan.

This has not been published. In a reply issued on 24 February 2026, the Minister for Children provided the following update: "The midpoint review was originally due for completion in 2025 however it was postponed to allow for the publication of the results of the OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey which was published in December 2025. These results along with findings from the CSO Early Learning Care Graduate Outcomes 2022 report also published in December 2025 will help inform the review.

It was also deemed appropriate to wait until the publication of Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan in December 2025. It is important that the midpoint review and new implementation plan are completed in line with the priorities set out in Shaping the Future. Work has begun on the midpoint review. the Department intends to contact stakeholders regarding focus groups to support the process in the coming weeks. The midpoint review

<sup>16</sup> [Annual\\_Monitoring\\_Report\\_on\\_the\\_Implementation\\_of\\_Nurturing\\_Skills\\_2024.pdf](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Annual\\_Monitoring\\_Report\\_on\\_the\\_Implementation\\_of\\_Nurturing\\_Skills\\_2024.pdf](#)

will include an updated implementation plan for 2026-2028. This plan will outline the key actions required to achieve the objectives set out in Nurturing Skills. The findings from the research being used for the midpoint review, along with stakeholder engagement carried out as part of the midpoint review, will inform the prioritisation of actions within the new implementation plan. The midpoint review and revised implementation plan are scheduled to be completed in early Q2 2026.”<sup>18</sup>

## Partnership for the Public Good

Launched in December 2021, Partnership for the Public Good introduced several key initiatives, with Core Funding being a crucial component. Over the past five years, progress has been made towards achieving the Partnership for the Public Good’s aims, although some goals remain unfulfilled.

### Delivered

- Introduction of Core Funding.
- Implementation of a fee management mechanism.
- Introduction of targeted additional funding, akin to the DEIS model in the school sector, for settings serving children in high levels of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Provision of additional funding to address the increased costs faced by providers from the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan.
- Offering the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme to all eligible children and parents, including those accessing the NCS through sponsorship arrangements.

### In Progress

- Extending the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to all Early Years and School Age Care settings.
- Introducing an in-service training programme aimed at supporting children with additional language requirements.
- Requiring each setting to create and publish an annual ‘Tackling Disadvantage Plan’ outlining how it intends to utilise its allocation of Core Funding.
- Developing a concise set of national indicators that outline the expected benefits from

<sup>18</sup> Departmental Policies – Tuesday, 24 Feb 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

additional funding and publishing progress reports on poverty or disadvantage.

- Reviewing and updating the existing Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines, if necessary, and ensuring these remain a contractual requirement for Early Years and School Age Care settings.
- Developing a searchable price comparison website for parents. If needed, the Department should amend contracts with providers to present providers’ fees in a readily comparable manner (e.g., average hourly rates by age band).

## National Action Plan for Childminding (2021 – 2028)

In May 2021, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published the National Action Plan for Childminding (NAPC). The objective of the Action Plan is “to improve access to high-quality and affordable early learning and school-aged childcare through childminding”. The NAPC is different to the other policy plans which are being led by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, as it is being delivered on a phased basis. Phase 1 – ‘Preparatory’ ran from 2021-2023/24, with some continuing actions into 2025. The Plan indicated that Phase 2 ‘Transition’ would operate from 2021 - 2024/28, with Phase 3 ‘Full Implementation’ from 2028.

As the phases are overlapping, the table below provides an update on key areas of the Plan.

**Table 1 – Update on the National Action Plan on Childminding**

Action Area	Status	Commentary
Phase 1 – Preparatory (2021-2023/24)	Completed	
Childminding Regulations	2024 – Completed 2025 – In progress	Further work was required and this is progressing through the Oireachtas
Governance / Steering Group	In progress	National Steering Group established and meeting regularly to oversee implementation
Mandatory Registration of Childminders	In progress	Mandatory registration will happen over a three-year transition period
Registration and Inspection Model	In progress	Registration systems and inspection approaches under development during transition
Training and Quality Supports	In progress	Pre-registration sessions with City and County Childcare Committees are being delivered
Subsidy Access (National Childcare Scheme)	In advanced planning	

# Programme for Government - Securing Ireland's Future, 2025 – 2029

In the Programme for Government published in 2025, commitments relating to Early Years and School Age Care were categorised under three main themes: Affordability, Access, Quality and Inclusion. These themes run through most government publications on the topic. Early Years educators and childminders also feature with plans to enhance the Employment Regulatory Order (ERO) and introduce new childminder regulations.

Additionally, the government committed to exploring options such as SEED funding for community settings, an apprenticeship programme for new recruits in Early Years and School Age Care, and plans to expand School Age Care provision.

Of the twenty-four distinct commitments made in the Programme for Government, some are ongoing or established processes, which predate the Programme, as is evidenced in previous sections, so these are described below as 'In Delivery'. Others are new or finite, and these are defined as 'In Progress', and some have 'Not Commenced' as yet.

## In Delivery

- Continue to implement Employment Regulation Orders to attract and retain early years educators.
- Continue to build up the Equal Start programme, ensuring children experiencing disadvantage can access and participate fully in early learning and childcare.
- Extend the National Childcare Scheme to childminders working in the family home, with sensible regulations that fit home-based care.
- The National Childcare Scheme has already opened to childminders working from their homes. Childminders now have a 3-year transition period (to September 2027) during which they can register with Tusla but are not yet required to do so.
- Support childminders through the Tusla registration process and expand access to local training opportunities.
- Continue to provide grants that help childminders improve safety and quality through essential toys, equipment, and technology.

## In Progress

- Evaluate options to amend the ECCE eligibility criteria.

Policy analysis is underway to consider the implications of this change in the context of the results of the 2024 ECCE review and the development of Phase 2 of the Shaping the Future Action Plan. Phase 2 actions will be undertaken from 2027 through to 2029. The second report will be published later in 2026, following public consultation.<sup>19</sup>

- Examine and expand the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and make it available to younger children.

An independent evaluation of AIM was published in January 2024. Based on the evaluation's findings, AIM is now being extended on a phased basis as funding becomes available. The Department is assessing the policy implications and mechanisms required to extend AIM to children under three, recognising that their needs differ from those currently supported under the model.<sup>20</sup>

- Remove barriers in education and training for early years educators to broaden access to the profession.

The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund covers up to 90% of the fees incurred by early years educators studying for Early Learning and Care qualifications at Levels 7 and 8 that have been approved by the Qualifications Advisory Board while continuing to work in the Early Learning and Care sector. The Department and Pobal have been engaging in an onboarding process with Higher Education Institutions to prepare for the launch of the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund 2026 in March 2026.<sup>21</sup>

- Deepen co-operation and shared learning between early years education and the Department of Education Inspectorate.

Engagement between the Department and the D/EY Inspectorate is regular and ongoing.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan

<sup>20</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>21</sup> Nurturing Skills Learner Fund | Nurturing Skills

<sup>22</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

- Progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare Scheme and explore options to cap costs for larger families.

Phase 2 of Shaping the Future will be published in 2026. It will include a road map for achieving the Programme for Government commitment to reduce parental fees to a maximum of €200 per month over the lifetime of this Government.<sup>23</sup>

- Ensure childcare providers' fees are open, transparent and equitable and readily available to parents.

In July 2025, the Department commenced a Core Funding Fee Table Approval process, wherein City/County Childcare Committees reviewed the 2025/2026 fee tables of services that applied to the Fee Increase Assessment process in programme year 2024/2025.

- Review and increase Core Funding, ensuring the fee cap is maintained and that the model is open, transparent and equitable, and that early years educators in the private sector benefit from Employment Regulation Orders.

Budget 2026 secured an additional €45 million for programme year 2026/27, again ringfenced specifically to support employers to meet the costs of further possible increases to the minimum rates of pay, dependent on future Joint Labour Committee negotiations.<sup>24</sup>

- Reduce the administrative burden on providers.

Simplify and Support – the Action plan for simplification was published on 17 December, along with two Indecon Reports that informed the Action.<sup>25</sup>

- Resource and transform the Supply Management Unit into a Forward Planning and Delivery Unit within the Department to identify areas of need, forecast demand, and deliver public supply within the childcare sector where required.

This unit is now the Forward Planning and Delivery Unit. Additional staff were allocated throughout 2025, and other vacancies were sanctioned. Forward Planning model is advanced.

<sup>23</sup> Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan

<sup>24</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>25</sup> Simplify to Support: The Early Years Simplification Plan (2026–2030)

- Provide capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities, to create additional capacity in areas where unmet need exists.

State-led early learning and childcare capital programme launched.<sup>26</sup>

- Plan the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme, including Irish-medium Naíonraí.

Currently, 22% ELC and SAC services are delivered on school sites. Initial engagement with DEY about the potential for collaborative approaches to the development of new schools. Continued engagement with DEY is planned in 2026.<sup>27</sup>

- Work with schools to host before and after-school care and examine start-up supports for groups involved in after-school activities

As of the end of October 2025, 296 new school-age childcare services were added to the Tusla register, resulting in a net increase of 267 over the period January-October 2025. Continued engagement with DEY is planned in 2026.<sup>28</sup>

- Review the 2001 Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put into use.

Working group in place. Initial feedback sought and more wide-ranging engagement planned. Working Group to continue in place in 2026.<sup>29</sup>

- Expand the provision of after-school and childcare in school buildings and campuses, in tandem with the school building programme, to provide better access for parents and communities.

As of the end of October 2025, 296 new school-age childcare services have been added to the Tusla register in 2025, leading to a net increase of 267 new school-age childcare services over the period January-October 2025.

<sup>26</sup> State led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme

<sup>27</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>28</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>29</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

## Not Commenced

- Introduce an 'Earn and Learn' apprenticeship model enabling childcare staff to gain qualifications and advance their careers.

No significant progress has been made on developing such an apprenticeship. The Department states that it is aware of and is participating in conversations between the sector and the National Apprenticeship Office.<sup>30</sup>

- Examine the establishment of a professional register for childminders and early years educators, reflecting professionalisation of the sector.

While committed to in First 5 and Nurturing Skills, there is no update on the establishment of a professional register from the Department available at this time.<sup>31</sup>

- Explore making available an extra hour of ECCE each day in the second year of preschool.

Policy analysis is underway to consider the implications of this change for children, parents and providers. It is being considered in light of the results of the 2024 ECCE review and the development of Phase 2 of the Shaping the Future Action Plan, which is due to commence in 2027 and run to 2029.<sup>32</sup>

- Consider an annual Social Enterprise Empowerment and Development Fund (SEED) to unlock the potential of the social enterprise sector for sustainable job creation, affordable childcare provision and community services.

No update from the Department on this funding avenue thus far.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>31</sup> Programme for Government – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas

<sup>32</sup> Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan

<sup>33</sup> Social Enterprise Funding Allocations

# Conclusion

There has been very significant development in recent years in the Early Years and School Age Care system and the Department of Children and Equality and a series of Ministers and governments deserve recognition for this.

Specific highlights include:

- The early achievement of investment of €1 billion in public funding as promised in First 5.
- The development and implementation of the National Childminding Action Plan.
- The almost complete achievement of the commitments made in the new funding model - Partnership for the Public Good.
- The onset of State-led services as promised in the Programme for Government.

In providing an annual assessment of both policy progress and public opinion, Early Childhood Ireland hopes to highlight often unseen progress which has a positive impact for children, settings and the overall system, and examine what matters (or doesn't matter) to the public.

We also want to shine a light on the systemic issues which we believe need to be expedited or have a new or renewed focus.

Parents will point to high fees and long waiting lists. Both of which are reasonable and ongoing concerns.

Government will point to an unprecedented level of investment and plans for State-led services. These are also valid arguments.

## New Investment

For our part, as an organisation with a rich history spanning more than five decades, Early Childhood Ireland believes that the Irish Early Years and School Age Care system is at a crossroads. Having achieved a considerable milestone in 2023, no new funding target has been set. This needs to happen. In fact, any additional funding since 2024 has been largely to support more children attending settings, so it is not new investment. This requires urgent attention.

## A New Strategy

We would like to see a new or extended First 5 strategy after the current one reaches its conclusion in 2028.

There is likely to be unfinished business and there are additional challenges for young children and families, which will need new ideas from a range of government departments.

We think that any future strategy which will commence in 2029 is too late for government to come up with a new investment target. This could happen from Budget 2027.

## Valuing Professionals

In our assessment of progress in the Early Years and School Age Care system, it is evident that the area of Workforce Development is in most need of acceleration.

It is critical for children and for more than 30,000 staff who work in settings that this happens.

Alongside much better terms and conditions – which is the responsibility of politicians – further professionalisation of staff in all the areas that are included in Nurturing Skills needs a renewed and more ambitious focus by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.

If this requires greater investment, then the Minister will need to advocate for this firmly at the Cabinet table and ensure that it is delivered.

If terms and conditions and workforce development are not urgently and sustainably addressed, then staff turnover rates, currently at more than 25 per cent nationally, will increase. As well as being devastating for those staff members, and operators, this level of upheaval is most of all intolerable for children. Unless it is reduced, it will also undermine the proposed State-led services and other plans to increase capacity. It is unlikely that a similarly high rate of teacher turnover would be allowed to prevail in the primary or secondary education systems.

## Next Steps

The Convention on Education and the National Conversation which will be undertaken this year provide the government with a new opportunity to seek and outline a vision for the future of the Early Years and School Age Care system.

For Early Childhood Ireland, the key questions which need to be addressed are whether there is broad political and societal agreement that Ireland should move to what is described as a public model of provision? If so, what form will that take? And by when will it be achieved?

If a public model is not the answer, then what should happen and how will a different vision guarantee access to high-quality experiences in Early Years and School Age Care settings which value both children and staff, and which operate in an equitable and sustainable system that is trusted and valued by the public?

We look forward to engaging in these processes and to working with Early Childhood Ireland members and others to highlight expertise, solutions and most of all to promote a better system for every child.



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