



# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE

Our Plan for a Public Childcare System

*Labour* 

**Our mission is the delivery of a universal, publicly provided system of early childhood education and care with a guaranteed place for every child that needs one, where costs are capped for parents and professional staff are valued and paid properly.**

Labour believes in a society that values care. We outline here long-standing proposals for a public childcare system as part of our Charter of Children's Rights that will develop a universal system of affordable, accessible and quality early childhood education and care, and school age care.

## INTRODUCTION

Public funding for childcare in Ireland remains a fraction of what other European countries invest and the €1.37 billion committed in 2025 will mostly subsidise private providers. Labour has long called for a guaranteed, publicly provided pre-school place to be available to every child, as is in place for primary school children. Parents need affordable, accessible childcare while early years educators deserve decent pay and conditions that recognises their professional qualifications and experience. Most of all, children deserve an equal start.

<b>OUR GOALS</b>	<b>OUR PLANS</b>
<b>Equality for Children</b>	<b>A universal Public Childcare Scheme</b>
<b>Affordability for Parents</b>	<b>Cap childcare fees at €50 a week</b>
<b>Fairness for Professionals</b>	<b>Use core funding to increase pay</b>

Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs in the EU and the highest level of private provision of any OECD country. This leaves parents with few choices and despite some recent cost relief, very high bills. Progress has been made on increasing the level of public investment in early years, but it is not delivering enough places where they are needed.

Meanwhile, staff turnover in the early years and school age care sector is at 25%. The recruitment and retention crisis impacts on the quality of early education and care and causes stress and burnout for managers and owners. Low rates of pay and the lack of a professional structure need to be addressed.

Labour believes the best way to develop our childcare system over the next decade is to change focus away from subsidising private providers and towards the development of a universal public system of early childhood education and care. The impact goes far beyond the time spent in a childcare setting as it will transform society, reduce inequality, and increase participation in the workforce.

## To deliver this new system Labour will:

- » Begin the multiannual rollout of a public system of early years education and care by delivering 6,000 new places a year across an average of 100 services.
- » Guarantee equal access and prioritise the opening of new services in areas with a shortage of childcare places.
- » Develop a 'childcare in situ' scheme for existing services to join the public system.
- » Cap costs for parents at €50 per week, to bring the cost of childcare closer to average European levels.
- » Achieve professional wages for early year educators with a minimum rate of €15 per hour and recognise qualifications and experience.

## A PUBLIC CHILDCARE SYSTEM

Labour will begin the rollout of a universal public childcare system, and over five years provide at least 30,000 places. For many parents it is very difficult to secure an early care place from the age of one meaning a parent either must take extended leave or rely on care arrangements with extended family or a childminder. It is almost impossible to find places for children younger than one. Labour will provide a statutory guarantee to an ECEC place.

### Investing in new places

Labour will address this and provide for equal access to a public childcare system by delivering 6,000 new places a year across an average of 100 services, with annual first year operating costs of approximately €53m and an average staff of 11 per service. A priority will be providing enough places for children aged under two.

To ensure the sustainable growth of the system, each year a further €53-60m of current funding will be allocated so that over 5 years 30,000 new places would be delivered.

By 2030 the annual cost for these new places would be approximately €265-€300m.

### Identifying demand

Labour will carry out a comprehensive mapping of demand and capacity through strengthened City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), using demographic data, and working with the Department to identify an initial list of locations for new public services.

Areas with an identified shortage of places will be prioritised first for new services.



## **Initial rollout through ETBs**

For the first phase of rollout, new locations will be identified through existing publicly owned sites and buildings in the education sector and local authorities. New bespoke facilities will be developed and built.

Administration such as payroll and corporate services will be initially built out through existing systems in Education and Training Boards bringing early childhood education and care into the education system. For example, some ETB colleges already operate community creches.

Support will continue to be provided for new community and not for profit co-operative services.

## **A national agency for ECEC**

Over time overall responsibility for the public system and capacity planning such as locations for new facilities will transfer to a new state agency for Early Learning and Childcare that is already under development.

Labour will ensure local authorities and CCCs have a strong role in the development and delivery of new ECEC facilities.

There will be a complaint mechanism through the national agency, with a second independent tier through the Children's Ombudsman. Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate will continue to regulate, register, and inspect all services.

## **Funding new childcare settings**

A new recurring capital allocation of at least €50m will be provided for the delivery of appropriate new public childcare facilities, and the current annual €20m of capital investment provided to private suppliers under the NDP Building Blocks programme would be reallocated to the public model.

Labour will adapt the current school building programme to provide for co-location of new early education and care centres, and after school care facilities on existing sites where possible.

Working with local authorities as new housing developments are built, sites for new ECEC settings will be ringfenced for future development as already provided for under existing guidelines.

## 'CHILDCARE IN SITU' FOR EXISTING PROVIDERS

There are over 4,000 providers of early years services who access the National Childcare Scheme. Labour recognises that in the years to come parents will continue to avail of privately run childcare and that Ireland will have a hybrid system. Our plans will support reduced costs for parents and professional pay for staff in these settings to ensure high quality services, but our priority is delivery of a universal public system.

Large operators will continue their for-profit services, but Labour will put in place transitional arrangements for smaller independent settings who wish to move to the public model.

Labour will establish a separate ringfenced fund for a 'childcare in situ' scheme to allow the State to take over the operation of existing services that wish to transfer to the public scheme or buy out those that indicate their intention to close due to retirement or withdraw from core funding.

The level of funding for the childcare in situ nationalisation scheme will be reviewed on an annual basis depending on demand. There will be savings to the State from not having to subsidise as many for-profit private operators.

### **ECCE Programme**

Priority for the 'childcare in situ' nationalisation process will begin with smaller pre-school services offering the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme that wish to move to the public model.

The State funds over 107,000 ECCE places a year. As part of the transition to a public system the potential for expanding these settings to earlier ages and school age care or co-locating with a new local public services will be considered.

Labour will provide a statutory right to a place on an ECCE scheme as the first step to a universal guaranteed place for every child.

## CAP COSTS FOR PARENTS

Increased funding for the National Childcare Scheme and a cap on fees through core funding has reduced some pressure on parents, but the monthly bill for parents remains far too high, if they can secure a place. Monthly bills run into hundreds of euros for what should be a public good.

For over two years Labour has called for costs for parents to be capped at €200 a month or per child or €50 a week. Labour will cap these costs for parents as we rollout a universal, publicly provided service of early years education and care.

This will bring costs closer to average European levels. The total cost of this measure in 2025 would be over €170 million and will increase further as more families access the NCS.



## PROFESSIONAL PAY

A survey by SIPTU, the early years union highlights how the sector is struggling to retain staff with turnover at 25% per year. This is undermining early education and care, the viability of services, and creating additional stress on managers as they struggle to maintain staffing ratios.

Labour is committed to fairness for professional staff, and we will use the allocation of ringfenced core funding to guarantee a minimum €15 per hour rate for educators, with additional increases across other grades. Salaries must also recognise experience and qualifications.

For the public system, staff employment will initially be through ETBs, with responsibility eventually resting with the new national agency. Salaries in the public model will at the outset be linked to the ERO from the existing Joint Labour Committee process. Once the service is fully established, negotiated pay scales will then be agreed for a new category of public employee.

As we rollout a public service, Labour will also review pre-school staffing ratios with a view towards lowering it closer to 1:8.

## INCLUSION AND EQUALITY

Delivery of a public system of early years education and care will provide the State with a new tool to tackle disadvantage and poverty, and support children with additional educational needs. Co-locating services with existing and planned schools will also aid with the planning for future special educational needs.

Labour will expand the Access and Inclusion Model beyond pre-school so that children with disabilities are supported at both early years and in school age care. As we develop the universal public childcare system of early education and care, we will integrate the existing early intervention classes for children with autism into the new model. 157 such classes were provided last year. Co-locating new childcare facilities with schools will provide for significant efficiencies and improve access for children with additional needs.

Labour will expand the rollout of the Equal Start programme supporting children experiencing disadvantage to participate fully in early learning and childcare, and review the staffing ratios in place at pre-school level.

**BUILDING  
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