

Standing Up for Families

Labour's plan for quality and affordable childcare



Our proposals

- Cap childcare costs for parents at €4.25 per hour, or €170 per week
- Progressively increase the state subsidy so that the cost parents pay is reduced to no more than €2 per hour by 2021
- Increase paid parental leave by three months, to be shared between both parents
- Transform the quality of early years care and education with greater funding for providers with highly qualified staff
- Provide all staff working with children with one hour of paid time each week to plan their work Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Labour will make low-cost for parents, high-quality childcare for all children under 12 a reality, and dramatically increase the level of spending on early years education and childcare.

We also recognise that a high quality childcare sector depends on a skilled childcare workforce with decent pay and fair conditions. We will work to ensure those who provide childcare services receive the respect and remuneration they deserve.

In Government, we have expanded the subsidised childcare available to low-income families, introduced the first supports for children with special needs in pre-schools, begun inspecting the educational qualities of pre-schools so that every child in pre-school gets a high-quality experience, and passed a referendum enshrining the rights of children in our constitution. Labour will reduce the financial burden on parents of young children, and give every child the high-quality care and support that they deserve. These policies will also support increased labour market participation, particularly amongst women.

There are an estimated 180,000 children in paid childcare with about three-fifths of these in centre based facilities, and two-fifths with childminders. The national average cost of such childcare is estimated by Pobal to be €167 a week, with some parents paying significantly more. Some parties have proposed models such as tax credits or vouchers. But the evidence is clear – these don't work, and in fact just end up pushing up costs for parents. Public funding, paid directly to childcare providers, allows for greater oversight of early childhood services, and gives the incentives necessary for higher quality childcare.

We are unequivocal - we will support all parents in their choices. We believe in providing them with the opportunity to stay at home for a longer period during those crucial early months of baby's life. When parents need or want to work or train, we will support their childcare costs.

Above all though, children have to be at the heart of our plan. That means a relentless focus on quality care and education.

Note: the proposals contained in this document were developed by the Labour Party following consultations with local and national bodies across Ireland with expertise in early years care and education. We based much of our costings on the *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Future Investment in Early Years and School Age Care and Education Services*.

Start Strong – a coalition group campaigning to improve government policy on early years in Ireland – has corroborated our subsidised childcare and professionalisation costings on the basis of the proposals and assumptions contained within our policy paper.

Affordable childcare for all children under 12

Childcare costs for parents in Ireland are among the highest in the world. This prevents many parents from going back to work, or can mean that one income is spent entirely on childcare.

In the last year, we provided subsidised childcare for an additional 13,000 children. We have begun working on a single childcare programme to replace the five different programmes which exist to support low-income families. Labour's new simplified subsidy programme will be provided through both community and private childcare providers.

We will move immediately to cap the cost for parents of childcare for all children under 12 to €4.25 per hour for up to 40 hours of childcare a week – this is higher than the average fee reported by Pobal for full-time care of children over the age of one across community and private providers – with the state's contribution dependent on staff qualifications and flexibility to these prices to allow for geographic variances (on the advice of the county childcare committees). By 2021, we will reduce this cost for parents to €2 per hour, or a maximum cost of €80 per week. The State will fund the balance.

It will take time for such a system to bed down. A price cap of €4.25 per hour will be maintained in both 2017 and 2018 to allow providers to prepare for increased subsidies. The price cap will then be reduced by €0.75 per hour each year in 2019, 2020 and 2021, to reduce costs for parents to €2 per hour by the end of the lifetime of the next Government.

There are currently an estimated 75,000 children in unregulated, paid childcare – in other words in childcare provided by nannies or childminders. We expect that it will take some time for the publicly subsidised scheme to impact in this area. Our costings assume that 25% of this cohort enter regulated childcare through the subsidised system by 2021, though we would expect these numbers to rise further as prices fall to and below €2 per hour.

While the numbers of children who might be eligible for after-school care are much higher, we expect that take-up will be lower amongst this cohort. The large majority of such children are cared for by parents or relatives. We therefore anticipate that even very low childcare costs will only result in up to 9% of such children availing of subsidised childcare.

Year	Maximum weekly cost to parents
2017	€170
2018	€170
2019	€140
2020	€110
2021	€80

“IN THE LAST
YEAR, WE PROVIDED
SUBSIDISED CHILDCARE
FOR AN ADDITIONAL
13,000 CHILDREN”

Additional help for those who need it most

There are a number of schemes already in place to support low income families. Rather than abolishing these schemes, they will become a part of Labour's subsidised childcare scheme, with low-income families benefitting from lower hourly costs. The details of the charges that will apply to those eligible for the existing schemes are set out below.

Year	Training and Employment Childcare / High Need	Community Childcare Subvention Band A	Community Childcare Subvention Band B
2017	€0	€75	€120
2018	€0	€75	€120
2019	€0	€60	€100
2020	€0	€45	€80
2021	€0	€30	€60

The first year the most important

The evidence is clear: children perform best when they remain within the home with their parents for the first 12 months of life.

In the last budget, we introduced two weeks' paid paternity leave, recognising that fathers should have the opportunity to bond with their new-born children. We will protect the existing six months of paid maternity leave and the two weeks of paternity leave recently introduced.

In addition, we will provide an additional two weeks paid paternity leave plus three months' paid parental leave, with at least one month paid parental leave reserved for each parent, ensuring that every child can be cared for by their parents for the first 9 months of life. We will increase this to 12 months within the next ten years.

We will also commission a review of the level of payment given for maternity, paternity and parental leave and will explore the potential to legislate for negotiated flexible working time arrangements for workers with young families.

A second free pre-school year

Giving children access to high-quality pre-school education from the age of three has been shown to dramatically improve educational outcomes.

From September 2016, every child in Ireland will be able to start pre-school at age three, and to stay in that setting until they begin school – a second year of free pre-school will be a reality for most families from next September.

In the last Budget, capitation rates for children in pre-school settings was increased by €2 per child. We will build upon this, to increase the basic rate capitation grant by €5 per week, and the higher rate by €9.50, bringing the rates to €67.50 and €82.50 respectively. We are also making proposals around professionalisation and salaries within the sector which will also be funded.

To ensure that the time of year that a child is born won't impact on their life chances, children will be able to enrol in pre-school at three different points in the year – September, January and April. We are also providing supports to children with special needs in pre-school.



Different families have different needs

The childcare sector in Ireland is composed of public and private suppliers ranging from community facilities to private crèches, childminders (regulated and unregulated) and nannies. Many parents also choose to stay at home to care for their own children.

In Government, we have expanded the childcare subvention scheme to allow private as well as community providers to deliver childcare for low-income families. We increased the home carer tax credit to €1,000 for stay at home parents.

We will build on Ireland's unique model of community, private and home-based childcare and early years education provision. Families will be able to choose to avail of subsidised childcare in private or community childcare centres, or use registered childminders.

Child Benefit

Over the last two budgets, we have increased Child Benefit by €10 per child per month, benefitting 623,000 families. We will continue to invest in Child Benefit, and increase Child Benefit payments by €15 per month by 2021.

School meals

No child should ever go to school hungry. We recognise that hungry children have difficulty paying attention and benefitting from education. This year, we increased the funding available for school meals by €3m, with over 1,430 schools and community groups now providing meals in schools.

We will increase the funding available for school meals by €5m each year, to expand school meals to at least a third of all schools – the scheme will also be expanded to cover pre-school settings, with a particular focus on the promotion of breakfast clubs. This will include funding for minor capital work required in some schools.

Responsibility for management of the school meals programme will be transferred to the education sector, so that we develop a coherent approach to tackling poverty and disadvantage in schools.

Better quality care and education

Children receive childcare provision of varying quality. “A Breach of Trust”, the RTÉ Prime Time Investigates programme in 2013, sharply demonstrated what can go wrong in an ill-equipped and under-resourced system. Less than 1% of all childminders are regulated and outside of any inspection system. For centre-based services the current system of inspection and regulation is fragmented.

In Government, we established a new pre-school inspectorate to enhance the quality of pre-school education. The last budget provided funding to carry out a quality audit across all early years services, and more money for the Learner Fund that trains up existing workers – we are committed to expanding this work.

We will make funding conditional on basic quality guarantees, and increase funding for those with higher qualifications. We will create a unified early years inspectorate. By 2025, at least 60% of all staff working in childcare will be qualified to degree level. We will require all professional childminders to be regulated.

Mentoring and support

In the education system, there are well established supports for mentoring and continuous professional development (CPD) of staff. However there are few such supports in place for those working with our youngest children.

In Government, we established Better Start – a national early years quality support service. Education-focussed inspections are now helping providers to improve their practice. We have funded the roll-out of the Sólta quality assurance programme, so that more children benefit from high quality care.

We will provide intensive CPD for half of all

staff in the sector by 2018, and will employ a full-time education officer to produce new curriculum resources for those working with young children. Quality supports will also be provided regionally, through the expansion of Better Start.

IN GOVERNMENT, WE ESTABLISHED A NEW PRE-SCHOOL INSPECTORATE TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Respecting those who work with young children

Many staff working in the childcare sector are on the minimum wage. This leads to rapid turnovers in staff, and prevents us from building a well-educated, top-quality workforce in the childcare sector. We recognise that staff need to be paid appropriately, and get the opportunity to develop decent, well-paid careers.

Labour in Government has restored capitation levels to providers of the free pre-school year. Our increases to the minimum wage have increased pay for many staff in this sector from €7.65 to €9.15 per hour. Now we want to work towards a situation where all pre-school workers earn a professional salary. Our commitment to further improve capitation rates to pre-school providers will boost the capacity of providers to pay their staff a decent wage.

We will increase payments to all childcare providers with a higher premium for providers with well qualified staff – those qualified

to level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications or above. These settings will receive a premium payment of €40 per child per week to ensure that staff with high levels of qualifications receive decent levels of pay.

We will provide all staff with one hour of paid non-contact time per week to plan their work. We will examine a two-week payment for holidays for all those engaged in delivering the free pre-school year. A sector-wide agreement on pay and conditions should also be put in place, to ensure that we move towards putting sustainable salary scales in place for those working with our children.

We will also begin to move towards professionalising the sector, and move towards 60% graduates within 10 years. For graduates to commit to working within early years services, they need to be able to expect graduate salaries. Within our proposals we have committed to increasing salaries to levels similar to those working within our schools. Our costings include a move towards professional graduate salaries, and are based on the assumption that within five years, one-third of the early years workforce will be graduates. Within our costings, we are also ensuring that all early years workers earn at least a living wage.

Valuing childminders

About a third of children are cared for by childminders. Childminders need to be supported to promote high standards in the sector, and parents need to be informed so they can identify top quality services for their children. We will protect the existing entitlement for childminders to earn up to €15,000 a year tax free.

We want to see childminders regulated, so that the quality of care they are providing will be inspected regularly and childminders are recognised and supported. Inspections will be appropriate to the home-based service childminders provide. Labour's subsidised childcare programme will only be open to regulated providers. To support childminders

who wish to avail of this subsidised childcare programme, we will put new supports in place to help them to meet necessary standards for regulation.

Planning for the future

The development of childcare facilities throughout Ireland, funded by tax breaks, has created an unsustainable, unplanned network of infrastructure. In some areas, many providers are available, with competition threatening the viability of some providers. In other areas, there are significant space shortages.

We will introduce a new system of forward planning for publicly-funded early years and childcare provision. The state will assess where additional places are required, and will then hold a competition between potential providers to see which option can show evidence of community support. This is based on the existing model of forward planning already in place for the school sector.

Child Protection

We have embarked upon an unprecedented range of legal and constitutional reforms to protect our children. The passage of the Children's Rights referendum will have implications for all future legislation, and the creation of TUSLA and passage of the Children and Family Relationships Act were both designed to put the interests of children first.

Early intervention and well integrated care and support between TUSLA, education and mental health services is critical to ensuring a well-functioning child protection service. Labour is committed to bringing about greater integration of these services with TUSLA.

We will also review the high staff turnover ratios within child protection services and explore ways to overcome worker burnout in terms of better supervision, manageable caseloads and a greater experience mix amongst colleagues in services. We will fully commence all sections of the Children and Family Relationships Act.

Costings

Policy	2021 Cost (€m)
Extend paternity leave by 2 weeks	20
Extend parental leave by 13 weeks	136.5
Subsidised childcare to reduce costs to €2 per hour by 2021	516
New higher capitation fee and provision for 1 hour non-contact time per child per week within the ECCE scheme	41
Professional Salary costs	135.7
Expanded learner Fund to fund	5
Intensive CPD for half of all staff in sector by 2018	10
Unified early-years inspectorate	2
Expand Better Start	1
Professional Salary costs	135.7
Total	867.2

Note: the proposals contained in this document were developed by the Labour Party following consultations with local and national bodies across Ireland with expertise in early years care and education. We based much of our costings on the *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Future Investment in Early Years and School Age Care and Education Services*.

Start Strong – a coalition group campaigning to improve government policy on early years in Ireland – has corroborated our subsidised childcare and professionalisation costings on the basis of the proposals and assumptions contained within our policy paper.

“WE HAVE EMBARKED UPON AN
UNPRECEDENTED RANGE OF LEGAL
AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS TO
PROTECT OUR CHILDREN”



The Labour Party,

W: www.labour.ie,

T: 01-678 4700

f /thelabourparty

t @labour