

Green Party Childcare Policy



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1.0 Introduction

The care of children and vulnerable adults is at the core of our community. The Green Party believes in valuing children and those who are dedicated to their welfare by ensuring that those who work in the home in the home or in formal childcare settings receive an income, pension security and access to career progression.

Families through-out the State are struggling with the cost of bringing up the youngest generation – moving far from family and friends, working long hours that often don't fit into a creche system and paying rent to private landlords well beyond the real cost of accommodation. Ireland has one of the highest costs of childcare in the OECD . The Green Party's approach to childcare calls for a massive investment in this sector, while retaining the values that prioritise choice for parents, the highest level of care for children and valuing the paid and unpaid labourers who provide this care.

1.1 Key policy concepts

Choice over how families bring up their children is a core tenet the Green Party's childcare policy and therefore our model calls for childcare subsidies to be paid directly to families. We will invest in Child-led Childcare Investment in publicly run State creches delivered predominantly by local authorities

Childcare workers now require a level of qualification equivalent to a degree and yet they are amongst the lowest paid in society. We call for a salary review that recognises the important work of all childcare workers in creches and other formal settings and for this wage to be negotiated between the government and a worker's forum

- Child benefit must should remain intact
- Extend paid maternity and paternity leave to one year
- Extend parental leave for parents of children up to age 13 for all workers and change this to paid leave

- Introduce tax breaks for firms recruiting parents who have been out of paid employment and for those introducing flexible working arrangements
- Have a streamlined system of pension rights for Stay-At-Home Parents
- Provide support for family carers
- An over-haul of the system of maintenance payments
- A suite of measures to support lone parent families who make up a quarter of all families with children
- Flexible working is the future for all employees including parents. See our Flexible Working Policy for details

2.0 Investing in Childcare

We believe that proper investment and a scheme that recognises all forms of care is what our children deserve. We need to move incrementally to a system of:

- State sponsored creches delivered through local resources
- The highest level of care in all childcare settings
- Fair incomes for workers
- Support for those choosing not to use these facilities

More women are working outside of the home than ever before, but the numbers remain high for those caring at home. The changing landscape needs to be reflected in the variety of care on offer. In 1986 there were 653,843 people categorised as homemakers. According to the Central Statistics Office 2016 that figure had declined to 305,556. However 62% of families have a parent listed as the sole care provider. This means that many families use flexible arrangements tailored around school in order to provide for their children's care.

Additionally a significant number of families choose childminders (10%) and family members or friends (19%).

We believe that Ireland's investment in childcare should be split between publicly run childcare facilities and direct subsidies to families. Many parents choose to work outside of the home, but according to the economist Dr. Helene Turon. "We get a sense that many households are in fact very far from changing their mind [about domestic childcare] and no amount of childcare policy

is going to change their decision,” she was reported to have said to the ESRI in 2018.

Bringing up the youngest generation is expensive. It always means providing for those that do not have an income. Parents who work outside of the home pay the equivalent of a second mortgage on childcare. Those who care for children in the home lose most of their tax credits, forgo a salary and the vast majority are not entitled to a carer’s allowance unless they have a child who qualifies (see below).

Private providers are key to a transition to an increased State sponsored scheme for childcare in Ireland, however much like the housing crisis, an over dependence on state funding for private provision of services will lock the sector in to a complete reliance on private provision over time. Furthermore, distribution of childcare tends to increase faster and offers more choice in wealthier areas where there is a better return for investment and more reliable custom for services.

The Affordable Childcare scheme that was introduced as a concept in October 2016 by the Fine Gael government and which came in to operation in September 2017 has not worked for a great many parents. This is a scheme whereby subsidies are paid directly to private creches for children enrolled to reduce the cost for parents.

Success has been patchy with some parents reporting financial relief but with others reporting an increase in fees equivalent to the subsidy. There were technological difficulties from the outset and an administrative burden on the providers. We call for an end to this scheme and the introduction of one paid directly to families. Over time and with more investment in State sponsored and subsidised creches, only those not using the State system would be given this subsidy. It is envisaged that the subsidy would be equivalent to the reduction in the real cost of creche care for families using this approach.

2.1 Policy Points

- We propose to increase the state spend on pre primary childcare from 0.3% of GDP to 0.6% of GDP to be phased in over a 2 year transition period
- We propose to bring Ireland into line with the EU average for childcare payments (between 10-13% of family income) in Europe through an integrated scheme of direct subsidies

to families and supported caps on costs through local authority provided childcare .

- Require Local Authorities to conduct a review and support service for childcare buildings to ensure that all premises have the correct planning status, the appropriate space and services for childcare and that they meet all requirements for fire safety and air quality
- To promote the provision of part time and wrap around childcare we advocate that tax incentives on a per child basis to childcare providers who provide part-time care for children in their care.
- We propose to make available grant schemes to facilitate the adaptation of suitably-located community, youth and sports facilities to operate as after school service providers which could also be used by community groups operating cooperative childcare.
- Make sure all children get the best start in life by ensuring that high quality pervades all aspects of our childcare provision by our state . We will establish a comprehensive framework for the early education profession, including qualifications, professional development and remuneration. We will link qualifications to pay, ensuring that early education professionals are incentivised to stay in the sector after graduation
- We propose to ensure that all children with disabilities or who have other additional needs get support to access early years, integrated, childcare, based on the recommendations in the second report of the Interdepartmental Working Group, including speech and language therapists and other appropriate early intervention
- As outlined in our Food Policy and our Childcare Policy the Green Party believes that all children should have access to a Schools' Meals Scheme that provides nutritious, locally sourced food to all children on a daily basis. We also propose the provision of 'Breakfast Clubs' as standard to primary schools.
- We propose an immediate 20% increase in the Back to School allowance and the requirement that all schools in receipt of state funds of any kind operate a generic uniform policy- that is, uniforms with no pre attached emblems or crests and items in standard colours to allow parents to source uniforms economically. We would also seek to raise the qualification threshold to the same as Family Income Supplement.

3.0 Lone parents

One in four families with children are headed by a lone parent according to the CSO and children

are 3 times as likely to live in consistent poverty in lone parent families . The Green Party calls for the long overdue implementation in full of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection Report on the position of Lone Parents. We want to see a suite of measures introduced to support lone parents in the care of their children.

- Increase in the One Family Payment
- Increase the age up to which the OFP can be claimed before a parent moves to the Jobseeker's Transitional Payment to age 14 from the current age of 7
- Increase the age up to which Jobseeker's Transitional Payment to age 18 from 14
- Increase in the income disregard
- Disregard maintenance as a form of income
- Take an education first rather than employment first approach

Over 40% of lone parents have not completed secondary education and while this is not seen as contributing negatively to their children's well-being, the associated poverty with the policies of the State does contribute.

According to Millar and Crosse the labour market activation method used by the Fine Gael-Labour coalition (2011-2016) resulted in many lone parents being worse off when going out to work; in turn leading to in work poverty. The study also showed that many lone parents wanted to care for children at home but this led to long-term poverty with re-entry to the workplace difficult. The report points out that a lone parent's capacity for paid work cannot be equated to a parent in a two parent family. Much of their time is given over to care and the change in terms for the OFP did not take this in to account. They suggest that flexible and part-time work may suit some along with a childcare system that takes the needs of those wishing to engage in full-time work in to account.

The Affordable Childcare Scheme has further disadvantaged lone parents "many lone parents use informal childcare to facilitate low-hour contracts and unsociable working hours. As such, they are effectively excluded from getting childcare support" according to the Joint Oireachtas Report.

3.1 Policy Points

- We propose to restore the age limit for the One - Parent Family Payment from 7 years of age to 18 years inclusive or until a child has left second level education. (For example a sixteen year old in full time employment would not be eligible) As childcare and supervision is the main financial burden on Lone Parents this payment is vital to the welfare of such households. The Green Party believes that the state has recognised the requirement for supervision of children under 18 years old in policies within the education system. We propose a 3.5% increase to the OFP payment.
- We propose to increase the threshold for access to OFP to €440 (just above the Living Wage and also 3.5% approx). Currently, it's €425 which works out at €11.33ph for a standard 37.5 hours week. This means someone earning €12 ph doesn't qualify, even if their net income is €7ph after childcare costs. This low threshold of €425 per week is a huge contributor to why lone parents are stuck in a social welfare trap and forced to reduce hours.
- The creation of a dedicated government agency to facilitate the personal development and career progression of Lone Parents. This organization would undertake administrative duties around both education and employment, placing both on an equal footing, and allow parents to work together with an assigned member of staff to optimise outcomes. Under the Green Party proposal all residents of Ireland would receive a Universal Basic Income and Jobseekers Allowance or Jobseekers Transition Allowances will be phased out (see previous section). We envisage this agency would also support Lone Parents to utilise the various strata of the Family Income Support payment and the new Child Maintenance Agency. We propose that such an agency would work with employers and educational bodies to ensure that caring responsibilities (higher rates of absences, requirement for flexible hours etc) do not adversely effect service users in employment and education.
- The provision of a nationwide, funded programme to encourage Lone Parents to consider further education, prior to the reentering the work force. The Green Party proposes that SUSI work with Lone Parents to ensure household income is secured at a rate that does not disincentivise further education. We also propose that the current criteria provided by SUSI around full time undergrad and the qualifying post grad courses should be reformed to support Lone Parents specifically.

4.0 Maintenance Payments

The system of maintenance payments in Ireland is amongst the worse in the world. This is a huge contributing factor to poverty for lone parents, with the courts the only realistic option to deal with non-payment of maintenance. According to the OECD figures for 2000, only 20% of lone parents were receiving child maintenance in Ireland. Parents tend to return to court on several occasions before an attachment of earnings order is made and once a non-custodial parent changes their job the problem reoccurs. This needs to change. In Sweden, in contrast, 100% of custodial parents receive payments, because of the Advanced Payment Scheme which is in operation in many countries. There is a cost to the state as it is required to take over recovery of payments when a parent requests it to do so, however the benefits to the children are clear according to Joseph Rowntree Foundation, European Approaches to Child Maintenance Payments 1999.

For lone parents wishing to avail of the OFP they must show evidence of pursuing the non-custodial parent for payment of maintenance placing an even further burden on these families and removing any obligation on the State.

4.1 Policy Points

- The Green Party proposes the creation of a Child Maintenance Agency (CMA) to secure payments from non resident parents for the care and well being of their child. We also believe that the responsibility for requesting payment as it relates to other social welfare income must reside with the state and not the resident parent. The CMA will work with the courts to identify fair and reasonable payments and have full legislative powers to collect income at source. We propose that, as Child Maintenance is for the benefit of the child it should not impact on the receipt of Social Welfare Payments and in particular, considering the current housing crisis, it should not be deducted from any rental supplements received. We propose that the provision of Child Maintenance payments by the non resident parent should continue with the support of the state until the child is 18 years old or out of fulltime secondary school education..

5.0 Maternity, Paternity Leave and Parental Leave

Under the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 and 2004 mothers have a right to maternity leave of up to 26 weeks with an additional 16 weeks unpaid and fathers to paternity leave of two weeks. Our proposal is that paid leave be extended to one year paid leave, regardless of PRSI contributions, and that the right to the second six months to be shared between parents as they see fit. Adoptive parents, step-parents and guardians should also be entitled to share in this maternity and paternity leave. These government payments should be increased to 66% of a normal salary as recommended by the European Commission.

It is important that all families have equal access to spending time with their children. The current system of parental leave in Ireland is unpaid and this must be changed over time to ensure equal access. Additionally those in public sector work can take this leave up to their child's 14th birthday, whereas those working in private sector jobs must take it before age 7. This must be rectified by way of a simple bill in the Oireachtas.

5.1 Policy Points

- The entitlement to one year of paid parental leave
- Provision for parents to share this leave as is appropriate for their family
- Provision for both public and private sector workers to access parental leave up to the child's age of 14

6.0 Premature babies

The Green Party's Catherine Martin put forward a motion on the rights of parents of premature babies as her first act in office. Our legislation extended maternity leave for the mothers of preterm babies by the number of weeks a baby is born prematurely. Thus the mother of a baby born at 32 weeks would qualify for an addition eight weeks of maternity leave and benefit. We are committed to the ongoing improvement of maternal and infant care in this country.

7.0 Childcare Workers

We call for the immediate implementation of a Childcare Worker's Forum with stakeholders invited to participate. This would be similar in nature to a Citizen's Assembly and would hear from all concerned. The lack of respect for the valuable work of carers needs to be examined and

intense investment from the state provided.

Early Childcare Ireland reported this year that the average pay for a childcare provider in an ECCE setting is €11.21 and for the average for other assistants is €10.55 per hour . It is important to note that over 50% of these workers work part-time, meaning that their overall pay was extremely low .

Along with the difficulties for these workers, the pay of childcare workers negatively impacts the quality within the formal childcare sector as it has contributed to a turnover rate of 28% in staff according to POBAL 2018.

7.1 Policy Points

- To make sure all children get the best start in life by ensuring that high quality pervades all aspects of our childcare provision our state . We will establish a comprehensive framework for the early education profession, including qualifications, professional development and remuneration. We will link qualifications to pay, ensuring that early education professionals are incentivised to stay in the sector after graduation
- We call for a salary review that recognise the important work of all childcare workers in creches and other formal settings and for this wage to be negotiated between the government and a worker's forum

8.0 Child benefit

Universal supports such as child benefit are seen as being more advantageous than targeted benefits (Barnardos 2014) to the least well off in society. A detailed study of 18 developed countries compared rates of child poverty in countries with both universal and targeted services. There was a double outcome: firstly, countries with universal services had the lowest rates of child poverty and secondly, the states with the most targeted supports for those most at risk of poverty had the highest rates of child poverty. Targeted approaches were particularly ineffective for lone parents. Child benefit can insure that those who do not have an income have their own source, albeit small, of funding for day-to-day living. We in the Green Party see the continuation of child benefit, with the addition of subsidies while children are pre-school age to pay for

childcare as the best approach to supporting families. Into the future we propose that child benefit will operate in tandem with an adult access to a Universal Basic Income lifting many families out of poverty permanently. In accordance with the relevant EU regulations (883/2004 and 987/2009), child benefit should be payable to any family member and we suggest this should be, by default, the person actually or mainly responsible for caring for the child (either parent, especially a stay at home parent; step-parent; grandparent; etc

8.1 Policy Points

- We propose to continue the system of child benefit, to include extra payments for children of pre-school age to cover childcare costs.
- We propose that child benefit should be payable to the family member primarily caring for the child.
- In the long term, child benefit would be tied into a system of Universal Basic Income.

9.0 Flexible Care Strategies

Many formal childcare facilities operate on a Monday to Friday basis which assumes the parents are working on an office 9-5 schedule. This is not reflective of the modern working environment or the needs of families and this need for flexibility is likely to increase over time. Many formal settings may never be able to provide this service and in Ireland currently childminders, paid and unpaid, are a key part of the community and therefore families must be entitled to use a subsidy for this type of care.

9.1 Policy Points

- While we support the current childcare programmes available (CCS, ASCC, CETS, CEC and ECCE) we believe that the piecemeal nature of their availability, the delays in accessing care due to application requirements etc do not result in a secure and long term solution for parents. The Green Party proposes the development of a nationwide 'wrap around' childcare scheme that safeguards the welfare of children while supporting employment, further education and the various demands on Lone Parents. Wrap Around childcare offers extended childcare hours outside the standard 8am to 6pm hours and is not subject to term time, it focuses heavily on after school programmes and part time places with no minimum usage requirement. This scheme

would also seek to provide programmes and venues suitable for the care of teenage children. We propose that while such schemes would be available to all parents, the children of Lone Parents in employment or education would receive a state guaranteed place in their local area.

10.0 Quality

“The quality of services for young children is critical to their effectiveness. The evidence on early care and education services demonstrates that such services only benefit children when they are of high quality. When they are of low quality, they can do harm. The quality of early care and education services today is very variable and the lack of quality assurance is unacceptable.”

Start Strong, ‘Childcare Business or Profession’, 2013

Despite this the quality in the sector can fluctuate significantly. Currently 9.1% of staff in the sector have no qualifications , 1.4% have undertaken non-accredited childcare courses and 4% are unpaid volunteers. Also staff working in the childcare sector is generally paid a low hourly rate and must undertake training and CPD in their own time. This current system is resulting in high levels of ‘staff churn’ that is detrimental to all stakeholders. We need more a comprehensive qualifications framework that is responsive to the needs of children and parents and rewards staff who undertake CPD.

The Green Party asserts that to achieve quality there needs to be more sustained and targeted investment in the sector. Siolta is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and amongst its key objectives is a desire to develop the capacity of services to provide quality experiences for children aged from birth to six years and their families . Linking investment to a quality framework replicates international best practice and the Green Party is of the view that the adoption of Siolta framework should be mandatory for any childcare facility in receipt of state capitation. This will provide an incentive to providers to adopt the principles of Siolta and assist in advancing quality in the sector.

We also believe that the recently formed Better Start agency, which collaborates with City and County Childcare Committees and Voluntary Childcare Organisations to ensure high quality

early years services, should be made a permanent body and further resourced as recommended by the Inter-departmental Working Group in 2015.

10.1 Outdoor Spaces

The National guidelines for pre-school services recommends that children have, the opportunity to choose activities, be active indoors and outdoors, and to rest if they need to but current pre-school guidelines don't set down minimum requirements for outdoor spaces. Given the problem with childhood obesity in Ireland and the importance of physical activity in addressing this, the Green Party supports legislating for a minimum area of outdoor play area per space per child, with use of public green spaces to be allowable. This means that should a provider use a public park with the children this would count towards their outdoor space.

10.2 Inspections

The most positive outcomes from childcare have been found in countries with a national policy of providing preschool services to all children and a tradition of ensuring the quality of those services through enforceable regulations. For this reason the Child and Family agency must have sufficient resources to ensure regular monitoring inspections and re-inspections. There has been some progress made in this sector in recent years with the introduction of a registration system which requires all new childcare premises to be inspected before opening. However, if standards are to be improved and children safeguarded un-announced annual inspections should be the standard and inspection reports should be made publicly accessible online within a reasonable time frame.

We also support incorporating information on the protection provided by the 2014 Whistleblowing Act into the training programmes of childcare workers.