

A PUBLIC CHILDCARE SYSTEM

Labour's Childcare policy is one of our five policy commitments that must be at the core of any agreement with other parties in the next Dáil.

Labour will develop a public Childcare Scheme for Working Parents. This scheme is the first step towards Labour's vision of a universal public childcare service for all parents that is high quality and much more affordable, which ultimately will replace other schemes and subsidies.

TOWARDS UNIVERSAL PUBLIC CHILDCARE

Childcare needs to change. We need to bring Ireland into line with our European neighbours. Labour will develop a universal public childcare system.

Parents should never have to choose between their children and their job. Not surprisingly, when compared to other small open economies in Europe, Ireland's female labour force participation rate is among the lowest and remains below the pre-crisis levels. This is in large part due to Ireland's unaffordable childcare costs.

We need to try something new and bring Ireland into line with our European neighbours when it comes to childcare. The current model is not working.

Labour's scheme will first target parents who cannot work because of the prohibitive cost of childcare. There are around 300,000 children in the 0-4 age group, and around two-thirds of them use some form of childcare service at present. To start, the first phase will cater for around 6,000 children (2% of all children in the 0-4 age group), targeted initially at parents who can't afford to work and pay for childcare costs. Based on the outcomes from this pilot, the service will be expanded.

The service will include early drop-off times and late collection to reflect modern work practices and commute times, and will be based on best

practice education, play and early learning. Only appropriately regulated and inspected childminding services will be eligible to be involved, and we will prioritise community-led, not-for-profit childcare models.

The costs to parents will be moderate, set at the EU average level of childcare costs. Irish parents are currently paying three times the EU average.

The approximate cost of the programme will be €60 million, to be funded through existing tax revenue. That's €10,000 per child, based on the assumption that half the premises to be used will already be state-owned. There might also be an initial capital cost to prepare sites, and a further allocation of €20 million will be made available for that. The scheme will be rolled out on a pilot basis to start, and if the take-up is high, have a public discussion on what it would cost to scale it up.

Labour will increase inspections and oversight of childcare providers, in relation to €400 million in grants received by the sector.

PROFESSIONALISATION OF CHILDCARE WORKERS AND CONTINUITY OF CARE

Currently, the average wage for the some 25,000

childcare workers in the sector is just €11.18, one euro below a living wage. The turnover rate for the sector is high, which is detrimental for the continuity of care that is critical to a child's development at an early age. The model is clearly not working and needs to be reformed for parents, providers and most importantly the children who avail of these services.

Labour will ensure that childcare workers are paid what they deserve and guarantee at least the Living Wage for all staff.

If we want a high-quality service with low turnaround, then we need to pay staff properly. Specifically, **we will raise the pay floor in childcare to a higher minimum wage through a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) for that sector.** This will provide a decent wage for childcare professionals and therefore reduce the high turnover rate of childcare staff, ensuring greater continuity of care.

LOWER INSURANCE FOR PROVIDERS OF CHILDCARE

At the end of 2019, a once-off €1,500 payment to each childcare provider to help them deal with extra insurance costs. This highlighted the Government's complete mismanagement of both the childcare and insurance sector. Simply throwing more money at the problem will not solve the long-term issues which lead to the continuous rise in insurance premiums, subsequent closures and fewer places for parents seeking childcare.

Labour will promote **Pooled Group Insurance schemes** which will ensure significantly cheaper premiums for businesses, voluntary and community groups who could act together to negotiate lower premiums. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs will be tasked with facilitating childcare operators who wish to pool together to seek insurance.

