GENERAL ELECTION 2024

PUBLIC Early Childhood Education and Care

November 2024

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[1] in Ireland has jumped from one crisis to the next. This is despite increased public investment in the sector.

Parents are finding it difficult to access ECEC services as demand in many areas is now outstripping supply.

- Fees are rising as some providers are leaving or threatening to leave the core-funding programme which capped fees
- Low wages and poor working conditions make it difficult to attract and retain skilled staff. This continues to degrade the quality of the service, limits expansion and reduces capacity.

The key issues are affordability, accessibility and service quality. SIPTU is calling on the next Government to implement a three-step programme to bring Irish ECEC up to best practice in Europe, ensuring that children, parents and educators in the sector can benefit from a sustainable and quality in ECCE.

1. Roll out of public model provision

Alongside private and community provision, roll out ECEC services throughout the country through a public agency. Public service ECEC should, in the first instance, be provided:

- In areas of unmet demand
- In areas where providers are leaving the sector
- Where a provider is closing, the public agency should have a right of first refusal
- Where state investment is creating new ECEC facilities
- Where there is a lack of providers abiding by the Core Funding programme.

Public service ECEC is not intended to replace private or community-based providers, but rather complement them – providing a third option for children, parents and Educators in the sector. The issue of what kind of public agency should be discussed; it could also be a public enterprise, Education Training Board-type body or a non-commercial state body, it could be organised at national or local authority level.

[1]Including school-age ECEC

2. State-funded employee compensation

The Government should assume the payroll expenditure of all providers – private, community, and public provision service. Employees, however, would still be employed by the individual provider.

Only the Government has the resources to bring wages and working conditions to a level that would ensure ECEC services can recruit and retain staff, invest in skills and provide compensation to the workforce consistent with their vital caring and educational roles.

This is not a radical departure from current policy. Wages to deliver the Early Childhood Care and education scheme are fully paid for by the state as well as in primary education. Much of the subsidies to the ECEC sector are directed at wages. The state would need to develop a robust and transparent process to ensure that funds aimed at employing educators and managers are used for that purpose.

For too long, Irish ECEC has gotten by on low wages with little career development on offer. This is not the basis for a long-term sustainable ECEC and Early Years' sector.

Until this new system is brought on-stream the Government must give a concrete commitment to annual ring-fenced investment in pay to enable a new pay deal every September.

3. Reducing fees through a new fees regulation system

With the Government paying the wages of the workforce in the sector, costs to providers will fall by up to 70%. A new fees regulation scheme should ensure that a similar fall in fees occurs, thus ensuring affordability (fees could fall to as low as €60 per week).

Community and private sector providers would only be eligible to receive state funding for their payroll expenditure on condition they participate in the new fees regulation system. If they choose not to participate then they would have to rely on charging fees at market prices (e.g. €200 per week).

Public service ECEC provision would automatically participate in the new fees regulation system.

The current means-tested supports for low-income households would continue, further reducing fees from the new standard.

This new Early Years' programme – ensuring accessibility, affordability and quality service – would require regular tripartite negotiations involving representatives of employees, employers and the State. These negotiations would cover wages, provider subsidies, fees increase (tied to the costs of service provision) and capital grants.

The additional cost of introducing this new system would be limited as much of it would be financed through redirecting current subsidies.

THE EARLY YEARS UNION

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