

**Social
Democrats**

A New Deal for Families

Getting it right for children, for parents

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Introduction

Parenting is the most important job that any of us will ever do. After all, the future of our country depends on it.

Yet, in Ireland, we do too little to support parents. Despite improvements in recent years, we are still well behind other countries in terms of paid leave for parents, investment in childcare and early years education, supports for new parents, and basic public services for children.

The Social Democrats believe that parents and families deserve a break. Parenting should be more than just about surviving week to week, or an ongoing battle to ensure your child gets the services they are entitled to.

We want a **New Deal for Families**.

This New Deal would put parents and children at the heart of Government policies. It will support those parenting, in all forms of families, by allowing them more time with their children, more help with the cost of raising a family, and more peace of mind over their children's future.

Below, the Social Democrats are proposing a range of measures including the following:

- **Improving paid leave arrangements** for parents
- Introducing a **right to flexible work** options
- **Helping with the costs** of raising children
- Respecting and **supporting all childcare choices**
- **Public services that parents can count on** in areas like Education and Health
- **Ending Child Poverty**
- Promoting **healthy and active lifestyles**
- Protecting children **online**

Improving flexible work options for Parents

Paid Leave for Parents

The Social Democrats are committed to **extending and vastly improving entitlement to paid leave for parents and flexible work options.**

Ireland lags far behind most other EU countries in terms of both paid and unpaid leave. This is not in the interests of employers, workers or children. Our leave system should be providing far better support and flexibility for parents.

During the 32nd Dáil we published a Bill which extended unpaid parental leave to six months and raised the qualifying age from 8 to 12 years, and we fought hard to get it through the Houses of the Oireachtas. As a result, new parental leave entitlements came into force in September 2019.

The feedback we received on this Bill tells us there is huge public demand to extend both paid and unpaid parental leave much further. **Parents want the option of spending time with their children while also retaining the right to return to their employment.** This is not too much to ask.

The Social Democrats favour the **extension of paid parental leave** so that in conjunction with paid maternity leave, paternity leave and existing paid parental leave, the **first 12 months of a child's life can be covered by paid leave.** It would be shareable between parents.

In our Alternative Budget 2024, we called on Government to:

- **Increase paid parents' leave by 6 weeks** for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each, and
- **increase benefit payments to €350 per week** for Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit.

This would allow paid parents' leave and maternity leave to cover the full first year of a child's life.

We should also be moving to a situation where the overall amount of paid and unpaid leave for parents is extended to the European average of **around 100 weeks per child.** We would also like to see the general child qualifying age for unpaid parental leave extended to 16 years.

The 4-day Working Week

It is clear from the uptake of the existing limited flexible work options that there is a high demand for these options.

In addition, there is **growing interest among workers and employers in providing for a 4-day working week**. This is already available and promoted in many other countries and the outcomes have been generally very positive.

The demand for more flexible working is especially strong from parents of young children, those caring for an older person or a family member with a disability, and generally where people are seeking a better work/life balance.

We will establish a Commission to **research, trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work** including working from home, term-time working, and a 4-day week, and to ensure that it works for parents, families of all types, and for large and small employers.

We also recognise that parents of children with disabilities and certain carers have particular demands on their time and require further flexibility. We will **raise the qualifying child age for unpaid parental leave to 16 years and to 18 years for children with disabilities**.

We will provide for this and other flexibilities through a **new Family Leave Act** in consultation with representatives from those sectors.

This Act would also include making it **compulsory for employers with more than 250 employees to make publicly available** their policies regarding their financial contributions to Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave and Parents' Leave for their employees.

This would recognise that when a person is applying for a role in a new company, information regarding that company's policy on such contributions would be beneficial to the prospective employee, though requesting that same information might incur prejudice in the competition for the role.

Supporting All Childcare Choices

Despite some improvements, Irish parents pay some of the **highest costs in the world for childcare**. Despite some recent improvements, childcare remains a huge expense for many families.

The Social Democrats supported the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme. However, the scheme as currently constituted, falls far short of meeting the needs of those parenting.

For many Irish parents, especially those with more than one child, childcare still represents the cost of a second mortgage. In addition, many parents don't qualify for support under the scheme, either because their income is not deemed low enough or their child is not deemed young enough.

These major gaps significantly raise the cost of living for such families and represent a very significant barrier to employment, especially for women and people parenting alone. **Parents have a right to expect that like other developed European countries, childcare should be accessible, affordable and adequately supported by the state.**

However, the Social Democrats also recognise that it is **not just parents using the formal childcare sector who face high costs**. And neither are these high costs confined to just the youngest families.

Many families adjust their childcare arrangements as their families and work arrangements change over time. Many take time out of work to care for their family, use a Nanny/Au Pair, the formal childcare sector, or family members, or move in and out of childminding.

Most of these choices entail costs, either directly or through **income-foregone**. So, it's **important that all childcare arrangements are respected and supported by the state**.

In addition, the Social Democrats are keen to ensure that the childcare sector is placed on a sustainable footing and that **childcare workers are valued both in terms of wages and training**. This is not only in the interests of the workers themselves but also parents and children.

The Social Democrats will introduce **four key childcare measures** to help parents to support their families:

1. As in the previous section, we will introduce **additional paid parents' leave** from the end of maternity and paternity leave to the child's first birthday.
2. We will **significantly improve support under the National Childcare Scheme** to allow far more families with children under the age of 12 to qualify and to improve supports under the universal element of the scheme.
3. We would **establish a public model of childcare** through investment in a competent system that recognises ECEC as a public good rather than a commodity (See next page).
4. We will **improve direct funding to the childcare sector to help improve employment conditions and training, and to improve sustainability.**

Childcare fees should be capped at no more than €250 per week.

We will also seek to reduce the administrative burden on the sector through direct assistance from County Childcare Committees.

We will introduce a single Early Years and School Age Childcare Agency. If childcare fees continue to increase in line with subsidies, we will introduce measures to cap them.

Public Funds for a Public Model of ECEC

High quality, accessible and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an essential social and economic good that can enhance children's development, educational outcomes and health trajectories across the lifespan.

Access to and participation in ECEC can also reduce inequality and social exclusion and remove barriers to parental employment.

In Government, it would be a Social Democrats priority **to establish a public model of childcare through investment in a competent system that recognises ECEC as a public good rather than a commodity.**

With record levels of State funding for ECEC, it is essential that this investment generates the best possible social return through a sustainable infrastructure that ensures high-quality ECEC for children, affordability for families, and a highly skilled and fairly remunerated ECEC workforce.

The complex ECEC ecosystem requires ambitious investment and approaches to create a sustainable, accountable, and affordable public ECEC system. This should include **investment of surplus exchequer funds in a sustainable capital ECEC infrastructure**, as well investment of the recommended **1 per cent of national income in ECEC** over the coming years.

Our priorities include:

- Ensuring **1 per cent of Ireland's national income** is invested in Early Childhood Education and Care.
 - This will cap childcare fees at no more than €250 per month.
- **Increased public ownership** of purpose-built ECEC infrastructure.
- More **Community-based infrastructure** of ECEC in Ireland.
- Equal Participation in ECEC for Children experiencing **Poverty and Social Exclusion**.
- **Adequate levels of Sponsorship** for children experiencing extreme vulnerability.

Investing 1 per cent of national income in Early Childhood Education and Care

Ireland lags significantly behind our European counterparts on Government investment in ECEC. Ireland's reliance on market-based systems has resulted in a dysfunctional system with:

- some of the highest childcare fees in Europe,
- extremely poor working conditions for ECEC professionals, and
- problems with staff recruitment and retention.

Ireland must strive to increase investment in ECEC to 1 percent of national income. This requires an additional investment of €2.6 billion in a universally accessible, high-quality, affordable ECEC system, if GNI is the chosen measure.

This level of investment must be carefully managed and monitored to ensure ECEC partnerships for public good that are fiscally accountable and financially transparent, aiming for a highly skilled and fairly remunerated workforce, **with childcare costs of no more than €250 per month.**

Publicly owned infrastructure of purpose-built ECEC settings

Ireland needs a sustainable capital infrastructure of accessible purpose-built childcare buildings, suitable for babies and children from 7am to 7pm, 52 weeks per year.

Surplus exchequer funds should be used to acquire ECEC settings on existing and new sites such as Schools, Community Centres, Strategic Housing Development and Large-Scale Residential Developments.

Local authorities should require developers to implement the *Childcare Facilities: Guidelines for Local Authorities* that recommends one childcare facility providing for a minimum 20 childcare places per approximately 75 dwellings.

These ECEC settings should be publicly owned by central and/or local government and made available for public partnerships dedicated to high-quality, affordable childcare and fair and equitable staff working conditions. The construction of **early years facilities alongside all newly built schools** should also be mandated.

Equal Participation in ECEC for Children experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS), consistently presented as a landmark universal scheme, is **entirely inadequate to meet the needs of children experiencing poverty.**

Young children are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of poverty in early childhood. Material deprivation and social exclusion have both immediate and long-term causal negative effects on children's health, socioemotional well-being, academic achievement, and participation. **Children experiencing poverty benefit significantly from access to high-quality early childhood care and education.**

In government, we would target ECEC funding to ensure access to high-quality, full-day care throughout the year for babies and children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. These services should be able to provide favourable adult-child ratios, three meals per day, rest spaces, well-equipped outdoor spaces and access to family rooms that can be used for parent support and/or education purposes.

Such provision requires dedicated funding per child, per week (not deductible based on attendance) and should reflect 'real' provision costs. **The capitation per child per week in areas of deprivation should be a minimum of €250, with enhanced capitation based on the level of deprivation in the local area as defined by the Pobal Deprivation Indices.**

We would also sustain and upscale the important work of the Area Based Childhood Programmes.

Increase Community-based infrastructure of ECEC in Ireland

Community-based, not-for-profit childcare settings are a critical asset to children, families, and communities across Ireland. **Despite this they are inadequately supported,** and many are under threat of service reduction and closure.

Charities, not-for-profit organisations, and social enterprises that provide ECEC should be sustained, encouraged and further developed. In Government we

would **ensure that the community-based, not-for-profit, and social enterprise infrastructure is adequately supported** to make provision for all children and families, particularly those at risk of poverty.

Purpose-built community childcare settings should not be vacant in the afternoons or during school holidays and settings should be funded and supported to ensure that children can attend on a daily basis, throughout the year.

Boards of Management, volunteers and social entrepreneurs should be adequately supported to ensure their compliance with the Governance Code and requirements of the Charities Regulator.

Adequate levels of Sponsorship for Children in Extreme Vulnerability

Community-based settings in Ireland provide most Sponsored places for children experiencing extreme vulnerability, with 65 per cent of all sponsored places in 2022 provided in community-based settings; this equates to 3,352 out of 5,195 NCS Sponsorship Claims.

Community-based settings account for only 26 per cent of all settings in Ireland, meaning there is a disproportionate burden on community-based and not-for-profit settings to respond to the needs of children experiencing extreme vulnerability, and the majority make provision at an operational loss to their settings.

Sponsorship under NCS should reflect the 'real' cost of provision for children facing abject adversity. These children require additional care, attention and nurturing, and funding should reflect more favourable adult-child ratios, adequate nutrition and access and availability of advice and support to meet needs, including access to services such as play therapy, psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and social work teams as required.

Sponsorship should be **automatically funded as full-day care** (min 40 hours per week) with a **minimum capitation rate of €350 per child**, per week for a minimum of 50 weeks per year.

More Affordable Public Services

Education

The Social Democrats are committed to the introduction of **truly free Primary and Secondary Education**. This would mean investing in schools to increase capitation grants, improve school transport, and universalise book schemes for students at all levels through to the Leaving Certificate.

Adequate funding would ensure that schools **end the practice of seeking voluntary contributions from parents**.

We will also ensure that school managers adopt a principle of cost-minimisation in relation to school uniforms and other school costs.

We will invest in **new primary school teachers, supports for special needs**, and strive towards the full commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 so that parents with children with special needs do not need to campaign eternally for their child's rights.

Healthcare

The proposals of the Sláintecare plan, which was driven by the Social Democrats, will provide for the **expansion of frontline primary care services**.

It will mean that basic services that are key to a child's development such as public health nursing, speech and language therapy, and eye, ear and dental services will be significantly improved so that parents can rely on them if their child needs them.

Thousands of children wait very lengthy periods for basic health services such as speech and language services. The **completely unacceptable waiting times in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**, in psychology and many other streams of child health services are well known. These waiting times would be significantly reduced under our proposals.

As part of the full roll-out of Sláintecare we will provide **additional funding for public health nursing** and we would like to see some of this investment going to dedicated child and family public health nurses.

Ending Child Poverty

It's a huge indictment of our country that tens of thousands of children in Ireland grow up in consistent and persistent poverty. In practical terms, this means they live in households with a very low income and go without basics such as adequate food or heat, or they face social exclusion, for large parts of their childhood.

This is simply **unacceptable**. Allowing children to fall behind so early in life stores up huge problems for the future, and costs society dearly in the long run.

There is hardly a greater avoidable tragedy in Irish society than that of child poverty. The scarring effects of living in persistent poverty as a child last for life, and affect everything from emotional development, mental health and physical well-being in adulthood to educational attainment and labour market participation.

It denies children's human rights, is hugely wasteful for society as it inhibits economic potential in adulthood, and reduces the contribution people can make to society.

Dealing with the repercussions later in life is far more expensive and less effective than early interventions, which would lead both to future savings in expenditure on welfare and criminal justice, and to higher tax revenues. **Eliminating child poverty requires a combination of child and adult income supports, and access to quality public services.**

Income supports targeted at the most vulnerable in our society are required, as well as an expansion of services, particularly around education, health, and the care of children, designed to mitigate the notable economic inequality that is increasingly a feature of Irish society.

In Government, we would:

- Set a clear target in the next Programme for Government that **consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated** as early as possible within the lifetime of the next Dáil.

- Acknowledge that children live in households with adults. Therefore, **child poverty cannot be eliminated without lifting the households in which they live** out of poverty. Working-age income supports are part of the solution.
- Benchmark our social protection system to the cost of a **Minimum Essential Standard of Living** to ensure everyone has enough to live a decent and dignified life.
- Automatically fund **'sponsorship' for childcare as full-day care** (min 40 hrs p/week) with a minimum capitation rate of €350 per child per week, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year, for children experiencing the worst deprivation.
- Create a new **DEIS Plus categorisation** for the most disadvantaged schools.
- Set the **Qualified Child Increase payment** at a level that properly reflects the costs of raising children and the depths of child poverty in Ireland.
- Use the **Working Family Payment** to support low-income families who are at work.
- Increase supports for **Foster Carers** to a level that better reflects both the cost of raising children and the benefits of having children in foster homes rather than institutional care.
- Introduce a statutory **Child Maintenance Service**.
- **Replicate targeted area-based investment** similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving learning and well-being outcomes.
- Increase funding for TUSLA and **recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff** to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- **Make the primary and secondary education systems truly free.**
- Extend the **school meals programme** on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food.
- **Poverty-proof all Budgets** and set against the targets of the new Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Promoting Active and Healthy lifestyles

One in four children in Ireland are overweight or obese – with marked differences depending on family income. Three in four adults over 50 are overweight or obese. **Ireland has among the highest levels of overweight and obese adults in the EU.**

We have a problem, and it's time we faced it.

Obesity in children is almost entirely preventable. There are multiple factors involved including diet and nutrition, food affordability, education, activity and exercise.

We need action in a host of areas including promoting active lifestyles, portion-sizes, the availability and affordability of high calorie food/drinks, weight management programmes, parental and child education, food labelling, reformulation of food and drink, marketing and advertising restrictions, taxes, and public health campaigns.

A key factor is also the amount of quality time available to parents – this impacts on parents' ability to cook nutritious food, the activities their children can be involved in, and the amount of time children spend on screens. It is one of the reasons why the Social Democrats have placed **so much emphasis on extending leave and flexible work options for parents.**

The national action plan on obesity – *A Healthy Weight for Ireland* – set a good framework for the problem but is weak in terms of concrete actions, timelines and budgets. It is over-reliant on voluntary codes of practice and does very little to address the bombardment of our children with inappropriate food marketing through broadcasting.

The Social Democrats will address these weaknesses by drawing up **a new national plan for obesity.** To ensure there is proper buy-in from all Departments, this plan will be headed by the office of An Taoiseach, and Departments will report to the Taoiseach through a new National Implementation Office.

As part of this plan we will:

- Introduce a **ban on all food advertising aimed at children**.
- Improve **labelling and nutrition information** on food and drinks, and the public's understanding of it.
- Introduce a **sweet snack tax**.
- Ensure that "**no fry zones**" are put in place within 400m of all schools, where practicable.
- Require all schools to have **healthy food policies** and provide guidelines on school lunches.
- Invest heavily in **sport and recreation**, ensuring that there are grant allocations on an annual basis and that qualifying criteria are strongly skewed towards driving participation.
- Promote **safe cycling** as a viable option for children.

Protecting Children Online

The digital age brings both opportunities and significant challenges for children and parents.

Children are far more exposed to online material, social media and computer gaming with many companies seeking to improve their commercial reach by actively and in some cases aggressively targeting children.

The Social Democrats wish to **protect children from over-zealous consumerism and marketing**, and to provide parents with better information on how to deal with on-line bullying issues, social media concerns, and over-use of computer games.

The Social Democrats commit to:

- Supporting the roll out of the new **Digital Rights Commission**
- Developing a new **National Strategy on Children's Cyber Safety and On-line Bullying**
- More public awareness campaigns for parents and children on **online safety issues and digital well-being**
- Enacting legislation to reflect the Law Reform Commission's recommendations in its *Report on Harmful Communications and Digital Safety*.
- Ensuring the continued **prohibition of the use of children's online data for commercial marketing purposes** by keeping the ban on the practice of 'profiling' those under 18 years old.
- Push for legislation building on the EU's findings around **how loot boxes and some in-game purchases are targeted at children**.

Legislation should set down a requirement for a new warning system on computer games sold over-the-counter to alert parents that the game includes in-game purchases and/or loot boxes.
- Introducing new regulations to prevent over-the-counter sales of computer games to children who are under the age-rating for the game (as in Britain).

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