

**Together
For Public**

nwlc

National Women's Council

Roadmap to Public Childcare

**Together for Public Alliance
Position Paper
May 2026**

Introduction and Executive Summary

Ireland's system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is in crisis. It does not adequately support children, families, or educators. Ongoing issues of affordability and access, precarious pay and work conditions for educators, lack of supports, flexibility and inclusivity for different children and families' needs, along with increasing corporatisation, are all impacting the sector

This crisis continues despite wide-ranging, welcome, and ambitious investment by Government over the last half-decade. Genuine systemic reform is needed. Convened by the National Women's Council (NWC), the Together for Public Alliance for a Public System of Early Childhood Education and Care ('the Alliance') was formed in 2024 to advance and advocate for a transition to a public system of early childcare and education (ECEC) and school-age childcare (SAC) in Ireland.

The Alliance has grown to over 40 members at present, ranging from academics, trade unions and educators, ECEC providers, human rights and anti-poverty groups including those representing lone parents, migrants, and Traveller and Roma, and members of wider civil society. This diversity in membership showcases the wide reach in the Irish ECEC's current issues and cements a broad consensus toward urgent and immediate ECEC policy reform.

In December 2025, the Government published *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)*.¹ It sets out actions due in 2026 (Phase 1) under three headings, Affordability, Access, and Quality. Phase 2 of the Plan (2027–2029) is to be developed and published later in 2026 following a series of consultations through the first half of the year. The Alliance, and many of NWC's constituent members, have and will continue to contribute to the *Shaping the Future* consultation through the online survey, the Early Learning and Care Stakeholder Forum, and at regional and national events.

This position paper has been prepared to complement this work and to highlight the policy steps needed for government to transition to a public system of high-quality, accessible, inclusive ECEC and SAC which guarantees a place for every child.

The recommendations in this position paper are arranged around three pillars:

Pillar 1 - Affordability: Achieve €200 per month fees through the state taking on the responsibility for educators' wages. The Programme for Government commits to reduce fees to €200 per month per child. If government takes on employee compensation – this would reduce the administrative burden on services – and permit the bulk of this fee-target to be achieved. Recruitment and retention rates would also be improved through these pay conditions; fundamentally, restructuring the entire funding model for ECEC and SAC in Ireland.

Pillar 2 – Quality and Inclusion: Creating warm and supportive environments for children, educators, and parents. It must be viewed as essential that the principles of quality, inclusion, diversity and flexibility are placed at the heart of any reforms to the ECEC and SAC

¹ Government of Ireland. 2025. [Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan](#).

system. A range of measures are needed to properly include groups most marginalised in Irish society.

Pillar 3 – Accessibility: Delivering publicly-provided ECEC and SAC. To ensure that every child has access to an ECEC and SAC place, the state will need to begin the roll out of state-owned and state-run early years services, alongside whole-systems planning and regulatory reforms.

Context and Current Challenges

The formalisation of Ireland's ECEC system has developed rapidly over the course of the last quarter-century. However, a consistent undervaluing of the work done by educators has resulted in a fragmented support system for the sector. The result is an overwhelmingly market-led childcare system that does not recognise the provision of ECEC and SAC as a public service and fails short of ensuring accessible and inclusive care for all. This is compounded by with the ongoing undervaluing of care and education work, primarily provided by women for young children in the home, and in the community across Ireland.

Nonetheless, there have been very significant and rapid changes in the policy landscape around ECEC over the last decade, such as the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019. This programme encompasses both universal and targeted private subsidies, and has been well-developed since 2019, in both the scale of its subsidies and its newfound coverage of childminders. The introduction of additional schemes – such as Core Funding, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), and Equal Start – has been very welcome. Each scheme supports providers and families in diverse yet important manners, such as, helping providers in increasing labour supports and tackling other costs (Core Funding), improving services' inclusivity and additional need (AIM), and assisting disadvantaged areas and marginalised groups in the access of care (Equal Start). Despite these benefits, however, the additional administrative *complexity* without additional administrative *support* has not been without its challenges for providers. These all occur alongside the ECCE scheme of universal pre-school (though very limited in hours) which was established in 2010.

Despite this, the state still invests significantly less as a percentage of national income than many of our European counterparts. Ireland spends around 0.4% of national income on early childhood,² much less than the UNICEF target of 1%, and even less again than countries like Sweden 1.6% of GDP.³ Importantly, government investment in Irish ECEC and SAC has increased by 114% since 2021 alone, but we still have a long way to go.⁴

² While other countries use GDP as the base measure, the use of GNI* as a more accurate indication of national income is established in Ireland.

³ OECD Family Database. (n.d.). [Public spending on childcare and early education](#).

⁴ House of Oireachtas. (2025). [Early Childhood Care and Education](#).

The core issues with the current system include, but are not limited to, the following:

Affordability

Despite welcome decreases in fees brought about by increased state investment, costs for the vast majority of families are not below the €200 per month target promised in the Programme for Government. Pobal's most recent data on fees shows a median weekly fee for full daycare as €200 (around €867 per month),⁵ which even with the full universal subsidy for 45 hours of €96.30 still works out at around €449.37 a month – more than double the €200 commitment. There is significant regional variation, but average figures remain too high for everyone. For instance, in Leitrim, which has the lowest reported fees for 2024/25, the average cost per month for full day ECEC is €276.03, even when universal subsidies are considered. Despite the additional impact of targeted subsidies, for many families real affordable access to ECEC and SAC doesn't exist. Through a public system, the state could directly control affordability for families and children, regardless of their socio-economic background and/or geographical area.

Access to ECEC and SAC places

As fees have lowered, pressure for additional ECEC and SAC places has grown – and demand now far outstrips supply. Real demand for ECEC and SAC is very hard to assess, as many working parents rely on childminders or informal care from relatives such as grandparents. Informal childcare arrangements are usually under-reported, but many are providing regular childcare due to lack of spaces and/or affordable options. The limited number of childcare places available is compounded for under-2s, and through regional variations – complicated further for communities on the islands, for example – which have led to 'childcare deserts' in various parts of the country. Marginalised families face particular barriers in accessing care, as expanded further below. The most recent data from Pobal shows more than 40,000 places on waiting lists for full day care across the country.⁶ This figure may involve a degree of double counting, as some children are on multiple waiting lists, but the number of children without a place is demonstrably too high. Therefore, issues in ECEC access being divided by geographical inequities, which has further implications on both parental employment levels and child poverty.⁷ Through a public system, there would be less of a reliance on informal care options and greater onus on the government to ensure ECEC and SAC spaces for communities in every part of the country.

Recruitment and retention of educators

Recruitment and retention rates among educators are extremely poor, with precarity, low pay, and inconsistent working conditions affecting educators throughout the sector. This has impacts on the standard of ECEC and SAC services, as it increases the staff turnover in the sector, and leads to greater inconsistency in provisions of care. In particular, staff shortages can deepen access issues due to a

⁵ Pobal. (n.d.) [Fees](#).

⁶ RTE. 2025. [Thousands waiting for childcare places, figures show](#).

⁷ Curristan, S., McGinnity, F., Russell, H. & Smyth, E. (2023) [Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland and Northern Ireland](#)

reduction in opening hours, an increase in the length of enrolment waiting lists, and importantly, can have a compounding effect for those with additional needs. Staff-child ratios can then be a concern for educators; leading to potential safety concerns for the children in care. Through a public system, there would be an increase in the state's accountability for quality ECEC and SAC children across Ireland, and greater professional acknowledgement for the ECEC and SAC providers. By government providing childcare services in a more direct manner, there would also be less administration for educators and staff to manage. As a consequence, more time could be given to caring for and educating the children in their services.

Impacts on gender inequality

Lack of quality, accessible, and affordable ECEC and SAC is an enormous barrier to women's participation in working, social, political, and community life. Historical and contemporary gender imbalances in childcare responsibilities still persist today; women do twice as much care work as men⁸ and women's average incomes and wealth are statistically lower. Therefore, it is women who are primarily forced to choose between the inherent care responsibilities that come with having a family. This leads women to either take on the role of providing childcare in the home, or partaking in work, education, social engagement, community life, and/or engagement in leadership roles. In reflecting on these 'choices', access to ECEC and SAC becomes much more than just about much more access to employment for women – it can be about accessing medical appointments or other necessary supports. Further, the educator workforce is overwhelmingly women, meaning the sectoral issues in workforce precarity could be seen as a societal devaluing of women-led work in Ireland. Through a public system, women have real options to take up employment, and meaningfully engaging in social, political, and community life.

Acute impacts for marginalised families and communities

The challenges in accessing affordable ECEC and SAC are further compounded for marginalised families and communities. Access to high-quality ECEC and SAC is vital in supporting children's development and tackling intergenerational poverty and social exclusion, and yet it is often those who need it most who find it hardest to access. One-parent families (primarily led by women), Traveller and Roma families, migrant families, families of which a member is disabled, and families experiencing homelessness, poverty and deprivation, all face additional access. On top of this, racism, discrimination, and exclusion are systemic barriers which impede families' access to necessary services like ECEC and SAC. Through a public system, ECEC and SAC would be offered on a far more just basis, whereby the design of childcare is reflective of the experiences, identities, and challenges faced by marginalised groups in engaging in these services. Crucial to this would be to support ECEC staff – via training and resources – to provide the culturally-sensitive and trauma-informed education and care needed, nuanced in response to the communities they aim to serve.

⁸ ESRI and IHREC. 2019. [Caring and unpaid work in Ireland](#).

Fragmented nature of current system

The current system of ECEC and SAC, which involves both for-profit private providers, and not-for-profit community providers, vary greatly in structure, and thus are very diffuse and fragmented. They are all different sizes (from small sessional services to large investment chains) and different locations (throughout rural and urban areas). Alongside this, they each offer various numbers of hours per day and number of weeks per year a service operates. There is also an increasing number of for-profit providers, many of which are larger chains, often backed by significant investment capital, designed with a structural focus on growing profits over improving the quality of the ECEC they provide. This means that the state funds and subsidies provided by government ultimately become a source of profit and margin for private companies and international funds. These marketised childcare systems also invariably produce higher costs, inadequate working conditions, more inequality, and lower quality care and education. ECEC and SAC need to be reframed by government as an essential human right.

Through a public system, ECEC and SAC would have a far more consolidated approach to governance as it would be more directly managed by the state, simplifying the sector for both parents and educators. As a consequence, the core focus of services can be pivoted toward the rights and wellbeing of the child.

Together for Public Alliance's vision for a Public System

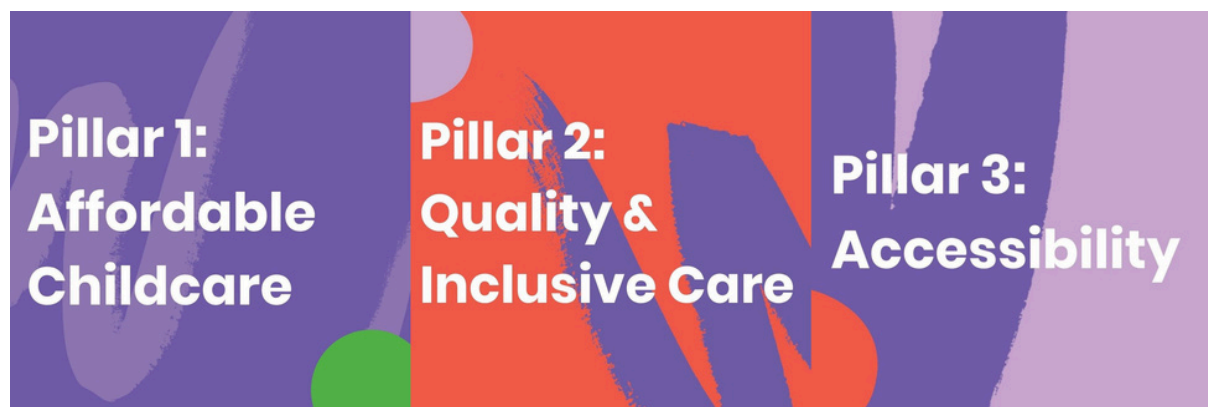
Universal, accessible, high-quality early childhood education and care and school age childcare is crucially important for realising children's rights to education and care from birth, for tackling social inequalities such as gender inequality, and for supporting everyone's ability to engage in social, political, economic, community and cultural life. We believe that Ireland should move towards a system where every child – every child – can be legislatively guaranteed an early education place that suits their needs.

As it stands, our infrastructure is a long way from being able to vindicate that right. Despite increasing investment in recent years, systemic issues remain. The current system is unsustainable, as a purely market-led approach will never meet the needs of all, particularly underserved or marginalised groups and areas. ECEC should be focused on the rights and best interests of the child first and foremost, with pay and conditions for professionals commensurate with the role, qualifications and experience, to provide guaranteed high-quality services that are accessible and available to all families and children regardless of income, location or working/care/community engagement patterns.

Further investment in a subsidy-driven system will not solve the problems faced by the sector without real reform and structural change. The Together for Public Alliance have consistently identified, based on both a deep and broad understanding of the sector in Ireland and engagement with international comparisons, that a public system of ECEC and SAC is the only way to ensure affordable and accessible childcare as the Programme for Government envisions.

The new Action Plan Phase 2 must include a plan for significant structural change towards that goal from 2027 to 2029, along with a clear vision for further development beyond that. The time is now for a transition to a universal, rights-based, public system of services for all children, families and communities.

We have identified three key areas of action for the new Plan, which will set in place the structural change needed to chart that course.



Three Pillars of ECEC and SAC Reform

Pillar 1 - Affordability: Achieve €200/month fees through the state taking on responsibility for educators' wages

Despite significant decreases in fees in recent years through additional state investment in the National Childcare Scheme subsidies, affordability of services continues to be an issue for many families. This was recognised by the government – and many opposition parties – with their commitment to reduce fees to €200 per month over the course of the government's term.

Alongside this, recruitment and retention of educators is identified by providers across the sector as a huge issue, with national the turnover rate at 25%, with higher turnover in the private sector than the community/not-for-profit.⁹ Low pay for many educators – the most recent Employment Regulation Order fixed minimum pay at only a small amount more than the National Minimum Wage – combined with precarious working conditions and lack of a defined career path means that many educators either spend only a few years working in the sector, and many of those completing early education courses and degrees never enter the sector at all. It will be impossible to add the number of additional ECEC and SAC places needed to meet growing demand without tackling this crisis. The driving force in the provision of ECEC is employee compensation – wages, PRSI and in-work benefits. This makes up 69% of the total cost of providing ECEC services, with other 31% made up of spending on premises, materials and equipment, insurance, utilities, and other smaller costs.

Were the state to assume full responsibility for employee compensation, the cost of providing a full-time ECEC place would fall from €190 to €59 per week, or €255 per month.¹⁰

| Cost Components of weekly Median Full-Time Day Care Fees (€190) | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Employee Compensation | All Other Expenditure | Total Expenditure | Total (excl. employee compensation) |
| 131 | 59 | 190 | 59 |

This single step would bring us within reach of the government's €200 monthly target, while further reductions in fees to be introduced through subsidies for input costs and operational expenses, fee caps, and payments to households. A new system to administer pay and benefits would be agreed between the Department, employee and employer representatives.

Through Core Funding and the National Childcare Scheme, the state already pays a significant amount of the educators' wages. The state also has existing systems for the wages of primary and secondary school teachers without their being employed directly by the state, as those in voluntary schools are employed by private boards of management. However, this system, which allows for standardised pay scales, collective bargaining, greater job security, would support educators while at the same time removing administrative and cost burdens from providers.

⁹ Early Childhood Ireland. 2025. [Staff turnover rate as high as 54% in some areas.](#)

¹⁰ Based on work done by SIPTU Early Years Union.

Pillar 2: Quality and Inclusion: Creating warm and supportive environments for children, educators, and parents

It is essential that ensuring quality, inclusion, diversity, and flexibility are placed at the centre of the future ECEC and SAC systems. Importantly, even where care and education places exist, they do not always sync up well with the realities of work for parents. For context, many ECEC providers in Ireland are operational only on a term-time basis; meaning they are closed during school holidays or limited to only being available during mornings/early afternoons. As a result, for working parents, particularly those in shift work, this lack in flexibility limits women and families' options.

High-quality ECEC and SAC provision depends on properly resourced staff who have the time, training, professional acknowledgement, and employment stability to build warm, consistent relationships with the children in their care. If these standards of work are not met appropriately, service centres can experience high staff turnover, which forces providers to reduce supply and/or potentially incur additional expenditure (on operational areas such as upping recruitment efforts or investing further in training costs for staff). On the other hand, when educators are supported with adequate funding, manageable workloads, and meaningful professional development, they are far better placed to deliver rich learning experiences and emotionally-sensitive care and education for the communities they serve. Fundamentally, ECEC and SAC staff who receive sustained training and professional supports can recognise the impact of adversity, respond with sensitivity, and adapt their approaches to honour each child's cultural background and lived experience. This nuance in care must be viewed as crucial for all children across Ireland, in particular, for the groups most marginalised in Irish society.

Supporting all children and families

ECEC in Ireland should strive to serve all children, parents, and families in Ireland, while also offering fair and professional consideration for ECEC providers. The following groups (many of which fall into multiple categories and face compounding challenges), are particularly important in developing inclusive childcare in Ireland:

- Lone parents, predominantly women, who face additional economic, social, barriers
- Migrant families, who may require trauma-informed ECEC services, encounter language barriers, and/or lack the information and access to information on ECEC in Ireland entitlements and dynamics.
- Traveller and Roma communities, who experience systemic discrimination and social exclusion across the island, with limited culturally sensitive ECEC services available in their local communities
- Families with disabled members, whose inclusion in ECEC services depends on the effectiveness of AIM (alongside other inclusion strategies).
- Families or parents experiencing homelessness or poverty, where ECEC is often unattainable without targeted state supports.
- Diverse family forms, including those who may require explicit social protections and/or the legislative recognition of diverse family forms or identities existing already in Ireland

Supporting and strengthening quality provision

The meaningful integration of marginalised groups into the development of reforms to the ECEC and SAC system is essential. For instance, while one-parent families often require greater flexibility than existing services provide, Traveller and Roma participation rates in ECEC are starkly lower than the settled population; migrant families often can't rely on informal care networks such as family as easily as non-migrants; and for those in direct provision or experiencing poverty, the lack of local accessible and affordable places is a huge issue. In light of these realities, ECEC and SAC must go beyond merely pledging to create affordable and available places and ensure that the design of future ECEC schemes in Ireland is reflective of the experiences, identities, and challenges faced by these groups in engaging in childcare services. This must include:

Trauma-informed approaches: ECEC in Ireland must develop to recognise the effects of stress, fleeing conflict, violence, and/or displacement on children's wellbeing and family welfare. ECEC providers thus must be supported, trained and equipped with the necessary skillset to respond to such realities if present in their cohort of children.

Culturally-responsive competency trainings: ECEC in Ireland must be conducted in a way that ensures the respect for diverse cultural traditions, ethnic backgrounds, languages, and family make-ups.¹¹

Local community involvement: suggested reforms for the Irish ECEC system should be informed by families and local communities, as a means of assuring the design and governance of ECEC is reflective to their wants, needs, and overall lived-experiences.

Addressing gender inequality: the manner in which gender – in particular for women – impacts how society views care work is of crucial consideration here. As noted, women carry out an overwhelming majority of the unpaid care work in the home which then has significant impacts on their access to wider life; while the vast majority of educators, an underpaid and undervalued sector, are women. Building a childcare system that works for families will also help address these gender inequalities.

Ireland is unique in Europe for having an explicit Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and guidelines for ECEC.¹² Their implementation will be crucial for addressing these individual and compounding sources of marginalisation, ECEC in Ireland should place the notions of inclusion and diversity as a core priorities for restructuring ECEC approaches. This is central in order to create ECEC services which permit all children, parents, and families to feel safe, valued, and recognised by the state.

¹¹ The revised Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and guidelines (DCDE 2026 forthcoming) will be complemented by a nationwide training. This needs to be mandatory and well-resourced.

¹² Government of Ireland. 2016. [Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter](#).

Pillar 3 - Accessibility: Delivering publicly-provided ECEC and SAC

Government should have a central, active, and directly involved role in supporting both ECEC and SAC. Without direct, consistent, and inclusive engagement by the state in the sector – including direct delivery of services where the market cannot or will not intervene – it will not be possible to ensure that every child and family has access to ECEC.

At a broad level, this involves a greater and strengthened role for the new Forward Planning and Delivery Unit in the Department, expanding existing work done to identify where ECEC and SAC places are most needed and working with other Departments to ensure the development of necessary regulation and infrastructure to support the development of facilities.

Contextualising this further, the Alliance puts forward that there needs to be a differentiation between ‘state-led’ and ‘public’ in the ECEC sector and governance agenda for the future.

Government has started to adopt and define the term state-led, which is welcome and promising, but has used it to equate to capital acquisition of premises and the tendering out of ECEC provision to pre-existing non-profit providers. While certainly a step in the right direction, in order to keep pushing toward the ultimate goal of public provisions of ECEC, the Alliance aims to use this position paper to underscore the point that public childcare means going that step further and having state take over the delivery of ECEC as well as acquire buildings and premises.

The addition of “state-led provision” provided for initially in Budget 2026 is very welcome, and a step in the right direction. However, the caveat above applies that this should not be confused with direct public delivery of services. The Alliance believes this scheme should be expanded with significant additional capital funding, but that it should also evolve into the development of direct state-provided services. If the state takes on responsibility for employee compensation in the sector, the state will already be paying around 70% of the cost of any additional places added to the system. The additional cost burden on the state to directly run a service, combined with the administrative efficiencies provided by the pooling of governance and administration, as well as – crucially – the direct control to manage where and how a service can best suit a given community, is far from insurmountable.

The development of publicly-provided ECEC as a new form of provision – alongside private providers and community/not-for-profit services – is essential in tackling the deficit in places and affordability experienced in many parts of the country. This could be done through ETBs or local authorities. While the new state-led provision approach is welcome, where the state will use capital funding to acquire facilities, and then tender for not-for-profit ECEC provision – we believe the state should begin to rollout publicly-provided ECEC and SAC. We argue that €60m of current funding could provide 3,000 places initially, with a view to scaling this up as possible.

Alongside this, the remit and work of the new Forward Planning Unit in the Department should be strengthened and broadened, and further integration of ECEC and SAC provision into community planning across all Departments. This process of de-corporatisation would lead to increased stabilisation in ECEC workforce, as well as a standardisation of ECEC quality and conditions for children and families across Ireland.

The next phase of Shaping the Future provides an opportunity to commit to the development of publicly-provided ECEC.

Conclusion

Incorporation of the three pillars of action outlined in this document into Phase 2 of the Early Years Action Plan would set us on a course towards a public system of early childhood education and care, one where every child is guaranteed a high-quality, affordable and inclusive early childhood place if their family wants it.

Although it may be announced before the final publication of the Action Plan Phase 2, Budget 2027 will be an important part of the plan – as it will set out the spending parameters and measures for the first of the three years of Phase 2 of the Plan. Measures to underpin all three pillars – including additional funding to support educators’ wages, current and capital funding for state delivered services, and broad investment in equality and inclusion programmes within the sector – must be part of the Budget.

Transforming Ireland’s ECEC system from a market-led into a public model is a major undertaking for government. It requires not only policy reform, but also immediate legislative action, sustained financial investment, and strong, top-down political will. However, international experience shows that systemic change in ECEC is possible when anchored in clear goals, timelines, and accountability for government. Together for Public proposes a phased implementation framework designed to achieve a fully public ECEC system within a decade, with tangible reforms beginning this year.

