

## Ireland

**Population:** 3.9 m. **Fertility rate:** 1.98. **GDP per capita:** USD 33 200. **Children under 6 years:** c. 330 000.

**Female labour force participation:** 58% of women (15-64) participate in the labour force, 35.1% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 6.9%).

**Labour force participation rate of women with child(ren) under 6 years:** Women with youngest child 0-3: 51.1% (OECD, *Babies and Bosses*), women with youngest child 3-6: 52%.

**Maternity and parental leave:** 18 weeks maternity leave paid, 14 of which are paid at 70% of earnings (ceiling imposed) or a social security stipend. Maternity leave can be followed by 14 weeks unpaid parental leave.

**Average duration of parental leave:** 14 weeks.

**Compulsory school age:** 6 years.

**Social expenditure:** 13.8% (2001). **Child poverty rate:** 15.7% after taxes and transfers (UNICEF,2005) (OECD average is 11.2%).

**Funding of public pre-primary education services:** 0.44% of GDP (0.39% public and 0.05% private); 8.5% of the education budget is devoted to the education of 3- to 6-year-olds, who comprise 11.6% of education enrolments.

**Funding of publicly financed services for children under 3 and OSP:** 0.07% in 2002.

**Legal entitlement to a free service:** From 4 years.

**Major service types and duration:** (unregulated child-minding); regulated family day care and nurseries generally on a full-time basis; half-day pre-primary classes offered to children aged 4-6 in primary schools; playgroups and private pre-school working mainly on a sessional basis. Regulated OSP does not exist.

**Average costs to parents:** Children 0-3 years: the average cost to parents of child care is in the region of 51% of costs, or 30% of the disposable income of the average double income family, unless in community child care where subsidies exist; children 4-6 years: the morning session of pre-primary is free; other services (playgroups and pre-schools) are paying services.

**Rate of access to regulated services:** Children 0-3 years: from 10-15% of children have access to regulated services; children 3-6 years: 56% of the age-group enrol in public pre-primary.

**Designation and qualifications of lead staff:** Qualifications are not regulated in the child care sector. Family day care, nurseries and playgroups can have a variety of staff, ranging from no qualification to tertiary level. Key staff in centres are expected to have a 2-year, post-18 certificate. In pre-primary, all staff are tertiary trained primary school teachers.

**Overall % of qualified staff in services:** In the child care sector, no qualifications are required. It is estimated that 30% of staff are without any qualification. In early education, lead staff are primary school teachers, all trained to university degree level.

**Child-staff ratios:** Children 0-3 years: depends on type of service and age of child; for children aged 3-6 years in a non-pre-primary session, the ratio is 8:1; children 3-6 years in pre-primary: the average is 25 children to one teacher (no assistant), but 24% of children are in classes of 30 children or more. In *Early Start* sessional classes for at-risk children, the ratio is generally 15:2 (one teacher and child care worker).

**Maximum group size:** Children 0-3 years: 20 children; children 3-6 years: 29 children.

### Auspices

Seven government departments have had responsibility for different aspects of early childhood and family policy in Ireland, although three ministries take major responsibility: the Department of Health and Children (DHC); the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR); and the Department of Education and Science (DES). ECEC is clearly divided into child care and education sectors, the former two ministries being involved in child care for children under 3, and in principle, for out-of-school provision (OSP). The Department of Education and Science (DES) is responsible for the pre-primary sector, that is, for children aged 4-6 years, under the 1998 Education Act (1998), with in the last decades, sponsorship of some programmes for children experiencing disadvantage or special needs (Background Report for Ireland, 2002).

Child care services are administered under the Child Care Act (1991). Until the late 1990s public recognition and support for child care was vested with the DHC, whose focus mainly was on children at risk, including children in need of protection. A national agreement, *Partnership 2000*, involving government, trade unions, employers, and social and community organisations generated a broader focus. Child care administration and provision has since been consolidated under the remit of the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). In order to implement the *National Child Care Strategy*, the DJELR has a *Child Care Directorate* within its Equality Division. This Directorate oversees the *EU Equal Opportunities Child Care Programme* (2000-2006). In addition, the National Children's Office and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children are the primary agencies that are oriented towards a children's rights approach, following ratification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1992. The degree to which a rights-based approach has filtered into policy and provision developed in the different child care and education areas is yet unclear (Background Report for Ireland, 2002).

In December 2005, the Office of the Minister for Children was established by the government to maximise the co-ordination of policies for children and young people (including early childhood care and education, youth justice, child protection, children and young people's participation and research on children and young people). This new office will have a range of functions previously discharged under the Departments of Health and Children; Justice, Equality and Law Reform; and Education and Science.

A new Early Years Education Policy Unit has been established within the Department of Education and Science and will be co-located with the Office of the Minister for Children. This unit will oversee the development of policies and provision for early years education

within an overall strategic policy framework to be developed with the Office of the Minister for Children.

These developments are designed to address the issues of fragmentation of policy development and service delivery in the sector and respond directly to related recommendations in the White Paper on Early Childhood Education and the OECD review of early childhood education in Ireland.

### **Context**

*Labour force rates:* In 2004, the labour participation rate for women aged 15-64 was 58%, increasing from 42.6% in 1990. Of those, 35.1% work part-time, while 6.9% of men work part-time (OECD, *Employment Outlook*, 2005). Mothers with a youngest child under 6 years had an employment rate of 52% in 2002, increasing from 31% in 1990, and constituted 8% of part-time employment (OECD *Society at a Glance*).

*Parental leave:* The Parental Leave Act 1998, introduced for the first time in Ireland a statutory right to parental leave. Mothers may now take 18 weeks maternity leave, 14 of which are financed by social welfare payments. Payment is based on income, generally being 70% of the gross income, subject to a maximum of EUR 232.40 per week. In addition, parents may take 14 weeks unpaid parental leave from work to take care of children below 5 years of age. Because it is unpaid, there has been limited adoption of parental leave by Irish couples. Some large employers provide women with their full salary for 18 weeks, the women in return giving the welfare payment to the employer to offset costs (Background Report for Ireland, 2002).

### **Access and provision**

*Operational features:* Provision of services is diverse and fragmented, spread across the child care and education sectors. Within the child care sector, paid child minders form the major component of services, predominantly from their own homes. This service is usually available year-round for the full day, according to the needs of the parents. Transactions between parents and child minders are generally conducted in the informal economy, with only those child minders caring for more than 3 children being required to notify the Health Boards. Centre-based child care (nurseries and crèches) caters for children 2-3 months to school age. These services are mainly privately owned and operated, or community-based services for lower income families. In addition, a small number of workplace crèches and drop-in crèches exist providing work-based and/or occasional care services. Further, playgroups and pre-schools, mostly privately owned, provide sessional services (< 3.5 hours/child/day) for children typically aged 3-5 years. Parent and toddler groups may be attached to crèches and nurseries, offering play for children and social interaction/support for parents. Montessori schools, privately owned and managed, also cater for children 3-6 years. *Naionrai* (Irish language) pre-schools also form part of this varied set of services, catering for children 3-6 years. Within the education sector, provision in pre-primary education is public, centre-based, universal and free. Four types of provision exist: morning infant classes in primary schools, catering for 4- and 5-year-olds; special needs facilities within a small number of schools; specific pre-school pilot programmes; and pre-schools for traveller children.

*0-3 years:* Evidence from the Economic and Social Research Institute (1998) indicates 38% of all parents with children 4 years and below, rely on paid child care arrangements. One-fifth of mothers with full-time jobs and 47% of mothers with part-time jobs use no

paid child care, relying instead, on informal provision by partners, family, friends or neighbours (Background Report for Ireland, 2002). Based on the mix of data available, the OECD review team estimated that 10% to 15% of children 0-3 years access half-day or full day publicly subsidised services.

*3-6 years:* All 5-year-olds and just over half of 4-year-olds attend infant classes located in primary schools (Irish Background Report, 2002). Few children aged 3 years are enrolled, with net enrolment being around 4%. Overall access for the age-range 3-6 is about 56%, among the lowest in Europe. Junior infants (for 4-year-olds) and senior infants (for 5-year-olds) generally operate from 9:00-14:00.

*Attention to children with diverse needs:* Most measures to redress educational disadvantage come under the remit of DES, whose pre-school facilities cater for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special learning needs. Some child care centres in disadvantaged areas receive support through EOCP (the EU Equal Opportunities Child Care Programme), while others receive support from Health Boards (Background Report for Ireland, 2002).

*Children with disabilities:* There is no national plan to provide from birth, public interventions in favour of children with disabilities. Children are to be included in regular infant classes (at age 4-5) wherever possible, but according to teachers, with insufficient support to provide appropriate access. With the exception of visual or hearing impairment, DES does not take responsibility for the great majority of children over 4 years with disabilities. Just over 2% of children with special needs are included in mainstream primary settings. When enrolled, children with special needs may receive periodic tuition from a specialist teacher. According to the specialists and voluntary bodies engaged in this field, major issues are priority entitlement for these children and appropriate inclusion.

*Children from low-income families:* Since the launch of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, many recent initiatives are in place to support children from disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods. The *Early Start* programme in early education is based on assessments of children's cognitive, language and motor capacities in junior infant classes. However, early results have not been strong, possibly because of irregular attendance, inadequate support and insufficient specific training for staff, resulting in unfocused or inappropriate pedagogy. The initiative has not been expanded since its inception in 1996.

*Pre-schools for Traveller children:* Traveller children are among the poorest group of children in Ireland. They suffer from discrimination and the practical difficulties of regular school attendance. The 50 or so pre-schools established for them have generally been created by voluntary bodies, with DES providing 98% of teacher salaries and transport costs. The pre-schools offer play-based experiences based on active learning strategies to develop cognitive, language and social skills. These pre-school are separate from the primary school system, and rarely staffed by fully trained teachers. On the positive side, assistants are often drawn from the Traveller community, but the need to have fully-trained Traveller teachers has yet to be addressed.

*Ethnic and bilingual children:* The need for children without distinction to access appropriate ECEC provision is generally accepted. According to the National Child Care census, however, less than one-quarter of services have written policies on equal opportunity and non-discrimination. As with Traveller children, anti-bias training for teachers, children and adults is strongly recommended by the voluntary bodies.

## Quality

*Licensing and regulatory regimes:* Child care is regulated through the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (1996); and the Amendment to these Regulations (1997). Any pre-school, crèche, day nursery, playgroup, day care or other service outside of primary schools are overseen by the regional Health Boards (Background Report for Ireland, 2002). The regulations for child care are designed to ensure the health, safety and welfare of the pre-school child. They do not address the quality-related issues of staff qualifications, curriculum and pedagogy. Annual inspection of services is dependent on staff availability and the number of notifications received. Department of Health inspectors are not required to undergo specific training to inspect early childhood centres. Current review of the regulations is focused on including a voluntary notification and support system for child minders. Early Start Units within primary schools are inspected under education system processes by inspectors who are trained primary or post-primary teachers (Background Report for Ireland, 2002).

*Funding:* Public expenditure on educational institutions for young children as a percentage of GDP is about 0.39%. For child care, total funding available is EUR 436.7 m (USD 580 m) for 2000-06, comprising 27% exchequer funds and 73% European funds (Background Report for Ireland, 2002). As provision in the child care sector is mainly private, parental fees are the major source of funding. Costs to parents are among the highest in Europe and average over 30% of disposable income for the Average Production Employee (Country Note for Ireland, 2004). In addition, according to recent reports, costs of child care are rising far more quickly than inflation.

*Staffing and ratios:* Staff in the child care sector may have one of a variety of qualifications of variable quality and length, but many (particularly in the case of child minders) have no formal preparation for their roles. The percentage of qualified staff working in the sector is currently not known, but estimates place the number of staff without any qualification at about 30%. Child-staff ratios in the child care sector are regulated and appear correct by international standards. In the education sector, services are staffed by trained primary school teachers, who normally have had little or no specialist preparation in early childhood education. Junior class ratios in the pre-primary sector (4- and 5-year-olds) have on average a child-staff ratio of 1:25. According to figures provided in the Irish Background Report (2002), 24% of infant class children are in class groups of 30 children or above, with one teacher without assistance. Such ratios are extremely difficult for teaching staff, and are unfavourable to child initiative or to individual attention being given to children.

*Training requirements:* Until recently there has been little state involvement in child care. This circumstance enabled a general low-level of training and the *ad hoc* development of training for child care workers. The sector comprises a large number of “qualification poor/experience rich” workers in the sector (Background Report for Ireland, 2002). A wide range of qualifications exists – from Froebel and Montessori teachers trained to international standards to child care workers with no formal qualifications in child development. Post-leaving certificate courses in child care have also been developed. The National Child Care Strategy has recently prompted a training framework through the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Government of Ireland, 2002). Primary teachers are trained through state supported training colleges, generally to Bachelor of Education level. However, only in some programmes is there a significant core subject in early childhood education.

*Work conditions:* Low status, low rates of pay and high staff turnover are features of child care positions. Trade union representation for child care workers does not exist across the sector. Two surveys of nursery staff (1999) indicated the scale and range of earnings of this group was EUR 8 900-17 000/year for junior nursery teachers and EUR 11 900-24 000 for senior teachers (Background Report for Ireland, 2002). The relevant scales for Health Board employees are EUR 24 851-32 621 and for managerial staff EUR 35 178-42 430. However, the recent *Model Framework* (noted above) offers a vision of professional development and articulation of professional roles. Recognition and accreditation of learning through experience, and development of pathways to formal qualifications are included in the *Framework*. Work conditions for teachers are much better. The pay scale for primary teachers starts at EUR 23 096 per annum, progressing to EUR 44 891. The working day and year are shorter (generally 9 a.m. to early afternoon, for the academic year only) than in child care where 9-hour-days and an 11-month year are the rule for full-time workers. Junior class teachers are represented by the Irish National Teachers Association. There is no statutory requirement for annual staff development or training.

*Curriculum and pedagogy:* Wide differences are apparent in curriculum approaches to children in child care, pre-school groups (non-public early education) and public pre-primary classes. Some pre-school settings adopt approaches to learning such as High/Scope, Montessori and Steiner. In the public sector, the *Curriculum Guidelines for Good Practice in Early Start* shape curriculum and pedagogy in early start programmes. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is developing a non-mandatory *Framework for Early Childhood Learning* and the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is preparing learning goals for the 0-6 age span. These developments are intended to link with Department of Health and Children requirements set out in the Child Care Regulations.

*Monitoring, evaluation and research:* One of the measures proposed in the White Paper on Early Childhood Education concerns the development of minimum quality standards for some of the areas not covered by the Child Care (Pre-School) Regulation and the establishment of best practice in others. Meeting these standards will be obligatory for those receiving state funding for the provision of developmental/educational places. Non-State funded providers may voluntarily adopt these standards and apply for the Quality in Education (QE) Mark. The QE Mark or its equivalent is to be devised by the CECDE and will cover curricula, methodologies, staff qualifications and training. It is hoped that this development will lead to an increased recognition of the need for quality standards both to improve services and to guide parents in their choices. It is proposed that attaining a quality standard should be based on inspection and evaluation visits. A persisting challenge is how quality and quality goals will be implemented in children's services, as the broad goals outlined, for example, by the American National Education Goals Panel for kindergarten education – health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; positive approaches to learning; communication skills; cognition and general knowledge – are not always given equal weight in traditional services (NEGP, 1997, "Getting a Good Start in School", Government Printing Office, Washington DC).

*Parent and community involvement:* Under the Act parents are represented on primary school boards and may form parent associations, although a national parent association for early childhood does not exist. The recently established Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is expected to facilitate strategies for enhancing

parent involvement, which traditionally has not been strong in the education sector in Ireland. County Child care Committees include at least one parent representative and parent involvement in the management of community-based services. Evidence gathered by the National Child Care Census indicates that the concept of active parental involvement is not firmly anchored in this sector. Less than half (40%) of facilities have a policy on parental engagement, with only 19% having a written statement.

### **OECD policy issues**

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD review team in 2004 were:

*Co-ordination of ministries, agencies and resources:* In the interest of coherent policy-making and of the efficient funding of priority goals, it was proposed that consideration be given towards:

- Bringing together education and care policy under one ministry or designated agency.
- Formulating a national plan for early childhood services development.
- Decentralising the practical planning and management of ECEC services to integrated agencies or committees at country level.

*Improving general access:* Among the measures proposed to increase access were:

- Extending funded parental leave to one year after the birth of a child.
- Increasing the supply of places for children one year and older through accrediting and subsidising quality child minders.
- Removing barriers to affordability for low- and modest-income families.
- Increasing parent support and education through professional planning and management of local services from county level.
- Entitlement of a place in a free, accredited early education service for all children who have reached their 4th birthday.
- Development of a publicly funded morning education for all children of 3 years.
- Extension of the Early Start in areas where there is sufficient demand.
- Accreditation and financial support provided to voluntary, community and private organisations delivering high quality programmes.

*Improving access for children with additional learning needs:* Given the significant size of the group of children with additional learning needs, urgent consideration and implementation of National Forum recommendations in favour of children with special needs were recommended, with intensive quality programming for disadvantaged children from as early an age as possible.

*Improving the quality of ECEC:* Among the strategies put forward for consideration were:

- Formulation of a common quality framework for centre-based programmes and agreed standards for services.
- Introduction of a voluntary accreditation and quality improvement scheme for service providers.
- Restructuring the infant school to favour autonomy, quality and accountability.
- Reassessment of initial training for early childhood services at all levels.

*Financing new measures:* The financing measures proposed not only an increase in funding towards young children, but also a more equitable sharing of budgets between the ministries, parents and the private sector. Among the measures proposed were:

- Significant increase in ministry budgets for early childhood services.
- A pooling of resources and sharing of costs across ministries.
- Shifting educational financing towards quality ECEC.
- Cost-effective co-ordination of policies at central level.
- Sharing of tasks with the voluntary, community and private sectors.
- Enlisting the support of the corporate and business sectors.
- A study of international funding mechanisms.