

## Starting Strong VIII Country Notes

# Ireland

The Translating Research into Policies for Quality and Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions in reviewing how recent research advancements on child development, learning and well-being from multiple disciplines could help them revisit ECEC policies and identify areas and directions for improvement. Over the last two decades, science has made significant progress in understanding the factors that shape early child development, fuelled primarily by advancements in neuroscience, but benefiting also from the growing attention that education and social sciences research pays to early childhood. This knowledge holds promise for policies that set strong foundations for life-long learning and socio-emotional well-being and resilience.

However, translating research into policies is a complex endeavour. The policy review built on recurrent and structured exchanges between country representatives of Ministries in charge of ECEC policies (the OECD ECEC Network) and a multidisciplinary group of experts to engage in a collaborative review of evidence that could inform directions for improving ECEC policies. At the beginning of the project, policymakers indicated ECEC areas or challenges where they perceived a need for additional or updated research evidence to inform policy directions in their countries. This led to the identification of the theme of the policy review: how to design ECEC policies to ensure that they help mitigate inequalities in the short- and long-term. The project's final report, *Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD, 2025<sup>[1]</sup>), was published as part of the OECD Starting Strong series.

Five countries (Australia, Bulgaria, Ireland, Japan and Korea) engaged more actively in the project. Representatives from these countries were invited to engage in consultation meetings to identify their priority areas and key issues for the development of the ECEC sector, aligned with the objectives and themes of the Starting Strong VIII report. Two workshops were organised to foster dialogue between experts and country representatives, focusing on the key issues identified during the consultation meetings. The information gathered during the consultation meetings and project workshops, as well during the preparation of the Starting Strong VIII report, informs this country note.

### Context

In Ireland, child poverty rates have declined in recent years (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.1) and are below the OECD average. However, 9.5% of children remained in income poverty in 2021 and, as in other countries, inequality of opportunity translates into inequality in students' achievements. This is evidenced by the gap in mathematics scores according to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) between children from high and low socio-economic status families (see Table 1). Notably, there are indicators of positive progress: Ireland has combined positive trends in both participation gaps and system-level quality of ECEC in recent years. The socio-economic gap in children experiencing more than two years of ECEC participation has narrowed, and the association between ECEC participation and mathematics performance at age 10 has increased (see Chapter 1, Table 1.1). However, the socio-

economic gap in participation in regulated ECEC among children under age 3 remains wide (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.7).

ECEC can help achieve multiple goals: supporting parents' labour market participation, but also building a more inclusive, equitable society and setting the foundations for strong skills development to address future workforce needs. Ireland's *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028)* (Government of Ireland, 2018<sup>[2]</sup>) aims to ensure high-quality, affordable and accessible ECEC for all children. Key measures under this strategy to achieve this include the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme to provide financial support to families, the Equal Start funding model to improve access and participation for children who experience disadvantage (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024<sup>[3]</sup>) and the "Nurturing Skills" Workforce Plan (2022-2028) that enhances the skills of the ECEC workforce to improve quality of provision (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>). These measures build on earlier policies that have helped to increase ECEC enrolment rates in Ireland (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.3), including the provision of universal free access for two years before primary school, and to raise qualification levels of the ECEC workforce (OECD, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>). These policies are also situated in a wider context of support for families that includes paid parental leave, family benefits and tax credits, and flexible working arrangements for parents. Ireland's First 5 strategy also underscores the importance of continuing to support children with additional needs, ensuring equity and inclusion across the ECEC system. During consultation meetings and project workshops, representatives from Ireland highlighted that improving access to ECEC for vulnerable groups, reducing disparities in quality between centres, and responding to increasing diversity among children and staff are key priorities for the country.

The note is structured around the policy areas of the roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion presented in Chapter 1 of the report. It also summarises some of the main findings of the report.

## Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC

With evidence showing that the early years play a key role in children's learning and development trajectories and that learning opportunities in family environments vary widely between children (see Chapter 3), extended participation in ECEC beyond the almost-universal year before primary education is a key policy direction to address early inequalities. Despite substantial increases in total enrolment rates in past decades in most OECD countries, some children have weaker opportunities to engage in ECEC. In Ireland, enrolment rates of children at age 3 and above in ECEC or primary education have increased and were higher than the OECD average in 2022 (see Table 1 and Chapter 1, Figure 1.2). In addition to increasing overall participation, the socio-economic gap in ECEC participation for children aged 3 to 5 decreased from 12 to 7 percentage points between 2010 and 2023 (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.7). However, there has been little change in the socio-economic gap in regulated ECEC participation among younger children, which remained close to 25 percentage points in both 2010 and 2023, higher than in most other European OECD countries (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.7).

Multi-faceted and inter-related effects of personal and environmental factors influence participation in ECEC (see Chapter 5). Some barriers to participation are direct, relating to the availability, accessibility and affordability of ECEC services, while indirect barriers (complex administrative requirements, lack of awareness of ECEC benefits, social norms or a low level of trust in provision quality) hinder access to otherwise available services. Direct and indirect barriers tend to disproportionately affect families from low socio-economic, immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. Reducing gaps in participation in ECEC involves addressing both direct and indirect barriers.

Given Ireland's privately managed ECEC market and historically high out-of-pocket costs for families (see Table 1), providing effective support to make ECEC affordable for all families and progressively moving

towards universal free access has been a priority to address direct barriers to ECEC participation. The Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) programme was introduced in 2010 to ensure universal access to ECEC for children in the year before primary school and was subsequently expanded in 2016 and 2018 to cover two years. To reduce costs for families, the National Childcare Scheme, introduced in 2019, provides universal and targeted subsidies (based on family income and other factors) for children from 6 months old to support ECEC participation, and covers hours in addition to the ECCE programme. The universal subsidy has increased from €0.50 per hour on introduction of the scheme in 2019 to €2.14 per hour in September 2024. Ireland has also introduced fee control mechanisms, which have been found to reduce ECEC costs for parents and support higher participation. However, in some systems, such mechanisms have been linked to shortages of places or detrimental effects on quality. This illustrates the need to guarantee sufficient funding for providers to cover costs and design fee control mechanisms that ensure provision remains financially sustainable without detrimental effects on quality, such as the provision of Core Funding in Ireland (see Chapter 5).

The availability of ECEC services where families live can be a key determinant of children's participation in ECEC. Lower-income regions are typically underserved, while both urban and rural areas can display relatively high unmet demand due to a shortage of facilities. A lack of availability can reflect a range of factors, including insufficient capital investments or an ineffective distribution of the ECEC network across the country (see Chapter 5). In addition, in many OECD countries, staff shortages as a result of limited staff attraction, high staff turnover and poor retention remain major obstacles to the expansion of ECEC provision. Public management and central steering of sector development therefore matter to address inequalities in service coverage in market-based systems and to ensure services are created in areas most in need. In Ireland, in addition to general public funding mechanisms, the Building Blocks Capital Programme specifically aims to support the expansion of ECEC services in areas where they are needed most, particularly for children aged 1 to 3. ECEC sector expansion needs to be accompanied by regulations and initiatives that ensure the quality of provision is not undermined, such as setting comprehensive quality standards for the sector and building ECEC centres' capacity to deliver quality provision (see Chapter 9). Central authorities can build the capacity of ECEC providers (particularly smaller ones or those within disadvantaged communities) to plan and manage infrastructure projects through professional development and guidance. For example, Ireland has established Universal Design Guidelines (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2019<sup>[6]</sup>), including a self-audit tool, to support the refurbishment and building of ECEC settings that are accessible and can respond to diverse needs. In addition, flexible or alternative forms of provision can ensure some provision in remote areas and accommodate families with irregular work schedules and thereby reduce gaps in participation. This aligns with Ireland's National Action Plan for Childminding (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021<sup>[7]</sup>), which seeks to enhance access while regulating childminding services, which may offer more flexible hours of attendance and be more likely to operate in rural settings.

Accessible information on the availability and types of ECEC settings, how to apply, the cost and the various financial support available, as well as support during the administrative requirements is essential to ensuring that ECEC policies effectively reach families from disadvantaged backgrounds and facilitate their access to ECEC, thereby removing some of the indirect barriers to ECEC participation. Families in Ireland must apply, either online or by post, for their chosen provider to receive universal and income assessed ECEC subsidies. Detailed guidance for parents applying for subsidies is provided online. There is also provision in Ireland for authorised bodies to refer eligible families to access subsidies that provide full coverage of ECEC costs without the need for an income-assessment or application. While subsidies give financial support to families and support parental choice, administrative processes that require parents to apply and obtain documentation can be barriers, particularly for vulnerable groups. Ireland's Equal Start funding model includes action to develop an inclusive communications and engagement campaign (including on financial supports) targeted at disadvantaged groups. Research from OECD countries highlights the role of information services and support networks in closing gaps for socio-economically

disadvantaged or immigrant families (see Chapter 5). These services can assist parents by providing information on eligibility, service availability and enrolment timelines. To ensure equitable access to these services, it is important to offer them through diverse and inclusive communication channels. Integrating these channels into other services accessed by families, such as healthcare and social services, can also help reach vulnerable families, ensuring even those who may not actively seek information are well-informed.

Trust plays a key role in encouraging participation in ECEC services, particularly for harder-to-reach communities. Concerns over the quality of ECEC services, cultural sensitivity and inclusion, and preparedness of the services in responding to children's unique needs can translate into higher levels of mistrust in ECEC services. Ensuring that all ECEC services meet high-quality benchmarks and promoting community involvement in service delivery is important to build and strengthen trust among families. This may be particularly important in Ireland, as participation in ECEC among younger children is lower than in most OECD countries. Ireland's Equal Start funding model includes several commitments to help address this, including working with representative organisations of disadvantaged groups to develop tailored responses and introducing guidance for services on greater parental involvement. For example, Ireland's Traveller Parent Support Programme and Education Strategy for Traveller and Roma Children and Young People (2024-2030) (Government of Ireland, 2024<sup>[8]</sup>) aim to enhance pathways for Traveller and Roma families to access early childhood services, emphasising culturally sensitive support and working with parents and guardians as partners to build trust. Policies that focus on raising family awareness of the importance of ECEC for child development can also help change attitudes about ECEC services. In addition, strategies such as training individuals within communities to serve as trusted local intermediaries and advocates can raise awareness and foster engagement in public services.

## Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children

In addition to broader participation, the quality of ECEC, and particularly the quality of children's interactions with others within ECEC settings (process quality), matters for children's development, learning and well-being. While the quality of ECEC is complex to measure, according to available data, Ireland has combined positive trends in both participation gaps and system-level quality of ECEC in recent years, as measured by the association between ECEC participation and children's academic performance at ages 9-10 (see Chapter 1, Table 1.2). While some dimensions of quality have improved at the system-level in several countries, including Ireland, there is a large body of evidence that documents variability in quality between and within types of ECEC (see Chapter 6). When vulnerable children are enrolled in settings that provide lower-quality ECEC, there is a risk of exacerbating inequalities. This is problematic when more vulnerable children consistently receive lower quality services as this means that children's experiences in ECEC settings are unlikely to level the playing field among children. Particularly in systems with a variety of types of provision, participation in more regulated and intense forms of ECEC tends to be lower among children from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, often making them experience lower levels of process quality.

Curriculum frameworks informed by high-quality features identified by research and that set clear goals to support children's well-being, development and learning can strengthen quality and equity across an ECEC system (see Chapter 6). However, the fragmentation of curriculum frameworks and lack of coverage of some segments of the sector can lead to inconsistencies in quality provision. Ireland has a higher reliance on childminder care compared to other countries (see Chapter 5, Figures 5.1 and 5.2), which until recently was largely unregulated. To address this, Ireland's National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028) (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021<sup>[7]</sup>) aims to bring all childminders within the scope of regulations over a phased period. Childminders who meet new regulatory requirements can participate in the National Childcare Scheme, for which implementing curriculum and quality

frameworks is a contractual requirement. Childminding regulations came into effect in 2024 and registration will become mandatory in 2027.

Areas of development targeted by ECEC, as set out in curricula, are central to the achievement of long-term effects. Implementation of an integrative curriculum can overcome dichotomies between whole-child and skill-specific curricula (Chapter 6) by incorporating structured, skill-specific components within a play-based approach into frameworks and by guiding staff on intentional practices. Ireland's curriculum framework *Aistear*, which was updated in 2024, includes learning goals that underpin aspirations for children's learning and development and is accompanied by guidance for good practice for educators. At the same time, the framework emphasises the importance of play and hands-on experiences and interactions. Integrative approaches hold promise to support equity as they allow for flexibility in responding to a wider range of children's needs and because more explicit guidance on practices with children can facilitate curriculum implementation.

Developing a skilled ECEC workforce is paramount to ensuring a successful implementation of the curriculum framework and high-quality pedagogical practices and interactions with children. Initial education that includes training specifically to work with children, covers a broad range of areas, and includes a practical component can support staff in all roles and types of provision with their work. Ireland has raised the qualification levels of ECEC staff, with the percentages of both staff holding the minimum qualification to work with children and staff with a bachelor's degree increasing over recent years (OECD, 2021<sup>[5]</sup>). Building on pre-service training, staff should also have opportunities to participate in active and centre-embedded continuous professional development (CPD) with a strong individualised feedback component. In addition to increasing minimum qualification requirements, Ireland's ECEC Workforce Plan "Nurturing Skills" includes targets to introduce an induction process and develop a national CPD system for practitioners.

Overall, evidence points to positive relationships between staff and children being more likely in ECEC settings where child-teacher ratios and group sizes are relatively small, while offering limited support for the claim that ratios and sizes can have a direct impact on child outcomes. In Ireland, ECEC settings are required under regulation to maintain specified adult-to-child ratios at all times, with variation in these ratios depending on the age of children and the type of service. From a targeted angle, and in light of staff shortages in most OECD countries, introducing variation in these regulations or in public funding to provide additional resources to specific settings, for instance by increasing staff-child ratios or reducing group sizes in settings serving large shares of disadvantaged children or children with special needs, could be a policy direction. This is indirectly done in Ireland through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for children with disabilities and increases in funded staff hours for services with a high proportion of disadvantaged children under the Equal Start initiative, where funding can be used to improve adult-child ratios or for other purposes, providing flexibility depending on need. In addition, in the presence of staff shortages, ensuring that this does not disproportionately affect ECEC settings with large shares of vulnerable children (e.g. through financial incentives) is another consideration.

Finally, system-level monitoring can contribute to high quality across the sector by establishing a shared understanding of quality standards and clear expectations for all types of providers through incentives that reward high quality and through guidance for improvement. In Ireland, two separate inspectorates are responsible for monitoring ECEC services' compliance with regulations and the quality of education provision. Public transparency and stringent quality requirements for providers to qualify for public funding schemes are of particular importance in ECEC systems with a strong reliance on market competition. Making monitoring results available, as done in Ireland, and considering users' views and experiences can also contribute to family and community trust and engagement in ECEC (see Chapters 5 and 6).

## Making ECEC inclusive for all children

Increasing social and cultural diversity characterises the populations of children participating in ECEC across OECD countries. Growing levels of diversity are driven by multiple factors, including the expansion and greater accessibility of ECEC services as well as global migration and forced displacements. Ireland has one of the largest shares of multilingual children having participated in ECEC for at least two years among OECD countries (see Chapter 7, Figure 7.1). Further, in Ireland, as in other European OECD countries, most children with special education needs participating in ECEC do so in mainstream settings. ECEC can support inclusion by focusing on the strengths that come with diversity, leaving behind deficit views on the capacities and potential of children from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds and by combining universal and targeted approaches, in line with tiered models of support for young children. Ireland has been at the forefront of this approach for children with special education needs with the AIM programme, which enables access and meaningful participation in ECEC for children with a disability (see Chapter 7, Boxes 7.2 and 7.3). The new Equal Start funding model similarly combines universal and targeted approaches, to support the participation and inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Curriculum frameworks can promote inclusive practices in ECEC settings by valuing and affirming all forms of diversity. Strengths-based approaches are explicitly embraced in ECEC frameworks in several OECD countries, including in Ireland's curriculum framework *Aistear*. Research advocates for such a shift from deficit- to strength-based approaches to diversity in ECEC, best illustrated by new perspectives on multilingualism (see Chapter 7). Focusing on the needs of children with diverse needs (including children with disabilities and additional needs) has the potential to improve the experiences of all children, as all children require some level of individualised support and accommodation. ECEC staff also need flexibility for adapting the curriculum to local forms of diversity, including by engaging with families and communities.

A more diverse ECEC workforce can increase awareness of the diverse needs and strengths of children and families and facilitate more responsive practices. Staff diversity also helps all children, including those from majority groups, to be exposed to different cultures and backgrounds. A policy of growing priority in countries where multilingualism is prevalent is to attract and retain multilingual staff who can communicate with children and families from cultural and linguistic minority backgrounds and are more receptive to supporting the maintenance of home languages. This is the case in Ireland, where the ECEC Workforce Plan sets out a range of actions to support diversity in the workforce and to support language proficiency for non-native speakers of English and Irish. Matching staff with children also matters in a context of increasing diversity. Targeted staffing can strengthen supports for children, including by multi-professional teams with complementary areas of expertise (see Chapter 7).

Continuous professional development (CPD) is key to promoting inclusive practices in ECEC. Diversity-related training can equip staff and leaders to better support children with special education needs and multilingual backgrounds, enhancing the quality of their interactions, as done in Ireland with the AIM programme (see Chapter 7, Box 7.2). Developing transversal competences and attitudes (e.g. addressing biases, valuing diversity) can be a foundation for more specific skills (e.g. supporting home languages). In contexts where many languages are represented within ECEC settings and it is not feasible for staff to speak these languages, fostering language awareness and visibility through training is particularly important.

In turn, system- and setting-level monitoring and assessment can help authorities and staff to better understand and identify variability in children's needs and strengths. In addition to the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC, including the inclusiveness of staff practices, tools can also be used to assess the quality of the targeted supports provided to children. A number of observational and self-reflection tools have been developed to assess aspects of quality that support the needs and strengths of children and families from diverse backgrounds (see Chapter 7, Box 7.5). Used in combination with other,

more general quality assessment measures, these tools hold promise for enabling a richer picture of process quality in increasingly diverse ECEC settings. However, ECEC staff need to be supported to use information from such tools to adapt their interactions with children by receiving actionable feedback for improvement.

## Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities

The co-ordination and combination of ECEC policies with policies targeting families and communities can launch vulnerable children on more favourable trajectories (see Chapter 8). Ireland's First 5 strategy and Equal Start funding model highlight the importance of supporting parents in their role and include measures to strengthen parental involvement in ECEC and partnerships between settings, families and communities. In addition, both *Aistear* and *Síolta* emphasise meaningful partnerships with parents as essential for high-quality ECEC.

The home environment, parents and caregivers play a core role in the quality of the interactions that children experience with others, which is a key driver of their development, learning and well-being. Intentionally developing ECEC programmes that support parents to foster children's well-being and early learning, especially programmes that integrate well into parents' habits and do not add to existing stress burden, can therefore amplify children's positive experiences in ECEC and lead to sustained effects over time (see Chapter 10). Supporting the quality of the home environment seems particularly relevant in Ireland's context, where the socio-economic gap in home activities that develop early literacy and numeracy is wider than on average across the OECD, and where fewer children under 3 participate in regulated ECEC (see Table 1). To address this, one objective of Ireland's First 5 strategy is to provide families with high-quality, evidence-based information and services on aspects of parenting along a continuum of need. By considering ECEC as a programme for parents as well as children, the ECEC sector can play a stronger role in supporting families more holistically and extending benefits for participation beyond the walls of the ECEC setting. Different components and opportunities can be made available that accommodate different goals and needs of parents. For example, opportunities for conversation at drop-off and pick-up times or a home visiting component adapted to family availability can fit within parental working hours, while components such as employment services or parenting skills programmes may be tailored to parents who are not engaged in employment or education while their children are attending ECEC.

To sustain the benefits of high-quality ECEC, continuity across children's developmental stages and education settings is also essential. This includes aligning curricula, learning expectations and pedagogical practices to ensure smooth transitions and gradual exposure to enriched content, particularly for more vulnerable children, avoiding unnecessary redundancy of content (see Chapter 8). ECEC curricula that are designed to build broad or "unconstrained" cognitive skills (e.g. vocabulary rather than narrow school-readiness skills such as identifying letters), social-emotional skills and skills that support learning across domains (e.g. executive functions) can be expected to produce longer-lasting positive effects for vulnerable children. While the focus of transitions is typically how the lower level of education can prepare children for a higher level, a higher level of education can also be designed to ensure children build on what they have learnt during ECEC. In Ireland, the early years curriculum framework *Aistear* is aligned with the new primary curriculum framework, introduced in 2023, which explicitly builds on the principles and themes of *Aistear*, offering potential for curriculum continuity. Inequalities can also be reinforced when vulnerable children experience more transitions or receive less support around their transitions than their more advantaged peers. Supporting children in their transitions to and through ECEC and onwards to primary school is an objective of Ireland's First 5 strategy. ECEC settings and their staff are well-placed to co-ordinate with other professionals working with families, in addition to families themselves, and to engage with schools to facilitate transitions, especially for more vulnerable children. Staff and leaders need to be trained for these roles and supported to co-operate with other professionals, for instance by allocating time

for work without children. While not all ECEC staff (and leaders) need to engage in these extended tasks, those who do should have explicit recognition in their role and status.

A co-ordinated approach of ECEC policies with other policies targeting families and communities would involve the development of national quality frameworks that are shared across sectors serving early childhood to provide mechanisms for prioritising co-ordination and a common language for programmes to use with each other (Chapter 10). These frameworks do not fully exist in countries. Ireland's First 5 strategy goes in this direction by providing an overarching vision for all services that impact children from birth to age 5, including initiatives and policies relating to employment, education, social welfare, health, housing and other systems, in addition to children's services. Integrated national policy plans or structures can support co-ordination with other levels of governance and across services, although best approaches depend on countries' contexts, goals and existing institutions. Integrated service hubs, operating under the umbrella of a quality framework, can further support ECEC services to connect with families and communities by providing a soft entry point to education and care services, with which families facing adversity may not otherwise engage (see Chapter 5). Service hubs bring together an array of services to support families, and can be organised with different combinations of programmes and tailored goals to match community needs and interests (see Chapters 4 and 10).

## Improving governance and funding

ECEC systems require sufficient and sustained funding, with an adequate share of public funding, to address the compounding sources of inequalities in the early years and make early investments last (see Chapter 9). Ireland has increased ECEC funding in recent years to enhance the affordability and sustainability of ECEC. These measures include the introduction of fee subsidies (as discussed previously) and Core Funding (see Chapter 9, Box 9.1), which is provided directly to ECEC settings to ensure fee stability, improve service quality and promote better pay and conditions for staff. In addition, the Equal Start funding model, comprising of universal and targeted supports, is designed to support equitable access and participation in ECEC for children and families experiencing disadvantage. More substantial, equitable and efficient funding can support policy aims to increase ECEC enrolment, ensure all children benefit from quality services, and provide enhanced support proportionate to children and families' needs (see Chapter 9).

How resources are distributed and to whom is critical for ensuring accessible, affordable and high-quality ECEC for all children. Many countries, including Ireland, have often relied on private provision to expand ECEC services. Ensuring quality and equal access to ECEC in the presence of private provision requires comprehensive policies. Quality monitoring, regulation of private providers (with particular attention to for-profit players), funding conditionality and measures to limit family costs, as implemented in Ireland are several policy levers that can help mitigate the risks that can emerge in mixed ECEC systems and ensure the efficiency of public and private investments. Adequate capital spending, effective network planning and support measures for ECEC providers to access capital funding is also key for facilitating infrastructure investments that support ECEC sector expansions and benefit the children most in need.

Quality ECEC provision for all children hinges on a qualified workforce, which is one of the main sources of ECEC expenditure. Irregular working hours and low compensation can hamper the ECEC sectors' capacity to attract and retain qualified individuals, especially when other working conditions are also challenging. In response to these challenges, Ireland committed to upskilling the ECEC workforce as part of the "Nurturing Skills" Workforce Plan and introduced Core Funding, among other measures, to attract and retain staff. Ensuring salaries are in line with ECEC staff's roles and responsibilities can enhance retention and make the profession more attractive. Evidence from a range of OECD ECEC systems shows that wage enhancements only seem to impact quality if they translate into meaningful pay level increases. Additional funding can also be used to attract and retain staff in more disadvantaged areas, through

increased compensation that is better aligned with staff's roles and responsibilities in more challenging settings. In Ireland, the Early Start funding model introduces targeted supports, including additional funding, for ECEC settings identified as operating in areas of concentrated disadvantage. In ECEC systems dominated by private providers, such as in Ireland, central authorities may have more limited leverage over staff compensation and other incentives when contracts and salaries are negotiated at the provider level. The Joint Labour Committee, comprising sector employer and employee representatives, plays a key role in centrally negotiating minimum working conditions requirements (e.g. minimum staff pay rates) for the sector in Ireland, which are then set out in legislation via Employment Regulation Orders. Employers must comply with these minimum requirements when setting their staff terms and conditions. Funding conditionality, as done in Ireland through the conditions attached to Core Funding for the Joint Labour Committee to reach an agreement, can help to ensure dedicated grants are used to enhance workforce quality.

In addition to the alignment of funding, placing ECEC policies as part of a broader landscape of social and education policies requires aligning governance for a more integrated policy approach. For example, the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in Ireland monitors the implementation of government strategies in six areas identified as having the potential to have the biggest impact on children living in poverty, including early years and childcare. A whole-of-government approach calls for high-level policies and national commitments to support co-ordinated services throughout childhood (see Chapter 10). High levels of governance are important for creating favourable regulatory and funding systems that allow for and encourage co-ordination – essentially providing infrastructure for, instead of barriers to, co-ordinated efforts. In Ireland, responsibility for early-years services is centralised and shared across national ministries, with local government having no formal role in ECEC funding, standards setting or quality monitoring. A highly centralised funding model means national authorities retain policy levers for enhancing quality; however, a lack of involvement of sub-central authorities may also lead to ECEC services that are less supported or incentivised to respond to local needs and demands. Across contexts, enabling conditions that support successful co-ordination tend to include a combination of both top-down supports (e.g. stable funding, legal frameworks for co-operation) and bottom-up, local inputs (e.g. commitment to supporting early childhood initiatives, capacity for implementation), as well as shared values, strong leadership and strong communication channels (see Chapter 10). Access to data and data sharing can also be a barrier to successful co-ordination across sectors. Building data systems and processes to meaningfully monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements is therefore key, particularly in a centralised system such as Ireland. These efforts, however, require building the capacity of actors to collect and use sufficiently disaggregated data for decision-making.

### Box 1. A selection of pointers from the policy roadmap for ECEC with a lasting impact on equity and inclusion

A policy roadmap informed by research evidence and other countries' experiences can ensure ECEC leads to stronger outcomes for children (especially those more vulnerable), supports inclusion and mitigates inequalities with a lasting impact. This box highlights key policy pointers (see Chapter 1) that are relevant to Ireland's context, as well as policy examples drawn from other countries, including in areas where Ireland is already active.

**Policy pointer 1: Reduce gaps in ECEC participation by addressing both direct and indirect barriers.** While ECEC participation has increased in Ireland, both direct and indirect barriers to access remain and contribute to socio-economic gaps in participation for younger children, including high out-of-pocket fees for families and multi-step application processes to access subsidies. Policy directions to reduce gaps in ECEC participation include:

- *Set up accessible information channels and streamline administrative processes for enrolment in ECEC services.* For example, local information and support points in the Flemish Community of Belgium are centres which collaborate with a network of family-focused services to support families with ECEC. The support points help ensure accessible ECEC, with special attention to vulnerable families and those requiring urgent or flexible options (see Chapter 5, Box 5.3).
- *Provide flexible or alternative forms of ECEC provision (e.g. operating hours, duration, co-location) to better mitigate the constraints for participation of vulnerable families.* Flexible or alternative forms of provision that reach children in more remote areas, enable families to reconcile work and family commitments, or expose families to ECEC experiences can help alleviate inequalities in participation. Evidence from Finland and the United Kingdom shows that flexible ECEC arrangements are more frequently used or needed by socio-economically disadvantaged and single parents (see Chapter 5).
- *Promote family and community involvement in ECEC to strengthen trust in the quality and inclusiveness of ECEC services.* For example, an initiative in Germany trains mothers from diverse communities to support fellow parents to access services for their children. These "District Mothers" provide guidance on a range of topics, including immigration, language acquisition, employment and legal matters, in addition to ECEC access and the developmental needs of children and young people (see Chapter 5, Box 5.4).

**Policy pointer 2: Support meaningful interactions between staff and children by setting mechanisms for quality improvement and equitably expanding opportunities for children to experience high levels of process quality.** Ireland has reduced socio-economic gaps in participation and there are indicators of improved process quality overall; however, the quality of provision may vary between settings. As recognised in Ireland's Workforce Plan, the ECEC workforce is key to ensuring the quality of provision. Policy directions to support meaningful interactions between staff and children in ECEC settings include:

- *Target more intensive participation in ECEC (starting from an early age or more hours) to vulnerable children, provided that quality provision can be ensured.* In addition to the quality of ECEC, its quantity also matters for achieving long-term effects on inequalities. Early (below age 2) and intensive (more hours) enrolment in ECEC can have positive effects on children from low socio-economic backgrounds, especially for cognitive development, provided it is of high quality. The curriculum framework and preparation of the ECEC staff, as well as their

working conditions need to be adapted to the starting age and intensity of programmes (see Chapter 8).

- *In the presence of staff shortages, ensure that they do not disproportionately affect ECEC settings with large shares of vulnerable children (e.g. through financial incentives).* For example, the state of Virginia (United States) ran a pilot of a Teacher Recognition programme providing ECEC educators with a bonus of up to USD 1 500 for staying to teach at their ECEC centre over an 8-month period. Experimental evidence shows that the Teacher Recognition programme supported lower staff turnover in participating ECEC centres. The beneficial effects of the programme stemmed from increased perception of staff that their work was valued and from alleviating staff's financial burdens. Virginia further expanded and refocused the programme and the incentive amount was also progressively increased (see Chapter 9, Box 9.3).
- *Provide opportunities for high-quality continuous professional development for all staff, prioritising centre-based delivery and peer learning and feedback, and target supports for participation to staff working in settings with high shares of vulnerable children.* For example, in Norway, a mentoring scheme for newly employed ECEC teachers supports their transition into the profession, helping to recruit, develop and retain skilled teachers and leaders. Financial incentives for ECEC services compensate for staff absences during training, ensuring high-quality professional development is accessible and sustainable (see Chapter 2 in (OECD, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>)).

**Policy pointer 3: Make ECEC inclusive for all children by embracing a strengths-based approach to diversity and identifying and responding to variability in children's needs and strengths.** Growing shares of culturally and linguistically diverse children participate in ECEC in Ireland. This requires ECEC settings to respond to a broader range of needs from children and families, while also bringing opportunities to build on a wider range of experiences and resources. Policy directions to make ECEC more inclusive for all children include:

- *Ensure curriculum frameworks value and affirm all forms of diversity.* For example, the *Menntun, Móttaka, Menning* (MEMM) in Iceland responds to rapidly increasing immigration and refugee arrival rates in the country. With social inclusion as an overarching goal, the project seeks to establish a uniform procedure for the reception and education of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and aims to develop guidance, learning materials and tools for educators. Initiatives include supports to preschools to develop their own curricula with a focus on children with diverse backgrounds; the distribution of an Icelandic Picture Dictionary; and guidance for the support of mother tongues and active plurilingualism in both formal and informal programmes for preschool aged children (see Chapter 7, Box 7.1).
- *Monitor the inclusiveness of practices within settings and the quality of specific supports provided to children and ensure that staff and leaders receive actionable feedback for improvement.* For example, the Classroom Assessment of Supports for Emergent Bilingual Acquisition (CASEBA) is designed to measure the quality of linguistically and culturally sensitive practices with multilingual learners in preschool classrooms, with a focus on both home language maintenance and foreign language acquisition (see Chapter 7, Box 7.4).

**Policy pointer 4: Build on ECEC together with other social services to better support parents and ensure smooth transitions within ECEC and to primary education.** Ireland's First 5 strategy provides an overarching vision for all services that impact children from birth to age 5 and includes objectives to provide information, supports and services to parents and to support children in their transitions to and through ECEC settings and onwards to primary school. Policy directions to better connect ECEC services with families, schools and communities include:

- *Consider the development of national quality frameworks covering an array of services around families and children, applying for instance to service hubs.* For example, in Queensland (Australia), Early Years Places (EYPs) are provided in more than 50 rural, remote and high-growth communities across the state to make it easy for families to connect with services to support their child's early development. EYPs deliver a mix of integrated services and activities, including playgroups, ECEC, child and maternal health services, and family and parenting support for families with children aged up to eight years-old (see Chapter 10, Box 10.1).
- *Support pedagogical practices adapted to children's needs throughout early and middle childhood.* For example, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Department of Early Childhood (United States) developed the Focus on Early Learning programme for young children from pre-kindergarten through the second year of elementary school. An important feature of Focus on Early Learning is to align the early primary grades with kindergarten, rather than make earlier years look more like school. Research found that the BPS pre-kindergarten programme, which consisted of two evidence-based curricula paired with substantial teacher training and coaching, had positive impacts on children's literacy, language, mathematics and emotional development, domains directly targeted by the curriculum, and in executive functioning, a non-targeted domain (see Chapter 6, Box 6.1).
- *Support co-ordination among ECEC and primary education staff, particularly with the goals to ease transitions for vulnerable children.* Schools tend to be well understood as entities in the community, and therefore offer a logical place for building co-ordinated services and capitalising on institutional trust. One example of centring co-ordinated services in schools is the Our Place model in Victoria (Australia), a public-private partnership between a philanthropic organisation and the state government. Our Place identifies its role as "the glue" that facilitates partnerships and enables primary school to be a central place for accessing support services, ranging from ECEC to child and adult health services, playgroups, adult education and well-being services (see Chapter 10).

**Policy pointer 5: Better integrate ECEC within the broader landscape of social and education policies to improve governance and funding for early-years policies.** Ireland's First 5 strategy for early childhood takes a whole-of-government approach to guide co-ordination across national ministries. The strategy provides a shared vision to support governance and collaboration across different systems and structures, including Government Departments and State Agencies. Policy directions to better integrate ECEC within broader policies include:

- *Build data systems and processes that are meaningful to monitor quality and equity and inform directions for improvements.* For example, in Australia, the Restacking the Odds initiative focuses on five services that have been shown to support disadvantaged children: prenatal care, sustained nurse home visiting, ECEC, parenting programmes and the early years of primary school. The initiative developed a set of "lead indicators" that these programmes can use to collect and share better data on their services, with the aim of using data across services to make better-informed policy, funding and programme decisions. The initiative is also working to support capacity for data collection and use across frontline providers and ensuring incentives are in place to continue these data collections and their responses in a sustained and consistent manner (see Chapter 10, Box 10.3).

**Table 1. Indicators of quality and inclusive early childhood education and care**

Report ref.	Indicator	Ref. year	Indicator type	Ireland	OECD average <sup>1</sup>
<b>Context</b>					
Fig. 1.1	Relative child poverty rate	2021	%	9.5	12.4
Fig. 3.3	Gini coefficient of income equality ( <i>ranges from 0: max. equality to 1: max. inequality</i> )	2022	Gini coefficient	0.28	0.31
Fig. 3.4	National population below relative poverty threshold	2022	%	7.0	11.1
Fig. 1.2	Socio-economic gap in maths performance, age 15 ( <i>adv. - disadv.</i> )	2022	Mean score diff.	74	93.5
<b>Policy area 1: Reducing gaps in participation</b>					
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 4	2022	%	93.1	89.1
Fig. 1.3	ECEC enrolment rate, age 2	2022	%	26.7	45.4
Fig. 1.4	Trend in socio-economic participation gap, age 4	2005-2015	Trend	Narrowed	No change
Fig. 5.5	Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a two-earner couple family	2023	% of avg. earnings	22	12
Fig. 5.6	Agreement with statement “preschool children suffer with a working mother”, adult population	see Annex B	%	<i>m</i>	33.5
<b>Policy area 2: Supporting meaningful interactions between staff and children</b>					
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 02	2022	%	99.1	32.2
Fig. 6.2	Enrolment in private ECEC, ISCED 01	2022	%	100.0	50.3
Fig. 1.5	Diff. in maths performance by ECEC participation, age 15 ( <i>&gt;2 years - =2 years participation</i> )	2022	Score diff.	-7.8	5.2
<b>Policy area 3: Making ECEC inclusive for all children</b>					
Fig. 7.1	Children reported as multilingual in ECEC, age 10 in reference year	2019	%	20.7	13.4
Fig. 7.2	Children with special educational needs in mainstream settings	2020/21	%	<i>m</i>	79.0
<b>Policy area 4: Connecting ECEC services with families, schools and communities</b>					
Fig. 3.6	Socio-economic gap in home activities for early literacy and numeracy ( <i>adv. - disadv.</i> )	2019	Percentage points	34.7	22.1
<b>Policy area 5: Improving governance and funding</b>					
Fig. 9.1	Expenditure on ECEC per child, ISCED 02	2021	PPP USD	<i>m</i>	11 735
Fig. 9.2	Share of private expenditure on ECEC, ISCED 02	2021	%	<i>m</i>	14.2
Fig. 9.5	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 02	2021	%	0.0	57.6
Fig. 9.4	Local government share of expenditure after inter-governmental transfers, ISCED 01	2021	%	0.0	67.0
Fig. 9.7	Share of per capita spending on family benefits and education (0-17) for children aged 0-5	2019	%	26.1	28.4

Notes: *m* = Missing.

<sup>1</sup> Countries included in the OECD average vary depending on data availability, refer to Annex B for further information. The average for Figure 7.1 includes only the following countries or sub-national entities: Belgium (Flanders), France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

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