

first years
first priority



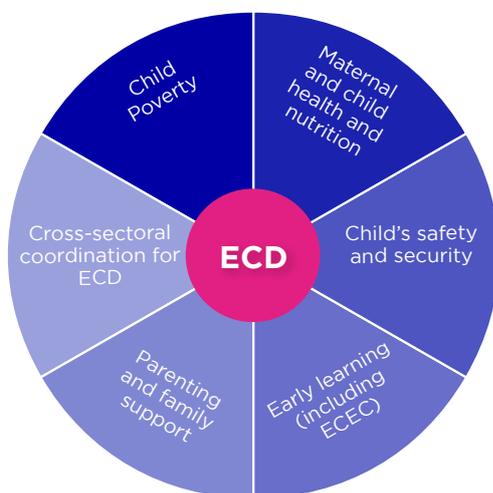
Early Childhood Development in

IRELAND

Country Profile 2021*



Ireland has made good progress over recent years in delivering **early childhood development (ECD)** policies and in supporting families with young children. Specifically, numerous policy provisions provide access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in health, and/or social and child protection services. Although early education is not compulsory in Ireland, and children can start attending a free, universal pre-school programme from the age of two years and eight months, different strategies and schemes have been introduced to address the needs of families and children in a holistic way. Other policies also aim to guarantee coordinated cross-sectoral services and targeted support for children (from birth to six years old), in particular children in vulnerable situations.



**POLICY AREAS
IMPACTING ECD**

Country PRIORITIES

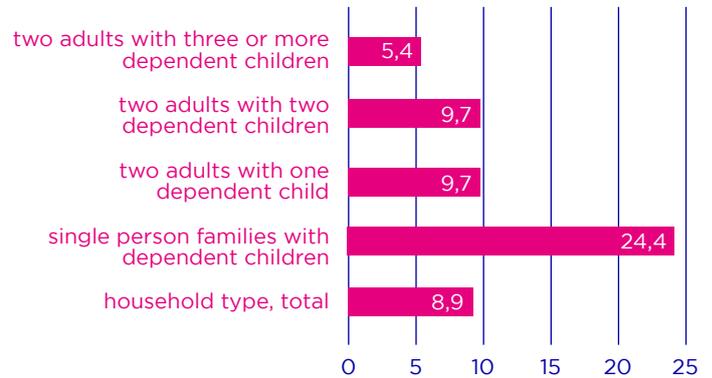
- Track data about poverty for families with young children under three, prioritising single-parent families.
- Track data about maternal and child health especially for families from vulnerable groups to inform the need for a dedicated child health workforce.
- Monitor child safety and security indicators for children under three years of age.
- Increased public investment in Early Childhood Education and Care working towards a publicly funded model.

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CHILD POVERTY

In Ireland, although *A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* outlines a plan to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU, currently there is a **lack of disaggregated data on child poverty and social exclusion for children under three years of age**. Data from 2018 for children under five suggest that 4,8% of children of this age group were living in extreme poverty. Data available indicates that lone parents and their children are particularly exposed to a higher risk of poverty and need targeted support.

At-risk-of-poverty rate per household type (%)



Source: *Poverty and Deprivation - CSO - Central Statistics Office, 2018.*

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MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

In Ireland, the Maternity and Infant Care Scheme provides free access to a General Practitioner (GP) for all children under six. Yet, **sufficient data on maternal and child health indicators is not available**, although data on antenatal health coverage is. Every pregnant woman ordinarily resident in Ireland is entitled to an agreed programme of maternity care under the Maternity and Infant Scheme provided by a family doctor (GP) of the mother's choice and a hospital obstetrician/community midwife. The Scheme also provides for two post-natal GP visits. Available data from 2017 suggest that 87,3% of women had received antenatal care by the end of the first trimester of their pregnancy. Data from 2019 indicates that 98,7% of newborns had access to a post-natal health check.



Additional available data from 2017 suggest that 5,7% of infants have low birthweight. Although there is no available data on the percentage of children who are exclusively breastfed at six months, in 2019, at the three-month public health nurse (PHN) visit, 36% of babies were being exclusively breastfed. *First 5: A Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* outlines a plan to develop a dedicated child health workforce to ensure it better addresses the needs of and ensures the highest attainable standard of health for all babies, young children, and families in Ireland.¹

¹ *Tusla Review of Adequacy Report 2019 (38).*

CHILD SAFETY AND SECURITY

In Ireland 1.075 children under six years were in alternative care at the end of December 2019. This number equates to 18% of all children in care (5.916). In addition, there are 67 children in care under Tusla's Social Work Team for Separated Children Seeking Asylum. In Ireland, the birth of all children under five is registered. There is no official data available for undocumented children.

Of the 876 children on the child protection notification system (CPNS) in 2019, 312 were aged zero to four. This highlights an over-representation of younger children on the CPNS with 36%, compared to 28% in the general population. These figures do not include the number of children referred, on waiting lists, or receiving family support.

EARLY LEARNING

There is **no legal entitlement to a guaranteed place in ECEC for children under three**. The 2019 Survey of Income and Living Conditions indicates that 33,4% of children under three attend either (a) pre-school or (b) day-care centre services. However, it does not include disaggregated data on other types of non-parental care such as paid/unpaid care by relatives, childminders, nannies, or au pairs.

A low percentage of ECEC staff for under-threes has a minimum of a Bachelor's level qualification, but there are public policy initiatives in place with the aim of increasing this.

Types of policies available to facilitate ECEC access of children from vulnerable families:

- **The National Childcare Scheme (NCS)** provides two types of subsidy: Universal for all families

The capacity of ECEC services to ensure the inclusion of children under six from historically marginalised groups

The annual Early Years Sector Report published by Pobal highlights the following statistics related to 2018/2019:

- 0,5% of all Early Learning and Care (ELC)/School Age Childcare (SAC) were located in very and extremely disadvantaged areas, although 2,9% of the population reside in these locations;
- 68% of services have at least one child for whom neither English nor Irish is a first language. They represent 12% of all children enrolled.
- 7% of services reported having at least one Roma child attending;
- 17% of services reported having at least one Traveller child attending;
- Over three-quarters of services (77%) cater for at least one child with additional needs, and 54% have at least one child with a diagnosed disability attending;
- The proportion of services with staff who have completed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Training Programme is 61%, while the number of providers with an inclusion policy in place is 97%.

According to the OECD, in most OECD countries, very young children are more likely to use ECEC services when they come from relatively advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In Ireland, the participation rate for children aged up to two years old in low-income families is about 17%, less than one-third of that for children from high-income families (59%).

with children under three, or who have not yet qualified for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. It is not means-tested and provides 50 cents per hour towards the cost of a registered childcare place for a weekly maximum of 45 hours. At present, the State provides subsidies directly to all providers of childcare services in an attempt to reduce the financial cost for parents.²

- Income-assessed subsidies are available to families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years. They vary depending on income, the child's age and educational stage and the number of children in the family. Parents who are working, studying or training can avail of a weekly maximum number of 45 subsidised hours but those who are not can access a weekly maximum of 20 subsidised hours.

- Since its introduction, over 67,000 children have benefited from the NCS³. **The Childcare Support 2018 Act** enables special provision for vulnerable children to receive subsidised services, for example, on child welfare or family support grounds, or to support homeless or asylum-seeking families to access education and integration supports.
- The ECCE programme provides early childhood education and care for all children from two years and eight months up to a maximum age of five years and six months in early years settings for three hours a day, five days a week, 38 weeks of the year for two full academic years. **The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)** is a model of support designed to promote inclusion and to ensure that children with disabilities can meaningfully participate in the ECCE Programme in mainstream pre-school settings.

Other ongoing initiatives to improve access to ECEC include: a Programme for Government commitment to establish an agency, Childcare Ireland; the publication of a National Action Plan for Childminding in April 2021; work on a Workforce Development Plan and the development of a new Funding Model for ELC and SAC to examine how additional public funding can be used to deliver higher quality, more affordable, more sustainable and more inclusive services.

² See Government of Ireland, 'National Childcare Scheme' (www.ncs.gov.ie), accessed 7 May 2021.

³ Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 6 November.



PARENTING AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Families in Ireland have different supports and benefits available to them. At least 31,267 children were referred to family support services in 2020, equating to about 26 in 1,000 children under 18. However, of those referred, 17,516 children were in receipt of family support services at the end of 2020, which equates to about 15 in 1,000 children under 18. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has developed several initiatives including a *Parenting Support Strategy* and *Parenting24seven*. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is currently developing a **National Model of Parenting Support Services** to ensure a more coherent and strategic approach so that all parents can access the support they need when they need it.

Family Support Services include:

- Services carried out by a partner agency, funded through a Service Arrangement with Tusla.
- Services internally funded and delivered through Tusla.

Supports and Benefits available to parents with young children (child allowance/benefits)

- Child Benefit €140 per month per child
- Under six GP Visit Card
- Medical card (targeted/means tested)
- Maternity Leave (26 week statutory leave)
- Maternity benefit (€245 per week)
- Paternity Leave (two weeks statutory leave)
- Paternity benefit (€245 per week)
- Parents Leave (five weeks @€245 per week)
- Parental Leave (Unpaid)
- Unpaid Maternity Leave (up to 16 weeks)
- Adoptive Leave

CROSS-SECTORAL COORDINATION

In Ireland **there is an explicitly stated national multi-sectoral ECD strategy**. *First 5* is a whole-of-Government 10-year strategy (2019-2028) to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families.

There is a coordinating body overseeing cross-sectorally ECD policies, funding and spending both at the country and the municipality levels. In 2020, **some formal mechanisms were in place for collaboration between agencies**.



*The information provided in this Country Profile reflects the situation at the end of May 2021.



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The views expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

Country Profile Contributor

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ALLIANCE

THE PARTNERSHIP

Eurochild is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.

International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programmes and services connects early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA Members from 43 countries implement programmes and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.

European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organisation made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.

Roma Education Fund (REF) was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organisation supports policies and programmes which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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National Coordinators: [Trust for Social Achievement \(Bulgaria\)](#), [Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance \(France\)](#), [Central Union for Child Welfare \(Finland\)](#), [Family, Child, Youth Association \(Hungary\)](#), [Children's Rights Alliance \(Ireland\)](#), [Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso \(Portugal\)](#), [Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development \(Romania\)](#), [Pomoc Deci \(Serbia\)](#), [Plataforma de Infancia \(Spain\)](#).

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