

Summary of the Social Democrats General Election 2016 Manifesto Commitments in Relation to Children¹

This document is produced by the Children's Rights Alliance and is a compilation of the information contained in the Social Democrats manifesto for General Election 2016. As the information is sourced from an external party, we do not accept responsibility for its content.

1. Early Years and Childcare

Affordable Childcare:

Improve state funding for childcare providers by increasing capitation rates, link funding to quality improvements and reduce and cap childcare charges (see separate childcare proposals). Introduce paid parental leave for the first 12 months of a child's life and legislate for better work flexibility for toddler years and beyond.²

The Social Democrats want to put children first by starting a multi-year programme of investment for children's services, especially for very young children. This programme would invest in the child's early years by ensuring parents have the choice to stay at home in the first precious year of their child's life through extended paid parental leave arrangements, and more flexible work options for parents. Furthermore, it would also help develop more affordable and higher quality childcare. It would also provide a significant boost to enterprise by giving many parents the choice of returning to work.

The Social Democrats would prioritise the following policies:

- Providing funding so that paid parental leave (counting maternity benefit) is extended to 36 weeks and commit to increasing this to 52 weeks over three budgets. We would supplement this with legislation to guarantee flexible work options for parents;
- Significantly improving childcare through a range of measures including:
 - Investing in quality of service provision via higher capitation payments to childcare providers, and linking funding to increased quality.
 - Setting maximum fees for parents for childcare, ensuring public funding does not simply push up prices, and enabling all families to benefit, with higher quality incentivised;
 - Extending subsidised childcare places to lower-income families in all areas, through extension and reform of the Community Childcare Subvention;
 - Investing in educational supports for childcare workers;
 - Carrying out a full economic review of the cost of childcare based on quality standards, implementation of national curricula, and the introduction of a proper career structure for staff.³

¹ Social Democrats, Building a Better Future 2016- 2020 <<https://socialdemocrats.ie/2016/01/22/building-a-better-future/>> accessed 15 February 2016

² ibid 7.

³ ibid 27.

2. Education

Introduce Free Primary Education:

The public investment of €103m would mean parents would save on the cost of school books and school transport costs.⁴

Primary and Post Primary:

- Steadily reducing primary school class sizes to the EU average of 20;
- Making primary education free by funding school books, schools transport and classroom resources;
- Restoring capitation grants for schools to 2010 levels;
- Ensuring resources are targeted to greatest need, including both areas of high economic disadvantage (as pursued by the DEIS programme) and the needs of disadvantaged students outside these areas;
- Investing in Special Needs Assistants, SNAs, including removal of cap, to ensure sufficient resource and provide continuous professional development for SNAs;
- Ensuring SEN students have access to education based on their needs;²
- Connecting every school with fibre broadband and funding ICT hardware and software for education;
- Equipping teachers to help close the gap in literacy outcomes, and reinstating literacy and numeracy professional development services;³
- Ensuring pluralism in schools, by ending the practice of children being refused a place in a school because of their parents' belief system (see separate section on pluralism in education);
- Introducing curriculum to proactively develop children's mental health and wellbeing in the classroom;
- Enhancing continuous professional development for teachers and principals;
- Re-establishing the role of career guidance councillors;
- Lifting the moratorium on the recruitment of Special Duties posts, allowing principals focus on school leadership;
- Introducing skills-based courses to include innovation, entrepreneurship, communications and critical thinking, together with required professional development for teachers.⁵

The Social Democrats Are Committed To Pluralism And Ending Discrimination In Education And Propose The Following Measures:

- Repeal of Section 7 (3) (c) of the Equal Status Act so that children cannot be refused admission to a local school on the basis of their religious beliefs.
- That the patronage of all new schools in developing areas should be representative of local parental preference.
- Where a demand for a new inclusive school is proven in an established area, the State should ensure that either a suitable denominational school building would be provided under an agreed divestment programme, a suitable public building would be made available, or funding would be provided for a new school building. Once the viability of a potential new school is established, the State should accommodate this demand within three years.
- The Minister for Education and Skills should be required to report annually to the Dáil on the progress of the State in ensuring an inclusive State-funded school system which

⁴ ibid 7.

⁵ ibid 22.

reflects the diversity of Irish society and which upholds the right of all citizens to an education, appropriate to their beliefs.⁶

Support the Irish Language:

Demand for new Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí is increasing, and this demand must be catered to as part of the overall reform of school patronage models. We would ensure that early years education facilities (particularly in Gaeltacht areas and in major towns) can be run through Irish.

We would conduct a review of the effectiveness of economic stimulus programmes in the Gaeltacht and fund measures that are proven to stimulate local economies and are cost effective.

We would invest in greater training for Irish language teachers to equip them to inspire students to continue their language journey beyond school.⁷

3. End Child Poverty

The early years of a child's life are precious and set the foundation for success in life. There is only one chance to make the most of this formative stage and we have a duty to ensure that every child gets a good start. Disgracefully, it is children who have borne the brunt of austerity and inequality. 130,000 children live in consistent poverty in Ireland, a figure which has doubled since 2008. One in 9 children have to go without basics such as proper food, adequate heating and warm clothes.

Poverty robs children of their potential. It's time we put an end to this. All children deserve an equal chance in life.

A Summary of our Priorities in This Are:

- Set official all-of-Government target of ending Consistent Child Poverty by 2021 – led by An Taoiseach;
- Within 6 months develop a New Anti- Poverty Strategy, with clear targets, timeframes and lines of responsibility, and with families as a key focus;
- Replicate targeted area-based investment similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving learning and well-being outcomes;
- Provide free primary education to cover the costs of transport, books and classroom resources;
- Subsidise childcare services for low income families and in disadvantaged areas, with some funding to make childcare more affordable where services are not viable(see further childcare proposals in childcare section);
- Invest heavily in early years supports such as speech and language, early childhood health clinics, parental leave, social work, childcare & public health nursing;
- Extend the school meals programme on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food;
- Increase spending on early years up to the OECD average;
- Implement a range of programmes and initiatives of support to parents in the critical 0-3 stage of development, focusing on parental well-being and early infant development;
- Poverty-proof all Budgets and set against the targets of the new Anti-Poverty Strategy.⁸

⁶ ibid 35.

⁷ ibid 41.

4. Health

Extend Free GP Care to All Children:

Complete the roll-out of free GP Care to all children.⁹

Improve Access:

Provide full medical cards for children who qualify for Domiciliary Care

Allowance, free GP-Care for all children, and improve medical card access for older people (see section on older persons);¹⁰

5. Mental Health

Decades of chronic under-resourcing and a lack of integration have hampered the effective development of mental health services in Ireland. This lack of appropriate services due to inadequate resource allocation has stigmatised people suffering with mental health issues and isolated them in terms of treatment choices. The Social Democrats want to eliminate that stigma and create a culture that fosters a positive approach to mental well-being.

The Social Democrats commit to delivering all aspects of the 2006 'Vision for Change' strategy as a cornerstone of our mental health plan. Fully implemented, this strategy will not only be responsive to individuals suffering from mental health issues, but will also work to proactively equip people with basic tools to positively strengthen awareness of their own mental health and recognise when to seek help.

Proactive Care:

- As with any medical condition, prevention is always better than cure. With regard to mental-health this poses a particular challenge as outmoded attitudes and cultural perceptions have contributed to a culture of silence. The Social Democrats want to change this.
- Early intervention is critical in addressing emerging mental health difficulties and we support the extension of successful infant mental health and well-being programmes where these are currently being provided on a pilot basis.
- As part of the 'Driving Quality and Access in Education' portion of our manifesto, we have committed to the introduction of a curriculum to proactively develop children's mental health and well-being.
- In addition, the Social Democrats also recognise the importance for children of parental mental-health. To this end special focus will be given to vulnerable new parents in the allocation of resources, (this also forms part of the 'early years' portion of our manifesto.)
- As part of our plan for education we have committed to restoring guidance counsellors to all secondary schools. Building on this restoration, we will commit to developing a system whereby guidance counsellors are equipped with the skills to deliver classes on positive mental well-being in secondary schools
- We support the aims of Connecting for Life; in particular we would seek to urgently address adolescent suicide by equipping teachers and guidance counsellors with best-practice training to be able to effectively identify and respond to children in need.¹¹

⁸ ibid 15.

⁹ ibid 7.

¹⁰ ibid 10.

¹¹ ibid 32.

Enhancing Responsiveness:

- Suicide is one of the biggest killers in our community; it is not acceptable that people should have to wait for crisis intervention.
- The Social Democrats will work to ensure that in conjunction with pro-active efforts to improve mental well-being there are also dedicated mental health teams on call 24/7 in each hospital area.¹²

Holistic and Inclusive Care:

- Studies have shown that prescribed physical exercise, CBT, Mindfulness and other forms of treatment are at least as effective in treating depression and anxiety as SSRIs and other drugs. We will work to ensure that these options are offered to service users, empowering them to make choices about how they themselves want their treatment to develop.
- For too long the solution to mental health issues in Ireland was seen to be medication. While we recognise that medication plays a critical role in the treatment for many, too often GPs see this as the only treatment option in the absence of adequate talk and therapeutic services.
- We will further invest in community mental-health teams as part of our primary care policy and allied health professionals will form a core of this investment.
- The Social Democrats will work to fully resource and expand the Counselling in Primary Care service (CIPC) to ensure better access to properly accredited community based services that suit the needs of users.
- We will ring-fence specialised mental-health funding for the most 'at-risk' groups, including young parents, the Travelling Community, asylum seekers, the LGBTQ community and persons with physical and mental disabilities.
- A core aspect of the Social Democrat mental health policy is to tackle the service distinction between addiction and mental health. Substance abuse and mental health issues often go hand in hand, and the first point of contact with a service provider for individuals with a dual-diagnosis should seek to tackle both issues in a holistic fashion. A study by the UK Dept. of Health, suggest that 75% of users of drug services and 85% of users of alcohol services experienced mental health problems. 44% of mental health service users reported drug use. (Weaver et al, 2002)⁵. The Social Democrats would realign the mental-health and addiction services of the HSE to tackle the intertwined issues of addiction and mental health in a complimentary fashion.
- Specifically in relation to substance misuse issues The Social Democrats support:
 - The early enactment of all sections of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill.
 - The amendment of the Misuse of Drugs Act to address the widespread problem of the street trading and abuse of prescription drugs.
 - The restoration of resources to the Garda Drug unit
 - A fundamental review of drug treatment services
 - An enhanced role for drug and alcohol task forces.
- In line with our international obligations the Social Democrats have committed to enacting the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a priority. This will be done in conjunction with new legislation on patient advocacy, the regulation of community based counselling and therapy services and Advance Healthcare Directives.¹³

6. Equality and Social Inclusion

¹² ibid 32.

¹³ ibid 33.

End Direct Provision:

Ireland's system of direct provision was only ever intended to be a short-term solution, but has become a national disgrace. We can and should do more to make a timely decision on a person's asylum status, particularly in light of the pressing Syrian, Somali and Afghani refugee crisis. A clear short to medium term goal of the Social Democrats would be to end Direct Provision.¹⁴

7. Social Protection



Improve welfare by:

- Exploring how better access to Family Income Supplement for the self-employed could be provided¹⁵
- Restoring tapering arrangement for Lone Parents.¹⁶
- Guaranteeing subsidised childcare for lone parents.¹⁷

¹⁴ ibid 37.

¹⁵ ibid 36.

¹⁶ ibid 36.

¹⁷ ibid 37.