

**Social
Democrats**



Supporting Families

A New Deal for Parents and Children

For the Future
It Starts Here

#VoteSocDems

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Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase paid parents' leave by 4 weeks for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each, to ensure the first 12 months of a child's life can be covered by paid leave.
- Increase benefit payments to €350 per week for Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit.
- Begin building a public model of early childhood education and care (ECEC), delivered by a National Childcare Agency.
- Ensure affordability of childcare for parents, by capping fees at €250 per child per month, with a cap of €200 for lower income households.
- Set a clear target in the next Programme for Government that consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated by 2030.
- Prioritise delivery of quality public services, particularly in education and healthcare, over tax cuts.
- Enact specific and effective legislation to protect children online, including by regulating 'preferences algorithms'.
- Establish a Commission to research, trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work including working from home, term-time working, and a 4-day week.

Introduction

In Ireland, we do too little to support parents. Despite improvements in recent years, we are still well behind other countries in terms of paid leave for parents, investment in childcare and early years education, supports for new parents, and basic public services for children.

The Social Democrats believe that **parents and families deserve a break**. Parenting should be more than just about surviving week to week, or an ongoing battle to ensure your child gets the services they are entitled to.

We want a New Deal for Families.

This New Deal would put parents and children at the heart of Government policies. It will support those parenting, in all forms of families, by allowing them more time with their children, more help with the cost of raising a family, and more peace of mind over their children's future.

Below, the Social Democrats are proposing a range of measures including the following:

- **Improving paid leave arrangements** for parents
- Introducing a **right to flexible work** options
- **Helping with the costs** of raising children
- **Building a public model** of Early Years Care and Education
- **Public services that parents can count on** in areas like Education and Health
- **Ending Child Poverty**
- Promoting **healthy and active lifestyles**
- Protecting children **online**

Improving flexible work options for Parents

Paid Leave for Parents

The Social Democrats are committed to **extending and vastly improving entitlement to paid leave for parents and flexible work options.**

Ireland lags far behind most other EU countries in terms of both paid and unpaid leave. This is not in the interests of employers, workers or children. Our leave system should be providing far better support and flexibility for parents.

During the 32nd Dáil we published a Bill which extended unpaid parental leave to six months and raised the qualifying age from 8 to 12 years, and we fought hard to get it through the Houses of the Oireachtas. As a result, new parental leave entitlements came into force.

The feedback we received on this Bill told us there is huge public demand to extend both paid and unpaid parental leave much further. **Parents want the option of spending time with their children while also retaining the right to return to their employment.** This is not too much to ask.

The Social Democrats favour the **extension of paid parental leave** so that in conjunction with paid maternity leave, paternity leave and existing paid parental leave, the **first 12 months of a child's life can be covered by paid leave.** It would be shareable between parents. In our Alternative Budget 2025, we called for:

- **An increase in paid parents' leave by 4 weeks** for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each, and
- **An increase in benefit payments to €350 per week** for Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit.

This would allow paid parents' leave and maternity leave to cover the full first year of a child's life. We should also be moving to a situation where the overall amount of paid and unpaid leave for parents is extended to the European average of **around 100 weeks per child.** We would also like to see the general child qualifying age for unpaid parental leave extended to 16 years.

We also need to reform the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 to provide additional support to one-parent families, acknowledging the disparity in benefit of paid parents' leave compared with two-parent families.

Flexible Work and the 4-day Working Week

It is clear from the uptake of the existing limited flexible work options that there is a high demand for these options.

In addition, there is **growing interest among workers and employers in providing for a 4-day working week**. This is already available and promoted in many other countries and the outcomes have been generally very positive.

The demand for more flexible working is especially strong from workers with young children, those caring for an older person or a family member with a disability, and generally where people are seeking a better work/life balance.

We will establish a Commission to **research, trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work** including working from home, term-time working, and a 4-day week, and to ensure that it works for workers of all types, and for large and small employers.

We also recognise that parents of children with disabilities and certain carers have particular demands on their time and require further flexibility. We will **raise the qualifying child age for unpaid parental leave to 16 years and to 18 years for children with disabilities**.

We will provide for this and other flexibilities through a **new Family Leave Act** in consultation with representatives from those sectors.

This Act would also include making it **compulsory for employers with more than 250 employees to make publicly available** their policies regarding their financial contributions to Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave and Parents' Leave for their employees.

This would recognise that when a person is applying for a role in a new company, information regarding that company's policy on such contributions would be beneficial to the prospective employee, though requesting that same information might incur prejudice in the competition for the role.

Separately, we will seek to increase the number of **annual bank holidays in Ireland** towards the EU average.

Supporting All Childcare Choices

Despite some improvements, Irish parents pay some of the **highest costs in the world for childcare**, and childcare remains a huge expense for many families.

The Social Democrats supported the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme. However, the scheme as currently constituted, falls far short of meeting the needs of those parenting.

For many Irish parents, especially those with more than one child, childcare still represents the cost of a second mortgage. In addition, many parents don't qualify for support under the scheme, either because their income is not deemed low enough or their child is not young enough.

These major gaps significantly raise the cost of living for such families and represent a very significant barrier to employment, especially for women and people parenting alone. **Parents have a right to expect that like other developed European countries, childcare should be accessible, affordable and adequately supported by the State.**

However, the Social Democrats also recognise that it is **not just parents using the formal childcare sector who face high costs.** And neither are these high costs confined to just the youngest families.

Many families adjust their childcare arrangements as their families and work arrangements change over time. Many take time out of work to care for their family, use a Nanny/Au Pair, the formal childcare sector, or family members, or move in and out of childminding.

Most of these choices entail costs, either directly or through **income-foregone.** So, it's **important that all childcare arrangements are respected and supported by the State.**

In addition, the Social Democrats are keen to ensure that the childcare sector is placed on a sustainable footing and that **childcare workers are valued both in terms of wages and training.** This is not only in the interests of the workers themselves but also parents and children.

The Social Democrats will introduce **four key childcare measures** to help parents to support their families:

- We will increase paid parents' leave by 4 weeks for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each, and increase benefit payments to €350 per week for Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit.

This will allow paid parents' leave and maternity leave to cover the full first year of a child's life.

- We will **significantly improve support under the National Childcare Scheme** to allow more families with children under the age of 12 to qualify and to improve supports under the universal element of the scheme.

- We would **establish a public model of childcare** through investment in a competent system that recognises ECEC as a public good rather than a commodity (See next page).

- We will **improve direct funding to the childcare sector to help improve employment conditions and training, and to improve sustainability.**

Childcare fees should be capped at no more than €250 per month, with a cap of €200 for lower income households.

A Public Model of Childcare and Education

The Social Democrats have a clear goal to establish a public model of early childhood education and care (ECEC), and a pathway to achieve it. Overseen by a National Childcare Agency, this would have the triple benefit of guaranteeing **quality early years education** and care for children, **affordability for parents**, and **appropriate compensation and benefits for workers** in the early years sector.

Investing more money in the sector as it is currently structured – while necessary to make childcare fees affordable for families and to achieve other goals – will not achieve the results we need. We want to ensure affordability for parents, by capping fees at €250 per child per month, with a cap of €200 for lower income households.

Research suggests that high quality ECEC can have beneficial and long-lasting impacts on children's outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. It can have a positive effect on children's educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes, in both the short and long term. But it is important to emphasise that this is only if it is of high quality.

Early childhood education and care also play a positive role in raising attainment and closing the gap between outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and other children. This is why we need to invest adequately in this area, to ensure that all children have an equal start in life.

We also acknowledge that **Irish parents pay some of the highest costs** in the world for childcare. Despite some recent improvements, childcare remains a huge expense for many families and yet a majority of staff within the sector earn below the Living Wage, with high staff turnover undermining the quality of the service being delivered.

There is still a clear need to increase the direct state funding to the childcare/early years sector to help improve staff pay and working conditions, and to increase affordability for parents. However, it is clear the system is not structured in a way that can deliver affordability for parents and sustainability for staff, while ensuring accountability for taxpayer money. A public model of childcare should be pursued, building capacity for greater direct state provision of ECEC, and a strengthening of community provision.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Begin building a public model of early childhood education and care (ECEC) built around three core principles:
 - Universal access
 - High quality
 - Public good
- Create a National Childcare Agency that would run this public ECEC service.
- Ensure affordability for parents, by capping fees at €250 per child per month, with a cap of €200 for lower income households.
- Invest €100m every year to acquire 80 childcare facilities as part of building a base level of public capacity in the sector.
- Conduct an audit of purpose-built settings lying vacant around the country, with a view to acquiring a number of these to begin building public capacity.
- Invest significant capital spending over our term in government to directly build additional settings in the areas most in need, including, where possible, on the grounds on other educational campuses, and ensure that no new schools in Ireland are built without an early years setting.
- Focus on using ECEC funding to disrupt the cycle of poverty and exclusion which exists in many parts of Ireland.
- Target ECEC funding to ensure access to high-quality, full-day care throughout the year for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.
- Ensure sponsorship under the National Childcare Scheme reflects the 'real' cost of provision for children facing adversity.
- Sustain and upscale the important work of the Area Based Childhood Programmes.
- Take measures to ensure a highly skilled and fairly remunerated ECEC workforce

ECEC: Disrupting Poverty and Disadvantage

High quality, accessible and affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an essential social and economic good that can enhance children's development, educational outcomes, and health trajectories across the lifespan. Access to and participation in ECEC can also reduce inequality and social

exclusion and remove barriers to parental employment. The complex ECEC ecosystem requires ambitious investment and approaches to create a sustainable, accountable, and affordable public ECEC system. This should include investment of part of the considerable corporation tax surpluses in a sustainable capital ECEC infrastructure. Our priorities include:

- More Community-based infrastructure of ECEC in Ireland.
- Equal Participation in ECEC for Children experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion.
- Adequate levels of Sponsorship for children experiencing extreme vulnerability.

Community-based ECEC infrastructure

Community-based, not-for-profit childcare settings are a critical asset to children, families, and communities across Ireland. Charities, not-for-profit organisations, and social enterprises that provide ECEC should be sustained, encouraged and further developed.

In Government we would ensure that the community-based, not-for-profit, and social enterprise infrastructure is adequately supported to make provision for all children and families, particularly those at risk of poverty.

Purpose-built community childcare settings should not be vacant in the afternoons or during school holidays and settings should be funded and supported to ensure that children can attend on a daily basis, throughout the year. Boards of Management, volunteers and social entrepreneurs should be adequately supported.

Equal Participation in ECEC

Young children are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of poverty in early childhood. Material deprivation and social exclusion have both immediate and long-term causal negative effects on children's health, socioemotional well-being, academic achievement, and participation. Children experiencing poverty benefit significantly from access to high-quality early childhood care and education.

In government, we would target ECEC funding to ensure access to high-quality, full-day care throughout the year for babies and children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. These services should be able to provide favourable adult-child ratios, three meals per day, rest spaces, well-equipped outdoor spaces and access to family rooms that can be used for parent support and/or education purposes.

Such provision requires dedicated funding per child, per week (not deductible based on attendance) and should reflect 'real' provision costs. The capitation per child per week in areas of deprivation should be a minimum of €250, with enhanced capitation based on the level of deprivation in the local area.

We must also sustain and upscale the important work of the Area Based Childhood Programmes.

Adequate levels of Sponsorship for Children in Extreme Vulnerability

Community-based settings in Ireland provide most Sponsored places for children experiencing extreme vulnerability. Sponsorship under the NCS should reflect the 'real' cost of provision for children facing adversity. These children require additional care, attention and nurturing, and funding should reflect more favourable adult-child ratios, adequate nutrition and access and availability of advice and support to meet needs, including access to services such as play therapy, psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and social work teams as required.

Sponsorship should be automatically funded as full-day care (min 40 hours per week) with a minimum capitation rate of €350 per child, per week, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year.

Further information about our plans for building a public model of childcare can be found in our Early Years Education and Care Policy Document on our website.

More Affordable Public Services

Education

The Social Democrats are committed to the introduction of **truly free Primary and Secondary Education**. This would mean investing in schools to increase capitation grants, improve school transport, and universalise book schemes for students at all levels through to the Leaving Certificate.

Adequate funding would ensure that schools **end the practice of seeking voluntary contributions from parents**.

We will also ensure that school managers adopt a principle of cost-minimisation in relation to school uniforms and other school costs.

We will invest in **new primary school teachers, supports for special needs**, and strive towards the full commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 so that parents with children with special needs do not need to campaign eternally for their child's rights.

Healthcare

The proposals of the Sláintecare plan, which was driven by the Social Democrats, will provide for the **expansion of frontline primary care services**, including free GP care for all age groups.

It will mean that basic services that are key to a child's development such as public health nursing, speech and language therapy, and eye, ear and dental services will be significantly improved so that parents can rely on them if their child needs them.

Thousands of children wait very lengthy periods for basic health services such as speech and language services. The **completely unacceptable waiting times in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**, in psychology and many other streams of child health services are well known. These waiting times would be significantly reduced under our proposals.

As part of the full roll-out of Sláintecare we will provide **additional funding for public health nursing** and we would like to see some of this investment going to dedicated child and family public health nurses.

Ending Child Poverty

It's a huge indictment of our country that tens of thousands of children in Ireland grow up in consistent and/or persistent poverty. In practical terms, this means they live in households with a very low income and go without basics such as adequate food or heat – or they face social exclusion – for large parts of their childhood.

This is simply **unacceptable**. Allowing children to fall behind so early in life stores up huge problems for the future, and costs society dearly in the long run.

There is hardly a greater avoidable tragedy in Irish society than that of child poverty. The scarring effects of living in persistent poverty as a child last for life, and affect everything from emotional development, mental health and physical well-being in adulthood to educational attainment and labour market participation.

It denies children's human rights, is hugely wasteful for society as it inhibits economic potential in adulthood, and reduces the contribution people can make to society.

Dealing with the repercussions later in life is far more expensive and less effective than early interventions, which would lead both to future savings in expenditure on welfare and criminal justice, and to higher tax revenues. **Eliminating child poverty requires a combination of child and adult income supports, and access to quality public services.**

Income supports targeted at the most vulnerable in our society are required, as well as an expansion of services, particularly around education, health, and the care of children, designed to mitigate the notable economic inequality that is increasingly a feature of Irish society.

In Government, we would:

- Set a clear target in the next Programme for Government that **consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated** by 2030.
- Acknowledge that children live in households with adults. Therefore, **child poverty cannot be eliminated without lifting the households in which they live** out of poverty. Working-age income supports are part of the solution.

- Benchmark our social protection system to the cost of a **Minimum Essential Standard of Living** to ensure everyone has enough to live a decent and dignified life.
- Examine the possibility for reform of certain payments to better target child poverty, including the possibility of **an additional (targeted) tier of child benefit**.
- Automatically fund **'sponsorship' for childcare as full-day care** (min 40 hrs p/week) with a minimum capitation rate of €350 per child per week, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year, for children experiencing the worst deprivation.
- Create a new **DEIS Plus categorisation** for the most disadvantaged schools.
- Set the **Qualified Child Increase payment** at a level that properly reflects the costs of raising children and the depths of child poverty in Ireland.
- Use the **Working Family Payment** to support low-income families who are at work.
- Increase supports for **Foster Carers** to a level that better reflects both the cost of raising children and the benefits of having children in foster homes rather than institutional care.
- Introduce a statutory **Child Maintenance Service**.
- **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.
- Increase funding for Tusla and **recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff** to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- **Make the primary and secondary education systems truly free.**
- Extend the **school meals programme** on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food.
- **Poverty-proof all Budgets** and set against the targets of the new Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Promoting Active and Healthy Lifestyles

One in four children in Ireland are overweight or obese – with marked differences depending on family income. Three in four adults over 50 are overweight or obese. Ireland has among the highest levels of overweight and obese adults in the EU. We have a problem, and it's time we faced it.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a ban on all **food advertising aimed at children**.
- Improve **labelling and nutrition information** on food and drinks, and the public's understanding of it.
- Require all schools to have **healthy food policies** and provide guidelines on school lunches.
- **Invest heavily in sport and recreation**, ensuring that there are grant allocations on an annual basis and that qualifying criteria are strongly skewed towards driving participation.
- **Promote safe cycling** as a viable option for children.

As part of the full roll-out of Sláintecare we will provide additional funding for public health nursing and want to see some of this investment going to dedicated child and family public health nurses.

We will aim to **expand the home birth service, and invest in maternity and postnatal care**. For example, in France, the postnatal care for all new mothers includes a full free abdominal check-up six weeks after giving birth, followed by a postnatal rehab programme where women are given exercises and advice on how to correct their posture and strengthen their abdominal and pelvic area. (Most postnatal care in Ireland is limited to the health of the baby, breastfeeding issues, or perhaps Caesarean stitch removal and scar recovery).

The abdominal check certifies that all the organs have returned to their correct positions, that the pelvic floor is recovering properly, and other things. This is the direction in which Ireland needs to move.

We will also adequately fund the implementation of the **National Breastfeeding Action Plan**, with additional lactation consultants.

Protecting Children Online

The evidence of the detrimental impact on our children and young people of unregulated access to the internet and social media is overwhelming. It has resulted, among other things, in an evolving youth mental health crisis and other challenges, and requires leadership and political will to address it.

We have laws and structures to protect children from harm in our society; that principle must be extended and applied to the digital world. Internet service providers **must be responsible for creating an online environment that is safe, and be held accountable where they fail.**

Attempts to regulate access to online content according to age seem likely to fail. Instead, the Social Democrats believe that regulating how algorithms – which direct content towards our children – work makes more sense. We would enact regulation of social media platforms, underpinned by legislation and enforced with significant penalties (rather than codes of conduct).

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact specific and effective legislation to **protect children online, by regulating ‘preferences algorithms’** and ensuring that engagement-based recommendation algorithms are turned off by default.
- **Expand the mandate of Coimisiún na Meán** so they have authority to instruct for content to be taken down from online platforms on the basis that it represents misinformation or disinformation.
- Provide guidelines for best practice **for smartphone use by children**, including no smartphones for children while in primary/secondary school, and age verification requirements for social media.
- Provide **education on digital and media literacy in schools**, including by having misinformation – and how to identify it – included in primary and secondary school curricula via SPHE.
- Provide resources to **support public health awareness campaigns**, wellbeing training, and support services for schools.
- Enact **stricter rules on influencers**, including around what they can promote, and guidance around how they promote it.

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