

# IRELAND

## Key contextual data

*Compiled by*

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## Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

### Please note

Early Learning and Care (ELC) is the widely accepted terminology for ECEC in Ireland. In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of centre-based provision are: (1) **ELC settings** when referring to facilities for 0 to 5 year-olds outside the school sector; and (2) **infant classes** in primary schools for 4 and 5 year-olds<sup>1</sup>. Any additional setting types are described where appropriate.

### Historical milestones in ECEC in Ireland

End of the 1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The first playgroups are established.</li> <li>– In Dublin, the first state-funded ECEC setting opened in Rutland Street in 1969, which later became a model for Early Start centres in the country.</li> </ul>
1973	A strong tradition of mothers remaining at home as primary carers of children in Ireland was reinforced by a ban on married women working in the civil service. This changed in 1973 when the so called ‘marriage bar’ was removed as a result of Ireland entering the European Union.
1991	Child Care Act
1994	The first Early Start centres are set up.
1997	Child Care (Pre School Services) Regulations 1996 and Child Care (Pre School Services) (Amendment) Regulations 1997 were commenced introducing first-ever statutory regulation for ECEC (non-primary).
1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Education Act</li> <li>– White Paper on Early Childhood Education</li> </ul>
1999	National Child Care Strategy
2000	National Children’s Strategy
2000–2006	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
2006	The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) produces the first quality framework <i>Síolta</i> , published by the Ministry of Education.
2006–2008	National Children’s Investment Programme
2009	The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) publishes <i>Aistear</i> , The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.
2010	Universal Free Pre-school Education in Early Childhood Care and Education settings (ECCE) Programme commences.
2013	National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Care and Education
2014	Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland</li> <li>– Better Start, the National Quality Support Service for the Early Years Sector is launched.</li> <li>– Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) launched to support the participation of children with disabilities in ECCE</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> **Editors’ note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for settings for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 years. The relevant formats for Ireland are **0–5** and **4–5** years.



2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Commencement of Department of Education Inspection of the ECCE Programme of universal free preschool</li> <li>– Child Care Act (Early Years Services) regulations commenced, introducing first national registration system for early years services and mandatory minimum qualification requirements for staff.</li> <li>– Free enrolment in ECCE is extended to two years.</li> </ul>
2017	Affordable Childcare Scheme
2018	Childcare Support Act comes into force.
2018/19	<i>First 5, A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families</i> is a 10-year reform strategy to include an overhaul of the ECCE system and structures supporting the delivery of ECEC (non-primary) (e.g. new funding models, measures to combat poverty, and workforce reform).
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– National Childcare Scheme (NCS) is launched to reduce childcare costs for parents.</li> <li>– Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings published</li> </ul>
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Review of <i>Aistear, the early childhood curriculum</i> framework commenced</li> <li>– Amendments to Education Act</li> <li>– <i>Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare</i>, the Report of the Expert Group</li> <li>– Review of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Operating Model in Ireland. Report Submitted to Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Prepared by Indecon International Consultants</li> <li>– <i>Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland</i>, Report of the OECD's Country Policy Review</li> <li>– <i>Nurturing Skills – The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028</i></li> </ul>
2022	Introduction of the Core Funding Model
2023	Publication of First Five Implementation Plan 2023 - 2025

Sources: Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010; Flood and Hardy 2013; Duignan 2018; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019; European Commission 2020b; Citizens Information 2021b, c

## ECEC system type and auspices<sup>2</sup>

The early childhood education and care system in Ireland differs from most European countries in that there is no long tradition of state funded support for ECEC outside the primary school system which is open for enrolment of children from aged 4. However, since the first OECD review of ECEC in Ireland 20 years ago, the approach towards investing in the early years education and care outside the primary school system has changed considerably. Building on this shift in approach, the government is currently pursuing a comprehensive policy agenda through the “First 5” strategy (2019-2028) in terms of improving access, affordability and quality in the sector (OECD 2004; 2021b).

Today, ECEC for under 6 year-olds is primarily a bi-sectoral system funded and regulated by two lead ministries<sup>3</sup>. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is responsible for the governance, quality, funding, regulation, monitoring and evaluation and workforce development of non-school settings for children under 6 years of age, co-operating with the Department of Education (DE) on issues of quality, curriculum development,

<sup>2</sup> The Eurydice country report on ECEC in Ireland provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are indicated within the text and in the references section.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this report we will refer to the ELC services outside the education system as the **early years sector** and to provision for 4 and 5 year-olds within schools as the **primary sector**.

special needs education and workforce development. Although the governance and funding of ECEC provision is centralised, there is a national support system at district level which assists ECEC services with funding applications and improving the quality of provision. More than 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCC) represent DCEDIY at the local level and are a first point of contact for providers and parents.

The Department of Education (DE) is responsible for a range of early education programmes in primary schools for children aged 3 and above with special educational needs, including Early Start (40) and Early Intervention classes for children with a diagnosis of autism (150). It also provides funding for early education provision to some children with disabilities, for education-focused inspections, curriculum development and provision of initial professional education for early years educators and primary school teachers (Frontier Economics 2020, 8). The DE is also responsible for infant classes in primary schools for 4 and 5 year-olds.

## General objectives and legislative framework

Overarching goals of ECEC are to take a holistic approach towards promoting lifelong learning, supporting inclusion and diversity, especially for those with additional needs and improving quality and the infrastructure to support it, including the expansion of places.

The government's ten-year “First 5” strategy 2019-2028 for children in the first five years of life and their families commits to improving accessibility, affordability and quality in the ECEC sector by implementing national standards. In addition to improved and paid parental leave, parents should be able to access ECEC services more easily in order to better reconcile work and child-care (DCEDIY 2021). The strategy builds on the former government initiative Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, a national policy framework for children and young people from 2014-2020 (DCEDIY 2019a). It reinforces commitments to five overarching goals or outcomes: “Active and healthy; Achieving in learning; Safe and protected; Economically secure; Connected, respected and contributing” (Government of Ireland 2019). First 5 adopts the term **Early Learning and Care (ELC)** to define all regulated centre-based and home-based services that provide education and care from birth to compulsory primary school age. It does not include the early years of primary school (Government of Ireland 2019). In December 2023 a phase two Implementation Plan 2023–2025 was published by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It outlined a number of strategic objectives to streamline the infrastructure that supports the governance, delivery, evaluation and monitoring of ELC services (DCEDIY 2023).

Both the Child Care Act, 1991 (amended 2016) and the Education Act, 1998 (amended 2021) provide the relevant legislation for early education and care. The Child Care Act sets out the basic regulatory requirements of ECEC settings, such as health and safety provisions (Government of Ireland 2021a).

The Education Act emphasises the right of parents to a free choice of provision. The general objectives of the education system are to help each person reach their full potential and thus contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of society. Important goals are the promotion of equal opportunities, inclusion, lifelong learning and the support of individual needs.

In 2019, Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings were published, aiming to improve accessibility to early learning settings for all children. The guidelines follow a participatory approach (European Commission 2020b).

## ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

Attending an ELC setting or an infant class in primary school is voluntary (Department of Education 2019).

Since September 2016, all children aged 2 years 8 months before 31 August are eligible to attend a universal two-year state-funded **ECCE programme** (early childhood care and education) until they are 5 years 6 months old. Attendance is free of charge for three hours a day for a total of 76 weeks. There is no such programme for children younger than 2 years 8 months.

Compulsory schooling starts at the age of 6.

## Main types of provision

### *Early years sector*

Centre-based **ELC (early learning and care) settings** (non-school) are variously called: crèches, nurseries, preschools, *naíonraí* (Irish medium preschools), playgroups, playschools, day care services, Montessori groups, drop-in centres. Settings eligible for government subsidies receive these primarily through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

ELC settings offer the following (TUSLA 2022a):

- Sessional pre-school service lasting 3½ hours or less
- Part-time day care service lasting a minimum of 3½ and a maximum of 5 hours a day (half-day)
- Full day care service for more than 5 hours a day
- Short-term drop-in centre services (maximum two hours)
- Temporary pre-school service during a short absence of the parents
- Overnight pre-school service during which children are taken care of for a total of more than 2 hours between the hours of 19:00 and 6:00.

All ECEC settings are required to register with TUSLA - the Child and Family Agency. Since 2014, TUSLA has been the state authority (Early Years Inspectorate) responsible for the supervision and monitoring of early years services for children from birth to 5 (TUSLA 2022b). The Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF), developed by TUSLA and the DCEDIY, provides reference support for ECEC providers (TUSLA 2022a).

Through the ECCE programme (see above), which includes children in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and - if enrolled in a primary school - School Age Childcare (SAC), children may attend a setting for three hours a day, five days a week and 38 weeks a year, free of charge, in the two years prior to compulsory school enrolment. Moreover, the National Childcare Scheme provides a flat-rate support for parents of 50c per hour towards the cost of a registered ELC place for a maximum of 45 hours per week (Government of Ireland 2021b).

In **home-based provision**, a registered childminder cares for up to five children up to 6 years of age at home alongside their own children. The times are agreed upon by the parents and the childminder (Citizens Information 2021a). However, home-based ECEC provision is largely unregulated and only a very small minority of childminders are registered (OECD 2021b, 35). Looking forward, a National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028) has set out phased steps for supporting and improving the quality of this neglected form of ECEC provision at all levels, including strengthening qualifications, funding support and monitoring (Government of Ireland 2021c).

In 2022, there were 4,483 ECEC providers with a contract with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (Pobal 2023). 16% of ELC/SAC institutions were located in disadvantaged areas.

According to an annual survey of centre-based setting providers (N=4,009), in 2022/23 the most common form of enrolment in services for under 6 year-olds was part-time morning (82%), followed by half-day (39%) and full-day (37%) (Pobal 2023).

### *Primary sector*

**Infant classes** in primary schools for 4 and 5 year-olds are funded by the Department of Education. Although compulsory education does not start until the age of 6, some 4 and most 5 year-olds attend a junior or senior infant class (ISCED 02), usually for 5 hours and 40 minutes a day (Department of Education 2023). The age of junior infants has been steadily increasing for the past twenty years, although the trend has accelerated in recent times. This is most likely due to the introduction of the free preschool scheme in 2010, and its expansion to two years in 2016. Overall, the proportion of 4 year-olds (and younger) in junior infants has fallen from 46.3 per cent in 2002 to 16.9 per cent in 2022 (Department of Education 2023c).

In addition, the Department of Education also funds **early intervention programmes in schools**. These are primarily targeted at the inclusion of children with special educational needs and include Early Start and Early Intervention classes for children with a diagnosis of Autism. The Early Start programme was initiated as a pilot project for inner-city children in Dublin in 1994. Children must be at least 3 years and 2 months and no more than 4 years and 7 months old on 1 September of the year in which they are enrolled. In 2021, the Early Start programme was offered in 40 schools. Children attend for two and a half to three hours every weekday for about 183 days a year (same as primary school). Early Intervention classes for children aged 3–5 years with a diagnosis of autism were established by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and were offered in approx. 150 schools in 2021. The school receives an allocation of one teacher for the early intervention class and the teacher is allocated to the class by the principal. Further resources are also made available to support the class, including building, training and transport. Six children are enrolled in each class and each class typically has two Special Needs Assistants (SNA). The classes follow the infant school day, i.e. 4 hours 40 minutes each day. Following early intervention, it is intended that the child will attend a mainstream class unless there is professional guidance that they require a special class.

Enrolment rates for children between 4 years of age and compulsory school entry are among the highest in Europe and among those with the most increases between 2009 and 2018 (European Commission 2020a).

## **Provider structures**

### *Early years sector*

ECEC in Ireland is operated by private providers. Through the introduction of Core Funding in 2022 all Early Learning and Care (ELC) services now have access to government funding (Together for Better Early Learning and Childcare 2023).

The relative share of private for-profit services has increased somewhat over the past few years, whereas the share of private non-profit community services (typically with a volunteer management board which may include parents) has remained stable. Private providers include chains, large structures and small structures (OECD 2021b, 34).

Of the 4,483 ELC/SAC providers, in services three-quarters (75%, 3,341) were private for-profit in 2022/23, and one-quarter (25%, 1,142) were private non-profit community settings. Overall,

108,619 children up to compulsory school age were registered in ECCE-programmes (Pobal 2023).

Table 1 illustrates the predominance of private ECEC provision in Ireland. According to these Eurostat 2021 data, in 2021, only a small percentage of children over 3 years of age in Early Start/Early Intervention settings and no children under 3 years of age attend a publicly funded programme.

Table 1

Ireland: Number of children in early years settings by provider type, 2021

Provider type	Under 3 year-olds	Share in %	3 years to statutory school age	Share in %
Private for-profit and Private non-profit	3,934	100.0	108,621	9.2
Public	0	0	905	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,934</b>		<b>109,526</b>	

Source: Eurostat 2023e

### Primary sector

ECEC (primary) mostly takes place in public primary schools, i.e. in infant classes in mainstream national schools. Table 2 also shows the number of children under and over 4 years of age attending a special school or a private school.

Table 2

Ireland: Number of children under and over 4 years of age in primary school infant classes by school type, 2001 and 2022/23

	Mainstream national		Special national		Private primary	
	2001	2022/23	2001	2022/23	2001	2022/23
Under 4 years of age	25,792	10,697	171	253	910	697
Over 4 years of age (5, 6, 7 years)	152,545	185,040	745	993	1,822	1,542
<b>Total</b>	<b>178,337</b>	<b>195,737</b>	<b>916</b>	<b>1,246</b>	<b>2,732</b>	<b>2,239</b>

Source: CSO 2023

The strong decrease in the number of under 4 year-olds attending both public and private primary schools between 2001 and 2022 is attributed to the increasing number of younger children participating in the 'free preschool' programme from 2010 onwards (Department of Education 2022a).

## Participation rates in regulated ECEC settings

### Early years sector

In 2022/23, 221,513 children were enrolled in at least one government-subsidised programme, an increase of 22% compared to the year before. This is mainly due to the statutory entitlement for the NCS age eligibility increasing from 3 years to 15 years and the increase to the universal minimum subsidy. 108,619 children benefited from ECCE programmes (Pobal 2023).

From August 2022 to August 2023, a total of 144,810 children from 103,048 households received financial assistance under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). Since 2019, this scheme includes a statutory entitlement to financial support to attend ELC/SAC facilities (Pobal 2023). Subsidies are paid to providers, who reduce parental fees for hours beyond the ECCE entitlement (OECD 2021b, 33).

Broken down by age, the highest enrolment rates in non-school early years settings are found among 3 and 4 year-olds. In 2023 this was the case for 90.9% of children aged 3 and for almost 80% of 4 year-olds (see *Table 3*).

*Table 3*

**Ireland: Number and enrolment rates of children in centre-based ECEC settings by age, 2023**

Age	Number of children	Enrolment rates
Under 2 years	15,878	14.0
2 year-olds	24,623	42.0
3 year-olds	54,480	90.9
4 year-olds	47,621	78.1
5 year-olds	6,308	9.9

Source: Pobal 2023

According to Eurostat data, slightly fewer under 3 year-olds were enrolled in ECEC in 2022 than in 2005 (19.1% vs. 20%). The enrolment rates of children from 3 years to school entry age increased since 2005 from 78% to 94.4% (see *Table 4*).

*Table 4*

**Ireland: Enrolment rates in ECEC centre-based settings by age and duration of attendance, 2005–2022**

Year	Weekly hours of attendance	Under 3 year-olds, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	14	64
	Over 30 hours	6	14
	No enrolment in ECEC	80	22
2010	1 to 29 hours	21	73
	Over 30 hours	8	17
	No enrolment in ECEC	71	10
2015	1 to 29 hours	21.7	73.5
	Over 30 hours	9.0	18.8
	No enrolment in ECEC	69.3	7.7
2022	1 to 29 hours	6.7	81.3
	Over 30 hours	12.4	13.1
	No enrolment in ECEC	80.9	5.6

Source: Eurostat 2023b

### Primary sector

By 2022/23, a total of 126,566 4 to 6 year-olds were attending entry classes; of these, almost all 6 year-olds (97.3%) were enrolled in a senior infant class, and most of the 5-year-olds (83.2%) were enrolled in a junior infant class (see *Table 5*).

Table 5

**Ireland: Number of children in infant classes in primary schools by age, 2022/23**

	Under 4 years	5 year-olds	6 year-olds	Total
Junior infants	10,695	51,296	1,446	63,437
Senior infants	1	10,382	52,746	63,129
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,696</b>	<b>61,678</b>	<b>54,192</b>	<b>126,566</b>

Source: CSO 2023

## Financing and costs for parents

In 2019, the average expenditure of OECD countries on ECEC was 0.87% of gross domestic product (OECD 2021b, 25), whereas in Ireland, in 2019, only 0.33% of GDP was spent the early education sector in 2017 (OECD 2023). Looking forward, the government budget for 2022 includes plans for increasing public funding on ECEC (OECD 2021b, 24).

In order to receive subsidies from DCEDIY, settings in the **early years sector** must be registered with TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. The providers receive per capita lump sums from DCEDIY, in return for which they must ensure that the facility is open free of charge to parents for three hours a day, five days a week and 183 days a year. Fees are charged for additional services outside the three hours of educational activities, e.g. excursions, meals (DCEDIY 2021). The Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is responsible for state subsidy of the early years sector. Care for children under 3 years old is usually paid for by the parents. However, since 2017, they have been supported by the Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS) in terms of costs. This strategy aims to increase accessibility to services and reduce poverty. Since January 2023, a universal subsidy of €1.40 per hour (with a maximum of 45 hours per week) is available to all families with children under 15 years attending ELC or school-age childcare services.

In addition, the former "free preschool year" for children between 3 years and 4½ years of age introduced in 2010 was extended to two years (the age of eligibility was lowered to 2 years 8 months) since 2016 until the start of primary school.

In 2022, a Core Funding Model was introduced. €259 million in full year costs includes allocations for improvements in staff pay and conditions, administrative staff/time, a contribution to non-staff overhead costs, and a contribution to support the employment of graduate Lead Educators across ELC and to support graduate Managers in ELC or combined ELC and SAC services.

The majority of Core Funding (€212 million of the €259 million) is distributed based on a service's capacity – the opening hours, opening weeks and the age group of children for whom services are provided as well as number of places available. It gives providers a stable income source based on the nature of the service they deliver. A provider's income now consists of Core Funding, NCS and ECCE subsidies, and parental fees.

Structuring Core Funding primarily based on capacity means that services have an allocation each year that does not fluctuate in line with children's attendance, thus contributing to services' sustainability and stability. The new funding model will include funding for universal and targeted measures to address socioeconomic disadvantage (Together for Better Early Learning and Childcare 2023).

Fees are generally set by the provider. In 2022/23, for full-day attendance the weekly average it was €197.43, for part-day €115.16. The younger the child, the higher the fees (€206.27 for full-day attendance for under 1 year-olds, €189.96 for over 5 year-olds); in Dublin the fees are higher

than elsewhere. Private institutions charge more than community ones €205.88 vs €174.33 for full-day attendance) (Pobal 2023).

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 19% of net household income on childcare costs<sup>4</sup> (OECD.Stat 2023).

Through the National Childcare Scheme (NCS 2019), parents receive a flat rate for children under 3 years of age and an income-related amount for children up to 15 years of age. Since 2022, the lump sum can also be granted for up to 15 year-olds - parents can choose the option that is more favourable for them. The prerequisite is that the provider is registered with TUSLA. Since August 2021, the NCS system has replaced all previous support programmes. This does not include the ECCE programme, which will continue to offer free education units in the two years before primary school (Citizens Information 2021a, 2021b).

Under the leadership of the DCEDIY, a review of the established funding model was undertaken with a remit to assess its effectiveness in terms of quality, sustainability and inclusion. The opinions of providers, parents and other stakeholders were canvassed. The group consisted of representatives from all relevant early education agencies, financial and economic experts, and representatives from ministries. A report issued in December 2021 (DCEDIY 2021).

As part of the school system, infant classes in the **primary sector** are free of charge.

## Staff to child ratios and group size

### Early years sector

In the early years sector, one qualified member of staff cares for a maximum of three children under 1 year, five between 1 and 2 years, six between 2 and 3 years or eight over 3 year olds (see Table 6).

Table 6

Ireland: Maximum number of children per group/professional in ECEC settings by age, 2022/23

Age	Max. number of children per professional	Max. number of children per group
Under 1 year	3	n/a
1 year-olds	5	n/a
2 year-olds	6	n/a
3 year-olds	8	22
4 year-olds	8	22
5 year-olds	8	22

Source: Eurydice 2023, 4

Furthermore, there are requirements regarding the square metres per child in ELC settings: 3,5sqm for children under 1 year, 2.8 for children aged 1 to 2 years, 2.35 for children aged 2 to 3 years and 2.3 for children aged 3 to 6 years (Eurydice 2023, 4).

A childminder in home-based provision who looks after five children or more must, like other providers, be registered with TUSLA (DCEDIY 2021). A maximum of two children may be under 15 months old (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 90).

<sup>4</sup> The calculation is based on the following fictitious model: two parents working full-time (average income); two 2 and 3 year-old children in full-time care; relevant care allowances included.

### Primary sector

In the primary sector, groups in the Early Start programme usually consist of 30 children, 15 of whom are present in the morning (9:00 to 11:30) and 15 in the afternoon (12:00 to 14:30). Each group is led by a Primary School Teacher and a qualified Childcare Worker and, where appropriate, supported by parents working on a voluntary basis (Citizens Information 2021d). When six children aged 3–5 years diagnosed with autism are enrolled in Early Intervention classes, each class typically has two Special Needs Assistants (SNA). The change in average class size has been relatively stable during the last 20 years with its lowest point in 2021 at 22.8 (highest in 2015 at 24.9). The number of classes with 35 or more pupils fell significantly between 2001 and 2022 (from 13,844 to 2,435). The pupil to teacher ratio on the other hand has fallen consistently over the same period, from 18.4 in 2001 to 13.4% in 2022 (Department of Education 2023c, 6, 9).

## Curricular frameworks

### Early years sector

The Department of Education is responsible for the curricular and quality frameworks developed for the early years sector, but these do not apply to primary school infant classes (Department of Education 2021a).

*Aistear*, The Early Childhood Curricular Framework was introduced in 2009 for all **early years services** as a non-mandatory framework for working with children aged 0 to 6 years. It is structured around four overarching themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communication, and Exploring and Thinking. For each of these areas, specific skills, attitudes and values are defined. It was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) over a long period of time in close collaboration with the early years sector. The NCCA is also responsible for the implementation of *Aistear*. Currently, the framework is under review, with stakeholder consultations being held in 2022 (NCCA 2021a).

For settings which have a contract with the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth for the two free years of early learning and care before starting school, the framework is mandatory. Settings for children under 3 years of age may develop their own curricula/programme as long as they adhere to the core principles of *Aistear* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 96ff).

*Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006), is a process-oriented framework and sets out quality criteria based on 12 principles: the value of early childhood; 'children first'; parenting; relationships; equality; diversity; enriching environments; care; the role of adults; teamwork; pedagogy and play. 16 quality standards and relevant indicators are intended to help translate the vision of quality into practice. Settings participating in the ECCE free pre-school scheme must develop a programme of activities based on this quality framework (Department of Education 2021a).

The NCCA has published guidance for the implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta*.

### Primary sector

Curricular guidelines for the **Early Start** programme in the primary sector include structured play activities designed to enhance children's language, cognitive and social development.

**Infant classes** in primary schools follow the Primary School Curriculum (1999), which is structured around seven areas of learning: language (English and Irish); mathematics; social, environmental and science education (history, geography and science); arts education (visual arts, mu-

sic, drama); physical education; social, personal and health education; religious, ethical education (NCCA 2021b). In March 2023 a new primary curriculum framework for primary and special schools was published. It builds on the successes and strengths of previous curricula while recognising and responding to challenges, changing needs, and priorities; provides agency and flexibility in schools; makes connections with what and how children learn in preschool, primary, special, and post-primary schools; identifies and responds to emerging priorities for children's learning; changes how the curriculum is structured and presented and supports a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to learning and teaching. The curriculum is presented in five broad curriculum areas: 1. Language, 2. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education, 3. Wellbeing, 4. Arts Education and 5. Social and Environmental Education. Additionally, schools can design their own programme in accordance with the ethos of the school (Department of Education 2023a).

## Digital education

In the *Aistear* curriculum framework, handling digital media is not a specific requirement but it is recommended that they be integrated into children's daily lives. This was also foreseen in the digital strategy for schools 2015-2020 (including infant classes), which produced a digital learning framework to support schools. Here, in addition to incorporating digital technologies into learning processes, the digital skills of professionals and the digital infrastructure of institutions are addressed. The foundations are to be laid in early childhood through playful, active and question-centred approaches. For the ELC institutions, it was found that there is need for action but currently no agreed procedure; for example, there are still questions regarding the age-appropriate use of digital media (Department of Education 2020).

## Monitoring – evaluation

### *Child-related assessment*

There is no formal evaluation system in the **early years sector** in Ireland. However, the curricular framework *Aistear* contains guidelines for assessing children's developmental progress and planning the next stages of learning. As a rule, children are assessed through observation. How the results are recorded is left to ECEC staff. It is recommended to document learning progress by means of a portfolio according to the areas mentioned in the curriculum (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 103f).

In the **infant classes** in primary schools, observations or screening tests are carried out in order to detect possible developmental delays or difficulties as early as possible. Children are also encouraged to evaluate their own activities (NCCA 2021c).

### *Centre-based internal evaluation*

The *Síolta* Quality Framework contains information on self-evaluation. The implementation of self-evaluation measures is not obligatory, but recommended. As part of this quality assurance process, settings may document relevant steps in a 'quality portfolio' (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126f). In 2015, *Better Start* – a national quality support service for the Early Learning and Care sector – was established by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and hosted by Pobal. *Better Start* promotes quality and inclusion in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings for children from birth to 6 years of age in Ireland and offers three programmes: "Quality Development Service", "The Access and Inclusion Model"



and "Early Years Learning and Development Unit". The Quality Development Service includes the provision of onsite mentoring and coaching to support internal quality review and development processes (Better Start 2023).

For infant classes in primary school a comprehensive system of school self-evaluation (SSE) is mandated by the Ministry of Education. During 2023–2026, schools will have autonomy to choose the focus of their SSE if they have a three-year plan which addresses, for example, context-specific school priorities related to teaching, equity and inclusion. In this period schools are supported by materials, inspections, collaborations with and between schools (Department of Education 2022b).

### *External evaluation*

The monitoring and external evaluation of ECEC in Ireland is divided across three main institutions:

(1) TUSLA, The Child and Family Agency is responsible for assessing regulatory compliance in the early years sector. Inspections take place on the basis of the 2016 amended regulations of the Childcare Act (1991) and are based on the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) published by TUSLA in 2018 which also offers guidance to providers on quality aspects (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 125). In addition to observations, checklists are also used. The reviews take place approximately every three years and the results are made available to the public.

(2) The Inspectorate of the Department of Education is responsible for evaluating quality in institutions participating in the ECCE Scheme and since 2022 for all ELC settings receiving Core Funding. The inspections (Early Years Education Inspections, EYEIs) are legally provided for in the Education Act 1998 (section 13(3)b) and are coordinated with the DCEDIY. They focus on the quality of children's learning processes in different areas, the learning context, learning processes, children's experiences and management and leadership for learning; they are primarily conducted through observation of practice. The inspections are based on a quality framework informed by the *Aistear* and *Síolta* principles. The framework describes 20 key aspects of best practice. After the inspection, the providers receive feedback and a written report with recommendations for quality improvement is sent to the ECEC setting. These reports are published. There are also follow-up inspections to assess the progress of the facility in implementing the recommended actions (Department of Education 2021c).

(3) Pobal, a government-funded, non-profit organisation, manages and monitors early years funding programmes on behalf of government departments, other national agencies and the EU. It works closely with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, where it is responsible for the disbursement of government funds to early years services. It also inspects the institutions to check whether the conditions of each funding programme are being adhered to (Pobal 2022).

Support for quality improvement is offered by a number of actors, including local City and County Childcare Committees, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and the aforementioned *Better Start* (OECD 2021b, 40).

## **Inclusion agenda**

### *Children with special educational needs and disabilities*

#### *– Early years sector*

In June 2016, a new Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced for children attending early years services. The model includes seven levels of support, depending on the needs of the

individual child. *Levels 1 to 3* provide general support that promotes an inclusive culture in institutions. This includes the commitment of the setting to a Charter of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion and the publication of a setting-specific inclusion strategy; the funding by the DCEDIY of a new university degree programme in Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years for professionals who wish to work as inclusion coordinators; and a multi-year training programme for early years staff. *Levels 4 to 7* refer to a range of targeted supports to promote the participation of children with special educational needs. These may include: accessing advice and support from early childhood experts; applying for special equipment or minor alterations; accessing therapy services; applying for additional per capita funding for further staff support in the setting (DCEDIY 2021).

In 2022/23, 14,822 children with special needs were enrolled in 3,197 ELC and SAC facilities. 57% of all facilities participated in the AIM model (Pobal 2023).

In 2018/19, more than three-quarters (77%) of early years settings had at least one child with special needs, and 54% had at least one with a disability (Eurochild 2021).

The Health Service Executive (HSE) provides a free screening test for pre-school children. In addition to an assessment of hearing, vision and physical abilities, it also includes language development (HSE 2021).

#### – *Primary sector*

In the school sector, children with special educational needs attend mainstream settings whenever possible; sometimes in a special class or group or on an integrated basis with supports. There are also special schools for children with complex disabilities.

For the inclusion of children with special educational needs, there is also a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan, updated in 2017, which also applies to the infant classes. This plan includes a standardised system for identifying disadvantages and an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) in a multi-layered approach. The action plan also emphasises the involvement of parents and families (Department of Education 2021b).

#### *Children with a migration background – Children from Traveller and Roma communities*

The wide range of private institutions in Ireland makes it difficult to find robust data on children with a migration background.

In 2022, 13.3% of the population had a non-Irish citizenship; of these, just over half (53%) were from other EU27-countries. In the group of under 5 year-olds 6.4% had a non-Irish background, just under two-thirds (65%) of them came from other EU countries (Eurostat 2023c, own calculations).

For refugee children up to the age of 5, the Community Childcare Subsidy Re-settlement (CCSR) programme provides free part-time and full-day care to support their integration into Irish society (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 61).

17% of settings had at least one Traveller child enrolled in 2018/19, and 7% had at least one Roma child enrolled. 12% of all children enrolled did not speak English or Irish (Eurochild 2021). In 2022/23, national statistics report 907 Roma children and 2,533 Traveller children in 303 and 687 ELC/SAC settings respectively. While 74% of Roma children (670) attended private institutions, the majority of Traveller children (65%, 1,650) were enrolled in community institutions (Pobal 2023).

## Parental leave arrangements<sup>5</sup>

**Maternity leave** lasts 42 weeks, at least two of which must be taken before the birth. For 26 weeks, a weekly amount of €262 is paid, provided that the mother was in compulsory employment for 39 weeks in the 12 months before the birth.

The two weeks of **Paternity leave** must be taken in one go during the first six months after the birth and are paid at €262 per week.

Unpaid **Parental leave** is granted for 26 weeks per parent and child and is not transferable, unless both parents work for the same employer. In this case, 14 weeks can be transferred to the other parent with the employer's consent. Parental leave can be taken until the child's 12th birthday. Both parents may also take parental leave at the same time and in different blocks of at least six consecutive weeks. All persons who have been continuously employed by the same employer for one year are entitled to parental leave.

After taking maternity leave and parental leave, each parent is entitled to a further seven weeks of **Parent's leave**, remunerated at €262 per week, which must be taken in the first two years after the birth, even by both parents at the same time.

In 2019, maternity allowances were paid to 5.3% of employed mothers. Take-up of Paternity leave rose to 48% in 2020. Also, the take-up of paternity benefit has increased significantly in recent years (from 27,295 in 2019 to 26,539 in 2021). After the introduction of *Parent's leave* in 2020, its take-up increased significantly: from 16,683 in 2020 to 51,395 in 2021. It is estimated that nearly 100% of mothers and 48% of fathers made use of it in 2021. Data on the overall take-up of parental leave is not available.

## Current challenges for the ECEC system in Ireland

*Country expert assessment by Maresa Duignan*

Ireland has made major progress in the development of the provision of ECEC services for children aged 0–6 years since 2000. With an almost 200-year history of infant education in primary schools for children aged from 4 years, attendance at 'pre-school' ECEC provision was traditionally low and exacerbated by a low participation rate of mothers of young children in the labour market. In 2023, Ireland's demographic, economic and social policy profile has undergone radical change and the State has responded positively in relation to the provision of ECEC services.

The level of state investment in ECEC (non-primary) provision exceeded €1 billion for the first time in the national budget for 2022 and a suite of national policy commitments were published to articulate a clear, strategic and cross government vision for the future development of the sector (DCEDIY 2022).

Whilst much of this commitment was built on decades of advocacy, research and evaluation of a continuum of previous government initiatives, the global Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2022), certainly highlighted the importance of realising this vision in a timely manner. During this period, the important role played by ECEC provision as a critical support for both economic activity and an inclusive society was widely accepted. In 2024, a renewed focus on development of the ECEC sector is gathering momentum. A set of cross government initiatives have been established to ensure that Ireland is a nurturing, enriching place to be a child. As the vision for *First 5, A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028* states:

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<sup>5</sup> The brief overview in this section is based mainly on the country note for Ireland by Stephan Köppe und Dorota Szelewa in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).

*All babies' and young children's early years will be valued as a critical and distinct period which should be enjoyed. Families will be assisted and enabled to nurture babies and young children and support their development, with additional support for those who need it. Those providing services for babies, young children and their families will be equipped to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing. Community contexts will help babies and young children make the most of their early years and fulfil their potential. (DCEDIY 2018).*

Whilst the range of initiatives are complex and cross-cutting, the core objectives can be summarised under the following headings:

1. **Improving access** – The commencement of Core Funding is a major step forward in state support for access to ECEC. Core Funding improves affordability for parents by instituting a fee freeze in participating early learning and care services; access for parents by expanding the capacity being offered by the sector, particularly for younger children; quality including promoting stability across the workforce through improved pay, conditions and career structure underpinned by Employment Regulation Orders; and operational stability and sustainability for providers.
2. **Promoting inclusion and participation** – A review of the innovative Access and Inclusion model of supports for children with disabilities in ECEC provision has been completed and a report is due to be published in 2024. Enrolment data would suggest that the findings of this review will be positive with the significant majority of all eligible children availing of publicly funded ECEC.
3. **Improving quality** - Investment in the quality of ECEC provision has resulted in a range of initiatives including: the establishment of Better Start, a national quality support service for ECEC; introduction of revised regulations to allow for establishment of a registration system for ECEC services; commencement of Education-focused inspection. An ambitious reform programme is underway in 2024 that aims to restructure governance and funding systems; extend regulation to family day-care and school age childcare; build workforce capacity and security; promote inclusion and participation for all children in Ireland and improve the quality of children's early learning and care experiences.
4. **Promoting positive transitions** – It is important to note that there is a clear understanding evident in national Government policy, that children's lived experiences must be to the fore in the shaping and delivery of public ECEC services. This translates into a series of commitments to promote positive, and where possible seamless transitions across the diverse settings they may experience in early childhood and beyond.

## In conclusion

Ireland's journey toward establishing universal access for all children to high quality ECEC provision has advanced significantly in the two decades since 2000. A clear and coherent national vision with strong commitment to substantial State funding has been established and instils much optimism for future developments in ECEC.

Undoubtedly many challenges for implementation remain. The legacy of diverse provision and practice across ECEC services, including the split systems of governance for school and non-school based provision continues to create barriers to seamless transitions for children and their families. Increases to funding, whilst substantial are still significantly short of the international averages across OECD nations. Global inflationary pressures and increased costs of living, the war in the Ukraine and concomitant refugee crises have acted to exacerbate Ireland's home grown economic and social problems including a national homelessness crisis and staff shortages across the public services.



However, on balance a positive trajectory of improvement in ECEC provision has been achieved in a relatively short two decades of investment in change. The realisation of national commitments over the next ten years will act to consolidate and progress these achievements in the best interests of young children and their families.

## Demographic data

*Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.*

### Total population

In 2022, the total population in Ireland was 5,060,004. This represents a steady increase over the last 20 years (2000: 3,777,565; 2010: 4,549,428; 2020: 4,964,440) (Eurostat 2023a).

### Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total birth rate in the EU27 (as of 2020) was 1.53. The highest total birth rate in the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). At 1.78, Ireland is well above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d)<sup>6</sup>.

### Children under age 6

Table 7

**Ireland: Number of under 6 year-olds in total population, 2022**

Age	Number of children
Under 1 year-olds	58,868
1 year-olds	56,524
2 year-olds	60,385
3 year-olds	61,980
4 year-olds	63,465
5 year-olds	64,274
<b>Total 0 to under 6 year-olds</b>	<b>365,496</b>

Source: Eurostat 2023a

In 2022, 3.5% of the total population were children under the age of 3, and 7.2% were children under the age of 6. As in the last 20 years, these proportions are significantly higher than the respective EU averages.

<sup>6</sup> Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).



Table 8

**Ireland: Relative share of under 6 year-olds in population by age groups compared with EU averages, 2000 to 2022, in %\***

Year	Comparison Ireland/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Ireland	4,3	4,1	8,4
	Ø EU15 <sup>7</sup>	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Ireland	4,4	4,2	8,6
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Ireland	4,3	4,6	8,8
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Ireland	3.5	3.7	7.2
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, \* Own calculations, slight deviations due to rounding

### Single households with children under age 6

71.9% of households with children under 6 in Ireland were couple households in 2022. Single parent households accounted for 9.5% - a good two-thirds of them were single mothers (6.8%), one-third single fathers (2.7%).

Table 9

**Ireland: Households with children under age 6, 2022**

Household type	Total households	Relative share of all households, in %*
Total households	553,200	
Couple households	397,600	71.9
Other types of households	103,300	18.7
Total single households	52,300	9.5
Single households, women	37,500	6.8
Single households, men	14,800	2.7

Source: Eurostat 2023j, \*Own calculations

### Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Ireland, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15–64 years) was 81.8% and for women 71.8% (Eurostat 2023i).

In 2022, 68.7% of women and 88% of men (18–64 years) with children under 6 were employed. The share of employed fathers was thus slightly above the average of the 27 (2020) EU countries, while the share of mothers was more pronounced (averages 87.2% and 63.6% respectively) (Eurostat 2023h, own calculations).

<sup>7</sup> The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

Table 10a

Ireland: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
<b>Ireland</b>	55.5	77.3
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries <sup>8</sup>	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2022	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
<b>Ireland</b>	68.7	88.0
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries <sup>9</sup>	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023h

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in Table 10b

Table 10b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023) with dependent children with children under 2 years with children 3–4 years	75.6 72.4 70.7	92.1 93.1 95.0	<sup>++</sup> 72.3 <sup>++</sup> 72.1 (2023)	<sup>++</sup> 79.2 <sup>++</sup> 79.4 (2023)

\*Eurostat 2023h, 2023i

\*\*[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

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<sup>8</sup> AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

<sup>9</sup> AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

<sup>++</sup>Statista. 2023. *Employment rate in the United Kingdom from June 1971 to January 2023, by gender*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280120/employment-rate-in-the-uk-by-gender/>

<sup>+++</sup>Office for National Statistics. 2023. *Families and the labour market, UK: 2021*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021>

## Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>10</sup>

In 2022, 19.7% of children under 6 in Ireland were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion is lower than the EU27 average (23.3%) for this age group. The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 20.7% (EU: 21.6%). In 2020, 2.8% of children under 6 suffered from severe material deprivation - this proportion is significantly lower than the EU27 average of 6.1%. For the total population, it was 1.4% (EU: 4.3%) (Eurostat 2023f, g).

The strategy "A roadmap for social inclusion 2020-2025" aims to reduce the proportion of people living in poverty to 2% or less. Children with single parents are particularly affected by poverty or social exclusion (Eurochild 2021).

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<sup>10</sup> 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material\\_deprivation](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation))

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