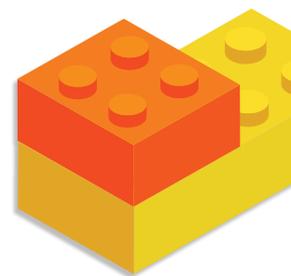


CARE OF THE CHILD

FINE GAEL 
POLICYLAB 

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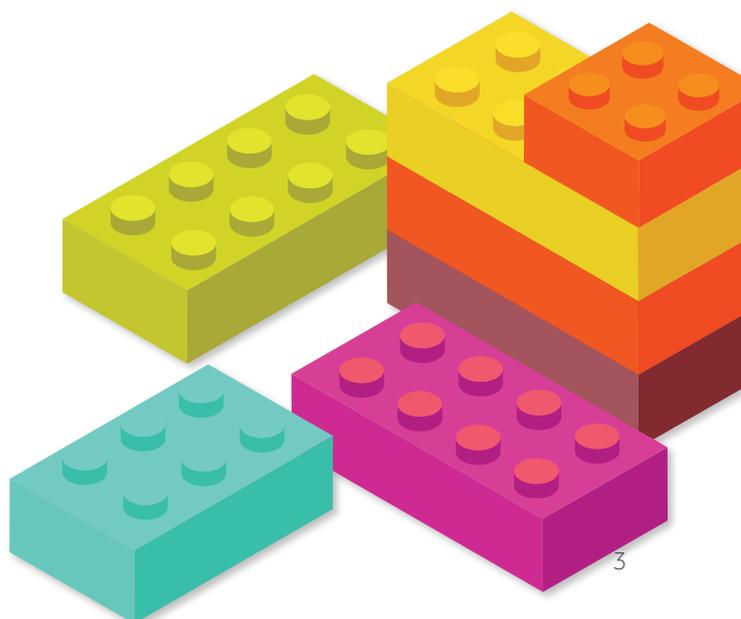
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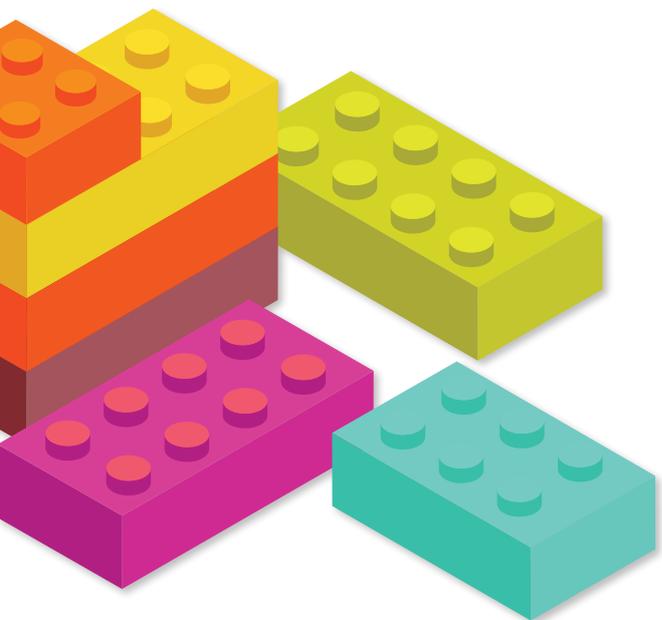
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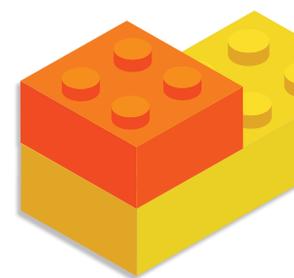
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Foreword

September 2021

The Policy Lab is a work in progress. It is an attempt to make policy that reflects accurately the concerns and preferred solutions of a much wider group of citizens than is the usual practice in Ireland. For its first policy area, the Board of the Policy Lab selected Care of the Child in Ireland as they felt that this was an area of particular societal concern.

Core to the thinking of the Policy Lab is the involvement of as many people as possible in order to gather diverse and representative views. Fine Gael sought expressions of interest from people interested in the Policy Lab concept. There was a strong response to the initial call and an equally strong response to a request to people to participate in the discussions around Care of the Child.

To help frame the discussions, an initial public survey was conducted, and its results published. The large number of responses confirmed the Board's view on the importance of the policy matter. A number of experts in the field were asked to provide short scoping papers and the board used its internal expertise to devise a consultation structure. This structure is called a "policy kitchen" and is at the heart of The Policy Lab process. Volunteer facilitators for the policy kitchen sessions came from the wider interest group.

All kitchen sessions were held online and they attracted very engaged and committed people who wanted their concerns and potential solutions to be heard and considered. As the summaries of the kitchens emerged, it quickly became clear that there was an appetite for real innovation among citizens and a strongly felt desire to bring real change to the policies associated with Care of the Child in Ireland.

From among those who attended the kitchens, the Board sought the additional assistance of those prepared to work on a task force to oversee the final policy paper. This group was particularly effective in reviewing the initial paper and in identifying any areas that emerged in the kitchens. The experts who prepared the scoping papers were also asked to review the emerging document.

In following this process, The Policy Lab modelled its work on a similar procedure used in Switzerland by the Green Liberal Party. The Board is grateful for the assistance it received from them in the initial phases. What has emerged is definitely an Irish pandemic version of the process and my particular thanks goes to the members of the Board for their commitment to this work at a difficult time for all. The FG research office, press corps and the office of Richard Bruton also provided substantial support and without them this work could not have been completed. The initial impetus to do policy in a different way came from Richard Bruton and he has contributed substantially to the achievement of the Board's first major objective.

The Care of The Child Policy paper is the first publication of The Policy Lab. Work has already begun on other policy areas and the Board welcomes wide participation in its future deliberations. Publishing the paper is not, however, the ultimate objective. The next stage is to seek adoption of its proposals and their implementation.

The people who came to the kitchens told us in no uncertain terms that we need to do better and that there are big and small innovations that will bring us along the path to a better society for all our children.

Marion Coy
Chairperson
Fine Gael Policy Lab

Executive Summary

The resounding message from this Policy Lab is that the underdevelopment of Early Childhood policies in Ireland is hampering the progress and well-being of our society. It is stifling opportunity in childhood. It is putting parents under huge stress. It is leaving providers struggling to fill the yawning gaps. It is damaging the capacity to attract and retain well qualified staff who will commit long-term to this vital sector.

The immediate need is for a major re-prioritisation of Early Childhood in our national ambitions. Its importance must be embedded in the goals of the Government and in the Strategy Statements of every Department. It must become a prominent pillar in the Development Planning system and be prioritised in the National Development Plan. It must be a significant part of the New Social Contract, which the government seeks to forge. Well-being in early childhood must be systematically prioritised and assessed. The Policy lab contributors told us that care of our children should be embedded in the strategy of all government departments and form an essential pillar of national social, economic, cultural, and spatial strategy. This must represent a major Policy Shift.

The costs of poor-quality early childhood experiences are well-recognised. This is acutely the case for the child with special needs. We must now plan for a step change in the environment within which parents, providers and staff work in supporting early childhood well-being. The report sets out the requirements and a range of both long and short-term actions. The Policy lab is seeking the adoption and implementation of its recommendations.

For Parents:

The first priority is to start to fill the yawning gaps in service which is making life so difficult. Services must be easier to access, more affordable, and offer a chance to participate in evolving policy.

- ⇒ **A Campus of Services embedded in the Local Community must be the goal.**
- ⇒ **The National Childcare Scheme including the Universal component should be systematically extended.**
- ⇒ **Parental Benefit should be increased and extended beyond the very early part of a child's life.**

For Providers:

Existing providers, be they for profit or not for profit, are struggling to meet the growing expectations of service. Outside of the age 3 to 5, they receive no direct support from the government, even though that is where the greatest gaps lie. The sector must be supported by a proper sectoral development strategy.

- ⇒ **Access to existing state facilities, and a systematic drive to build for emerging needs must inform Developmental Planning at local level and state investment.**
- ⇒ **Support for: innovation, for Demonstration projects, and for the start-up phase of new services must be developed.**
- ⇒ **A structured programme of support for development must help the sector build its services, encourage innovation and flexibility, provide an attractive career structure, and enable better recruitment and retention of staff.**

For Staff:

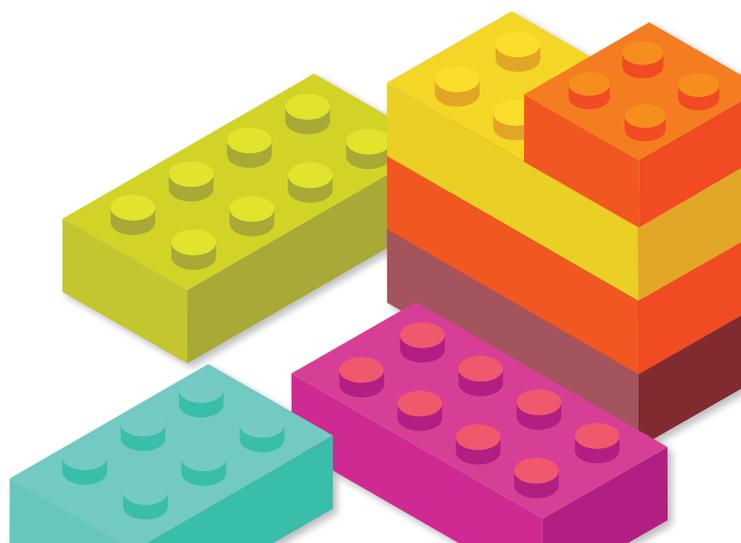
The frustration of staff with their pay and career prospects is causing high staff turnover and the loss of vital skills and experience from the sector.

- ⇒ **A proper Career Structure must emerge from the work of the newly appointed Joint Labour Committee, and the government must play a role in supporting that outcome.**
- ⇒ **Recognition for experiential learning and a proper Professional Development Programme must be put in place.**
- ⇒ **A structured programme of Apprenticeships must allow people to enter the sector at any stage of their career.**

The goal of a campus of service embedded in the local community will require a major step up in the role of the County Childcare Committees. A fresh mandate for these local bodies will include conducting a local assessment of need as part of Local Development Planning, operating local innovation Funds, facilitating the development of new Community based service, and building an outreach to all players in the sector, including those who are now unregulated and detached form supports.

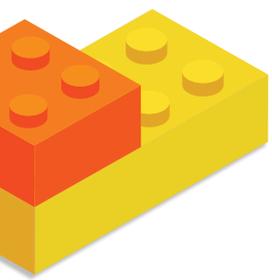
While the model of provision must be one embedded in the community and responding to local needs and capabilities, it falls to the government to be the enabler and guarantor of the successful policy shift which must be delivered. It must adopt a developmental vision for the sector and insist that the various public bodies, who may be comfortable in their own silos, open up their doors to help build the early childhood services. Central to delivering on the objectives for early childhood care will be the establishment of the Childhood Services Development Agency (CSDA). The adoption and implementation of a development strategy for the sector will be a responsibility which the state has not adopted before. However, building new capacities in the sector and driving the emergence of new services and innovative delivery will be vital to the vision. It is also important that the various regulatory programmes are streamlined.

The Childhood Services Development Agency must achieve a shift in priority throughout the public and private sector to deliver what the Policy Lab has described as "System Innovations". Systematic strategies will need to be developed to create the Campus Model, to drive the opening up of public assets to support the gaps to meet early childhood needs, to ensure the supporting pillars for a new career structure is built, and to grow the capacities at county level to deliver new responsibilities.



System Innovations/Steps to get there

	System Innovations	Steps to Get There
<p>Your Child – Their Life</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A major policy shift to make a quality Early Childhood a central goal of government • Make the Campus Concept a core goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop measures of Wellbeing in Early Childhood • Enhance Early Intervention for children with Special Needs • Champion Play as a key element in early childhood • Support Adults who play such a vital role. • Develop a One Stop Shop • Develop the Disadvantage Model to support disadvantaged children
<p>Your Family – Your Needs</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge the supply gaps to support parent's choices • Integrate support in early childhood through co-location • Develop Community Creches at local level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand financial support to parents equitably through the NCS (including universal payment) • Encourage schools to facilitate before and after school care for children and out of term activities • Deliver More flexible Parental Leave • Involve parents in policy development and execution
<p>Your Service – Your Supports</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an active Developmental strategy for sector • Establish an Innovation Fund • Develop an Apprenticeship Model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support opportunities to allow people to enter the sector later in their career • Streamline policies to ease admin burdens on providers • Extend ECCE Premium for those with higher qualifications



Your Career Pathway – Your Future



- Create a new career structure
- Use JLC to shape a robust structure for the sector
- New apprenticeship model
- Create new Professional Development structure with recognition of prior experience

Your Community – Your Networks



- Develop the capacity of County Childcare Committees to respond to local needs.
- Use public assets to facilitate needed early childhood services
- A new mandate for County Childcare Committees should include:
 - 5 Year assessment of need nationally
 - Local element of innovation to fund & promote local exemplars nationwide
 - Promote co-location of pre-school and primary school facilities where possible
 - Seek Childcare in all Community Development Programmes
- Registration and support of unregulated providers
- Extend AIM services beyond the ECCE years

Your Government – Your Guarantor



- Make Early Childhood a Pillar in NDP
- Breakdown the silos within government to meet early childhood needs
- Build childhood needs into capital budgets and planning
- Establish a Childhood Services Development Agency with an ambitious mandate
- New Model for Citizen Engagement
- Integrate Inspection
- Extend Regional Therapeutic Pilot
- Create Demonstration Projects to drive exemplars of best practice
- Create an Even Start for children at a disadvantage
- Education Capital budget to embrace childcare and the development of childcare facilities



Introduction

Fine Gael has created the Policy Lab to allow a much wider range of people to shape its policies. The Policy Lab wants to ensure that people who know and understand the problems first-hand and who have workable and innovative solutions are heard. Listening and understanding these issues is vital if we are to achieve excellence in the Care of our Children. This is an approach that will also inform many other policy choices which will have a profound impact on our country's future. It is a new, innovative, and inclusive model of creating policy from the ground up.

The Board of our Policy Lab has chosen **Care of the Child** because it believes that this has been an undervalued area of public policy where there is great scope for innovation and real progress. The Policy Lab has engaged the communities who use childcare and with those who deliver the service, first through our Care of the Child survey in which over 2,500 participated, and then through eight "Policy Kitchens" where over 150 participants engaged in a detailed assessment of the issues, their experiences and their suggestions for change.

In the past ten years, there have been many positive developments for young children. We have seen the introduction of improved leave for parents with some of it supported financially, free GP care for those under 6, a second year of free pre-school and the introduction of subsidised childcare. More recently the launch of First Five, the first long term strategy for the sector has seen the quadrupling of spending in the sector in the space of three years. During the pandemic the pivotal importance of the sector was recognised, and it was given access to the Wage Subsidy scheme on special terms. However, there is no denying that there are strains within the early childhood sector. For many parents, the cost of childcare is like a second mortgage, and gaps in provision are highly disruptive to their lives. The career structure for staff is underdeveloped and insecure. Providers struggle to meet the rising demands to meet gaps in service and growing expectations on all sides.

Early Childhood has a fundamental impact on the type of person we become. A happy and healthy start in life that provides a child with a positive nurturing influence is central to the person they become. Our children deserve the best start and opportunities in life, to reach their full potential.

This short paper develops policy innovations across six key areas which were identified throughout the Policy Lab process. They are:

1. Your Child, Their Life
2. Your Family - Your Needs
3. Your Career - Your Supports (Recognising our Childcare Professionals)
4. Your Service - Its Future
5. Your Community, Your Network
6. Your Government - Your Guarantor

In Ireland the state was very late in recognising the importance of investment in early childhood education and care. Even now, investment is very low by international standards at 0.3% GNI*, compared to an OECD average of 0.7%, and over 1.5% in the highest spending countries.

There is ample evidence that the return on investment in early childhood care is substantial and yields a greater dividend than at any other point in life. Furthermore, the costs in terms of lost human opportunities and potential if we provide a poor-quality service are also well known.¹

There is a need for a profound policy shift to be delivered in a consistent and sustained way in the coming years. Our Policy Lab has signposted both major "System Innovations" which are needed in each of these areas, and important opportunities where an early start can be made.

1. https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_1_Public_spending_on_childcare_and_early_education.pdf

1. Your Child - Their Life

1.1 Introduction/Overview

All children in Ireland should have the opportunity to participate in a universal early childhood education and care system developed around their needs. Ireland is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and we must ensure that we breathe real life into its many provisions. In particular, the state has a special responsibility to watch out for the health and well-being of every child and ensure equal chance to fulfil their potential, regardless of background or disability. However, the period of early childhood is an area where the Irish state has been slow to engage, despite its evident importance to our aspirations for our citizens and country.

The welfare of all will be enhanced if we support our workforce in the demands made on them as they combine their parental and working lives. It goes without saying that the nurturing environment in the home and the support of parents (and guardians) are the most vital ingredients in the care of our children, but this needs a supporting public policy framework. It also needs practical assistance in the demands created by contemporary economic and social structures.

It is also well established that access for all children to good quality early childhood education and care will improve the child's social development, health outcomes and educational progress. It will also increase social cohesion and ameliorate the long-term impacts on any deficits in a child's environment.²

A strong system for supporting development in early childhood is the most effective policy tool that can be designed to improve outcomes for children. It should be a key source of social cohesion in the community, capable of responding to local needs and capabilities. The state must be an initiator, enabler, and guarantor of a multiplicity of local solutions and democratic experimentation to achieve effective policy implementation.

The Irish care of the child policy framework has grown in a very piecemeal fashion and there is an obvious lack of consistency and oversight. However **First Five**, published by the last Fine Gael Partnership has for the first time created a coherent ten year vision which encapsulates much of what we need to achieve, but the pathway to get there needs to be more clearly carved out. Our world has change since early 2020 Many policy kitchen contributors told us in no uncertain terms that they did not want to return to stresses of pre-Covid life when it came to care of their children. They argued forcefully that we can and must do better to support children, families, and communities. A new focus on care of the child is a good place to start.

1.2 Key Issues

Contributors to our Survey and to the Policy Kitchens recognised some real strengths which have evolved in recent years, as standards have been developed and certain supports provided. However, parents and particularly mothers feel the burdens and stresses are weighing heavily down upon them and this is bad for the child, for the family and for society. Parents often feel they are being penalised for having children, and women feel that they are forced to make disproportionate sacrifices. Repeatedly, the Policy Lab heard of the stress experienced by women in juggling the demands of childcare and their careers. Fathers spoke of the pressures associated with their career aspirations and their desires to be more involved in care of their children.

The Policy lab heard many times that the Covid pandemic had given people an opportunity to assess their priorities and that many parents did not want any reversion to the pre-pandemic patterns as we carved out a new way of working.

2. https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/pdf/5223_4966_DCYA_EarlyYears_INTERACTIVE_Booklet_280x215_v1.pdf#view=fit

The key issues which emerged include: -

- The burdens falling on parents are overwhelming and they sometimes feel that their children are missing out on key developmental experiences. Parents find it very difficult to find out what child-care services are available, how they operate and how they are to be accessed. They spoke often of the incoherent and fragmented information system available to them. This was particularly acute for first-time parents, and for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- All such problems become much more acute for a child with special needs.
- The system of early childcare supports leaves many gaps and, what supports there are, may be scarce and inconsistently available.
- Many rich opportunities within the community could be harnessed for all children in areas such as outdoor education, cultural and social activities, and intergenerational socialization.
- Working parents find it too difficult to properly participate in important events and challenges in their children's lives, particularly in those early years when the child most needs it.

For many people who led and contributed to the Policy Lab, securing access to early childhood education and childcare is a live issue. However, for others, they understand this issue through the lens of being a grandparent, aunt, brother, colleague, or friend. There was a deeply connected shared understanding of the vital importance of early childhood education and care on both the individual and broader society.



Voices from the Kitchens

'If we take a holistic approach to this issue - care of the child meets family wellbeing. Addressing these issues should enrich the lives of children and families, enrich communities and build a better, more connected society for all.'

'It used to be said that it takes a village to rear a child, but that rich access to the experience of extended family and local community is getting lost and new ways of replicating it need to be found'

Based on the results of our Survey, the development of a child's well-being, self-esteem, socialisation and capacities is the top priority for parents and practitioners alike. It is ahead of any other consideration in selecting a service. However, three quarters of those surveyed report that choice is poor. Indeed 45% express dissatisfaction with availability. While the standard of service is almost exclusively the top concern, three quarters of respondents are satisfied with the quality of their service. There is little desire to choose early childhood care in their own home (10%) and even less for care in the workplace (5%). A Community Service gets the highest preference (44%) but private services (36%) are also widely valued.

1.3 System Innovations

A profound **Policy Shift** is needed across all dimensions of public service and within our communities to develop the early childhood education and childcare opportunities which are essential for families, communities, and the nation. To be successful this must begin with a cultural shift that recognises, prioritises, and commits to a new **Care of the Child** policy and strategy that is properly resourced. This will require recognition in the Strategy Statements and Policy Proposals across almost all government Departments and their agencies. This should be one of a small number of top priorities by cabinet as it charts future national development, and post-Covid priorities. Implementation of these policies will require a "whole of government" focus in which silos are eliminated and transversal policy implementation is fostered. This approach should be integral to the **New Social Contract** which the Programme for Government commits to develop. Prioritising, championing, and investing in early childhood education and care not only benefits individual children and families, but it also has wider social and economic benefits. It supports female participation in employment, helps to combat poverty, educational disadvantage, promotes positive engagement with the state and contributes to improved health and wellbeing of the population. Early childhood education and care should be integrated into this new social contract and our vision for a just society – the building blocks for our future society.

Develop Measures of Early Childhood Well-being The focus on wider indicators of well-being in measuring the country's progress is very welcome but is seriously hampered by a lack of consistent indicators of outcomes and progress in early childhood. In recognition of the major step up in the national priority afforded to Childhood, a range of key measures of well-being must be urgently developed.

The Campus Concept should be the goal of public policy, where communities can access in an integrated manner a range of services in early childhood. This is not exclusively a physical concept, but a network within which even services offsite can be easily reached in a setting most conducive for the child. The Campus approach allows the flexibility of a network in filling gaps, trying new approaches, delivering support or training, developing shared services, and an outreach to the informal childcare settings.

The Campus Concept should inform the assessment of local needs which we envisage as part of the County Development Plan process. It should inform the physical planning decisions of the Department of Education and of Planning Authorities. It should spur the flexible use of assets, particularly those in public ownership for enhancing early childhood. It should also shape early intervention services which can be much better accessed in a care setting rather than referral to a clinical setting.

1.4 Steps to Get There

Champion play as a key learning tool for children and ensure policies and investments follow. For example, outdoor play experiences should be an important part of childhood and the physical resources to enable all to share in this activity should be part of all planning activity. This requires a focus not just on the individual child, but their shared experience in accessing play spaces. This has important implications for the planning of all physical infrastructure.

Educate the adults This is about integration into cultural life in Ireland. It has many dimensions - information about parenting and grand parenting, pathways to explore challenges which children are experiencing, access to support groups - were a strong recurring theme. A **One Stop Shop** for parents should be created, with different parts of the public services at county and national level ensuring that it has the necessary back-up. My Child.ie and the advisory services of the County Childcare Committees form a useful base from which this could be built. It is vital that the voices of users are influential in all planning decisions Other dimensions are understanding the importance of early childhood education, and supporting the skills needed in that workforce.

Early Intervention The fear that a child may have special needs which are not picked up in time is a major source of anxiety, and much frustration is expressed with the uncertainties of access to early intervention services. However, reliance on assessments which put a tag on children at an early age is also a source of worry, and a move to having access to professional guidance on special needs at the setting where the child is, was felt superior to referral to a clinical setting, wherever possible. The initiative of the HSE to provide access to capability in enshrining support for Health and Well-being in early years settings needs to be strengthened.

Parental Leave It is vital that the support of a parent to be present when needed is facilitated. This is dealt with in Section 2.

Disadvantage There is clear evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at acute risk of falling behind and often by as young as 3 years a wide gap has emerged. Models like "Preparing for Life" need to be established in pockets of acute disadvantage and there is much to be learned from its approach for all support services.

1.5 Vision statement: The Future for Our Children

The needs of children, particularly in early childhood, must become one of the central objectives of public policy, building on the diverse settings and needs of different families and communities. The vital role played by families should be recognised and facilitated. Access to age-appropriate, flexible, and affordable services must be the guiding principle in future developments. It should be recognised that the care needs of an after-school child are very different from those in early childhood.

2. Your Family - Your Needs

2.1 Introduction

Parents told the policy lab survey and the kitchens that their joy in having children was dissipated by the burdens imposed by an inadequate childcare system. Women felt that they carried a disproportionate weight of responsibility for childcare and that their career choices were affected negatively by the difficulties associated with finding the kind of childcare they wanted. All parents and guardians should have a choice to work or otherwise participate in civic life. This must be facilitated by access to appropriate childcare which is community-based accessible, flexible, good quality and affordable.

The Early childhood sector consists of over 4,500 providers, of which 74% are private and the balance are community not-for-profit organisations.³ Nearly half offer less than 20 hours service per week, while only about 30% offer 40 hours or more. A full-time service has an average fee of just under €200 per week. Only 30% offer a service outside of school term. In total just under 200,000 children are enrolled in some registered service, and over half of these are in the universal option state funded ECCE scheme which runs for two years prior to entry to primary school. Participation in this 15 hour per week scheme over 38 weeks is now over 80%. Among children aged under 2 years and 8 months, participation in registered childcare services is well under 50%.⁴ While a core educational element is supported by the state in a systematic manner, it is vital to understand that the sector seeks to meet a much broader need for care and stimulation beyond the core element, and this is a part of the sector which has received little attention from the state.

About 90,000 of those enrolled in services get income-related support for expenses not covered by ECCE, which go directly to the provider. The latter are being rationalised into a single National Childcare Scheme which now extends cover to all after school (or ECCE) care right up to 45 hours and including all children up to age 15. It covers about 80% of the cost for families with after tax income under €26,000 (one child), but it falls quite sharply to cover just 15% of the cost at household income of under €60,000 (one child). Above that income, an hourly subsidy of €0.50 up to a max of €22.50 per week support is available, and even then, only up to 36 months.⁵ To date the NCS and Universal scheme have not been very expensive to operate, as the hours sought by most claimants are low. However, it is clearly a scheme that can be developed. Of the money expended on the scheme, 45% has been on children aged 1-2, 35% of children aged between 3 and school age, and 20% on after school for school aged children, so it does have a distinctly different profile.⁶ Another feature is that over 40% of the budget goes to parents claiming for 40 hours or more, so it shows the capacity to meet the requirements of those needing full-time cover.

3. <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/Annual-Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-201920.pdf>

4. <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/Annual-Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-201920.pdf>

5. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-09-09/763/#pq_763

6. https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-09-09/763/#pq_763

Leave	Who gets it?	How long?	Is it paid?
Maternity leave	Female employees	26 weeks and up to 16 unpaid weeks	Yes, Maternity Benefit is paid for 26 weeks
Adoptive leave	One parent of the adoptive couple, or a parent adopting alone	24 weeks and up to 16 unpaid weeks	Yes, Adoptive Benefit is paid for 24 weeks
Paternity leave	New parents of children under 6 months of age (usually the father or the partner of the mother, or in the case of adoption, the parent who is not taking adoptive leave)	2 weeks	Yes, Paternity Benefit is paid for 2 weeks
Parental leave	Parents and guardians of children under 12	26 weeks	No, it's unpaid
Parent's leave	Parents of children under 2 years of age Parents of adopted children in the first 2 years of the placement of the child	5 weeks	Yes, Parent's Benefit is paid for 5 weeks

7

2.2 Key Issues

Our Survey and the Policy Kitchens exposed many key issues:-

- Parents are stressed and unhappy because the existing services do not meet their requirements:
- There is limited supply and limited choice of provision in many areas resulting in great difficulty finding any service, particularly for those under 2:
- Most providers do not offer the range or flexibility of service which parents would like, and early drop-off / late pick-up, the 14 weeks when most services are closed, the after school/ECCE availability were regularly cited as problems:
- Rigidity of the availability of leave for parents from work adds to their difficulties:
- No means of checking the quality of what services is available locally:
- Lack of recognition of parent's need to make informed choices in selecting a service and the desire for involvement:
- The high reliance on providers in the child's or the provider's home, who are neither regulated nor supported.

7. Leave for parents (citizensinformation.ie)



Voices from the Kitchens

"Overhaul of rules of ECCE and other schemes to make them more flexible for parents".

"Legislation to provide flexibility for parents of young children around working hours".

"Summer is a HUGE challenge and it has nearly forced me to give up work from time to time, apart from camps, you can end up paying a fortune in childcare fees - another way in to this is to provide more parental leave - even if not paid it could cost less than the fees paid out for camps and care".

"How do we culturally enable men as well as women to take extended leave without adversely affecting their careers? This needs a big shift in society."

"We need a Level playing field in how both partners / genders can avail of extended leave."

"We need extended parental leave as parental choice for under 2 years. It is such a complex area of policy, but the research is clear (babies needs are best met by parents or a single caregiver unless they are in a very small section of disadvantaged in society).

"A tax break for parents, but any system must also be for parents who are not working".

"The tax treatment and relief is a big issue. Tax breaks favour those who can afford childcare. Childcare is another mortgage, in some parts of 30 to 35% of take-home pay goes to childcare on a monthly basis".

"There was a huge amount of capital grants in the early noughties".

"As a society we are creating a scenario whereby more families are choosing not to have children. Is this trend sustainable?"

"Overhaul of rules of ECCE and other schemes to make them more flexible for parents""Legislation to provide flexibility for parents of young children around working hours".

While most parents are satisfied with the quality of service, parents have low satisfaction with other aspects of the service: affordability (only 18% satisfied); availability (32%); choice (46%). The stand-out ask from parents is for more financial support (41% top ask), more than three times more often chosen than extended parental leave (12%). Parents also recognise the need for a career path for staff, and for expanded supply. On the question of the flexibility of their service, 45% of parents express satisfaction and 27% dissatisfaction.

2.3 System Innovation

Part of the **Policy Shift** which must be made in recognition of the importance of Childhood Services within national policy is to underpin a balance between **Work/ Life/ Care of Children** for parents. This has implications for the state, for employers and communities.

- **Bridging the Supply Gaps in the options available to parents must be central to policy development.**
- **A mix of policies must be evolved to support parents in the choices which they seek to make and to reduce the cost associated with those choices.**
- **Co-location and co-delivery of services should become an objective, breaking down traditional silos.**
- **New locally based and community supported provision should be developed with the help of Local Authorities and County Childcare Committees. [See Section 5 below]**

The demand for schools to play a role in filling gaps for parents and to promote the collocation of services was a very strong theme coming from the policy kitchens. This is something which the existing system has not been designed to facilitate and it represents a major system change which needs to be addressed. Primary Education is a constitutional right which means that the Department of Education takes responsibility to build schools and fund them. The model chosen at primary school level has been almost exclusively through private patrons to whom the school premises are handed over, and policy direction is only given on education matters. This curtails the capacity of the state to require spare capacity to be deployed for early childhood purposes.

The emergence of support for early childhood education and care evolved piecemeal and the state has only subsidised set-up costs for some community providers. It must be stressed that compulsory attendance at Early Childhood Education is not advocated. In addition, it is important to recognise a very different approach is needed for Early Childhood Education and care, and indeed for after-school care, than applies to managing the school day. However, there are many examples in other countries where some sharing of responsibility is very successful. **It is important that policies are now designed to encourage the emergence of cooperation and shared delivery, especially in the present environment when a sharp decline of primary school enrolments is projected. Initially this can be done through demonstration projects and supports for innovative leadership at local level, but the aim should be to mainstream an approach where cooperation and some co-location is the norm, not the exception.**

2.4 Steps to Get There

The government has already committed to double investment in early childhood over the coming decade. The evaluation by the Policy Lab Task Force suggests that even that will not be enough to achieve our goals, and certainly difficult choices will have to be faced.

- Bridging supply gaps was a powerful theme. Parents need out of term time services, and full day services to which they don't have to pay for 5 days if they only want to avail of three. While growing support under the NCS will undoubtedly help support services to emerge and to be viable, the NCS still remains primarily a support to parents and will only indirectly support new supply. It is believed that it will require a **top up viability payment** to providers who are taking new initiatives to fill gaps, at least for a temporary period. This can best be done by designing a suitable competitive bidding scheme at County level within the context of clearly established needs.
- Raising the income thresholds and increasing the rate of support on NCS and extending the level of the universal support payment beyond 36 months was the clear priority identified to ease cost pressures on parents. It would benefit all age cohorts of children and, for those eligible, would meet the demand for longer hours of care and care out of term time. It was also regarded as the most equitable and more effective tax relief.
- The ECCE scheme is well regarded, but it has never been evaluated since it was first introduced, and this should be done.
- There was broad support for the extension of benefit payments to parents and for parental leave which is unpaid. However, the clear priority was to extend Parental Benefit and extend the age of children which could trigger its use. While unpaid parental leave has that flexibility up to age 12, it is not a feature of the Benefit payment.
- Employers should be encouraged to provide a top up so that Paternity Benefit would have higher take-up

Other steps for which there is strong support included

- Encouraging schools to be more flexible in providing breakfast clubs and childcare for children before and after school 7.30am-6pm (Employing Childcare Professionals within schools) Falling enrolments create a greater opportunity to do this, and an enabling policy framework should be quickly put in place by the Department of Education.
- Involve parents more in contributing to inspections or Advisory Panels at local level.
- Set up a one-stop-shop information forum [See Section 1]

2.5 Vision Statement:

Families should be able to plan for a future in which they have seamless access to community based, flexible, affordable childcare services that meet their needs.

3. Your Service - Your Supports

3.1 Introduction

We need a set of services for children that can respond to the gaps in existing services and cater for diverse and growing needs in a flexible way. The central role of the childcare sector needs to be recognised. The sector needs to be able to respond to the clear demand from parents to extend beyond the core developmental model supported by ECCE and Siolta. The sector will need a greater diversity of skills in a workforce that is appropriately developed and recognised. Providers should operate within a policy framework which promotes innovation and development, without excessive bureaucracy. A sustainable financial model is required. Access to specialist services in response to identified needs and delivered in the appropriate setting is an important dimension of childcare services.

3.2 Key Issues

Our Survey and Policy kitchens identified much that is positive in how the sector has started to emerge. The protocols Aistear and Siolta, together with the ambitions of the ten-year strategy First Five are bringing better structure to the state's involvement. However, our contributors also identify a range of key issues which need to be addressed: -

- Clear strains on viability hampering the ability to grow.
- Lack of a developmental policy and practical support from government.
- Cumbersome and often unnecessarily complex and costly administrative procedures that diminish the time available for actual care.
- A substantial difference between small and large providers which has not been recognised as new standards and procedures have been rolled out.
- Challenges in recruitment, entry paths and staff turnover.
- Little opportunity for leadership development.
- Rigidity in financial supports not attuned to development needs of the sector.



Voices from the Kitchens

"Staff retention seems to be the main issue for a lot of childcare providers. I have noticed that this is particularly an issue with younger staff where the turnover is very high, however I noticed that the older members of staff are far more likely to stay. Perhaps a method to encourage older (35 years+) people to enter childcare would be beneficial for providers and our children".

"Quality staff are essential to quality and it costs. We pay our team well relatively speaking and our turnover is low, and experience is high. However, even with our focus being on investing in staff, we still struggle to attract and retain the best people (they are choosing careers that offer better pay and more flexibility)".

"Regulated providers need to be better supported to meet the burden of regulation – significant

"Heavy burden of high cost on one hand and low pay on the other"

Our Survey showed that for providers the overwhelming issues surround the wages, recruitment, and retention of staff. Providers express strong satisfaction with the guidance (Siolta and Aistear 78%) and with the ECCE programme (73%) and

even with the Regulatory Mechanisms (61%). Their overwhelming ask of the state is for more funding (81%), with the next most important ask being to streamline regulation (14%)

Parents emphasise the need for accessibility, affordability and flexibility of services.

3.3 System Innovation

The **Developmental Needs of the Sector** must be recognised and catered for through the creation of a Childhood Services Development Agency that will provide a variety of supports and services to the sector.

There are 4,000 exporting companies that have access to agencies with support for training, for management, for production methodologies and innovation. However, the over 4,000 providers of services for children in early childhood, arguably the most important investment a country makes, have no such access to supports. This gap must be remedied, and providers must be supported to have the time to plan for improvements, to build leadership capacity, to be given access to technical support and be afforded sectoral representation on a par with the sector's importance. The capabilities which must be developed are not just management capabilities but also in childhood development leadership. [See Appendix for a fuller description of the envisaged role of the new Agency]

The Agency must be particularly responsive to the voice of providers, parents, and workers.

An **Innovation Fund is proposed** to support the development of new types of childcare centres - community based, cooperatives, employer-led, co-location, some to be managed through the Local Childcare Committees.

The development of services that cater for the broader social, cultural, emotional, and cognitive needs of children should involve many types of services being made available in ways that parents wish. For example, more focus on outdoor learning was identified in the kitchens. There are many examples of Summer Programmes which introduce young children to sporting and artistic activities, which could be supported.

Development of an **Apprenticeship Route** into different parts of the sector through which providers could get access to structured pathways for recruitment, and staff could have structured pay scales. A recruitment portal could be developed through the Apprenticeship Council.

While pre-entry educational programmes to the sector are well regarded, it is important to develop new pathways into the sector, which could reach groups who may not be inclined to go back to full-time education. An Apprenticeship Programme will, of course, require the provider to deliver standards of training and mentoring, and those standards will be a requirement for participation. It is also recognised that an emerging sector like this may need some extra support to deliver mentoring, and the role of apprentices would need to be recognised as contributing in some way to the requirements for staffing ratios.

Greater **parental involvement** and governance at local, community level must be developed.

3.4 Steps to Get There

The state's **Funding and Regulatory Models** should be streamlined so that they are more consistent and less cumbersome for the sector, particularly for smaller providers:

- Eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy and examine alternative administrative support, building on the work being done by Pobal in the Hive initiative, and perhaps through a shared service model at county level for smaller providers. A particular source of frustration is the high level of record keeping associated with the universal childcare payment which is only paid at a rate of 50 cent per hour, which does seem very onerous.
- A campaign to attract new employees targeted at career changers.

- Development of the existing **Qualifications Premium** in the ECCE payment which provides 16% higher payment for a room led by a suitably qualified person (worth about €200 per week in a room of 20 children. This would be a way in which the state would contribute to recognition of qualifications and a career path which will hopefully emerge from the work of the recently established Joint Labour Committee [See Section 4 below]. This differential payment approach could also be built into some elements of the NCS. In time this might evolve into a Service level agreement model with providers.
- The establishment of a fairer **Programme Support Payment** which more accurately reflects the administrative burden of managing the NCS

3.5 Vision Statement

Ireland should continue to have a diverse range of providers, private and community, each supported and equipped to deliver a high-quality service and to achieve nationally developed standards..

4. Your Career Pathway - Your Future

4.1 Introduction

To deliver the care of the child model for our country, we need to develop a diverse range of services, in which workers with different skills must be able to access a viable career path and feel valued and rewarded for the quality of service they provide.

Currently there are an estimated 31,000 people working in the sector. The standard of qualification continues to grow with 27% having NFQ level 7 or higher Average hourly rates are €12.45, well below average wage levels. Staff turnover remains high at 18%.⁸

4.2 Key Issues

Our Survey and Policy Kitchens revealed a high level of discontent among staff in the sector, which was broadly shared by other participants. They included:

- Lack of an appropriate career structure and Inadequate pay.
- Insecure employment.
- High rates of turnover and exit from the sector, particularly among those with higher qualifications.
- Unnecessary bureaucratic burden.
- Little opportunity for leadership development.
- Lack of "voice".

There is clear evidence that the quality and commitment of staff has a huge bearing on the quality of early childhood education and care. However, staff morale is not high at present. Childcare workers told us of "lack of recognition", "lack of security", "lack of career progression" "the absence of a professional pathway" "the need to "professionalise" the service, and very poor pay and often insecure conditions of employment. They found the level of bureaucracy onerous and it eats into the time and quality of time they want to spend with children. They are frustrated and dissatisfied and yet they love the actual work. They stay because the interaction with children is what they want but many told us they will not stay in this sector.



Voices from the Kitchens

"the commitment of childcare workers to the welfare and development of children in their care goes above and beyond what they are paid and I think there is an old-fashioned attitude that many women working in this area don't need to be paid at a "professional" rate"

"I'd agree that quality means a focus on the individual child that stimulates them socially and reassures me that my child is safe and getting everything he needs. I think long term staff retention is a key means to achieve quality."

"We offer flexible care (part time days/ hours etc) for babies - 12 year olds and have done so for the past 30 years. However, we will have to stop, as it's just not manageable or viable and we don't have enough qualified staff to provide parents with flexibility. We will only offer full time care from Sep, so availability will only get worse."

"Parents wanted childcare- private creches or community creches – to be locally available – that was loudly and consistently expressed"

8. <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/Annual-Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-201920.pdf>

Our Survey revealed that for staff there is overwhelming dissatisfaction with pay and conditions (80%) and it ranks as the overwhelming ask for action. Their second big issue is the need for better opportunities for professional development..

4.3 System Innovation

The key Policy shift needed is the development of **A New Career Structure**, with appropriate pay structures, based on graded occupations in the early childhood and childcare sector. More roles need to be recognised and developed based on requirements consistent with the delivery of best practice in provision.

In many countries, there is an employment structure that recognises the roles of childcare assistants, childcare professionals, and childcare leaders. Each category has appropriate supports, pay-structures and opportunities for professional development and accreditation. There is urgent need for innovation in this area in Ireland.

4.4 Steps to Get There

To make a new career structure a reality, many supporting initiatives are needed which can start immediately:

- The establishment of a **Joint Labour Committee** for the sector by Minister Damien English is an important first step.⁹ It is vital that this process looks beyond a short term pay deal and seeks to shape a sustainable structure for the sector for the next decade and beyond. It will be the first test of the new legislation. Clearly, while employer and staff representative bodies will be central to discussions, it must be recognised that government support for the emerging proposals through its different support programmes will be essential for the delivery of a new career structure.
- A new **professional development programme** using flexible blended learning models and the recognition of prior experiential learning. It is noted that good cooperative work is underway to develop this.
- A new suite of Apprenticeships for the sector [See Section 3 above].
- Develop a Voice for staff and Providers at both national and local level.
- Ease the administrative burden on staff and create more time for shared evaluation and planning of their programmes.

4.5 Vision Statement

Workers in the childcare sector must have the careers and career structures that enable them to work as highly motivated individuals in a sector where they feel valued.

9. <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/News-And-Events/Department-News/2021/June/20210621.html>

5. Your Community – Your Networks

5.1 Introduction

A community framework that is structured and networked to meet the needs and fulfil the capabilities of all its children is the goal of the care of the child policy.

A good childhood care system is complex and responsive. At community level it responds to local needs and capacities in a way that cannot be delivered by the state alone or by top-down direction. It draws strength from wide participation of providers, staff and parents and good outreach to the wider community. It taps into other experiences and opportunities in the community. It can also access specialist skills as required. The Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter of the Department of Children sets out important principles.

5.2 Key Issues

Our Survey and Policy Kitchens revealed many pressing issues within local communities:

- The availability, the range and the flexibility of quality childcare is quite uneven across local communities.
- The need for flexibility from other state funded services to allow gaps in childhood services to be filled and valuable networks with other local services be built.
- The frustrations created by the absence of co-located services.
- The lack of information on what is actually available locally.
- The absence of policy and oversight for the unregulated childcare sector.



Voices from the Kitchens

“My ideal provider would be a creche run on a co-op model, where the parents are members and have a role in the oversight and governance- but they employ a professional manager and professional qualified, well-paid staff who have opportunities for training and career progression”

“Parents wanted childcare - private creches or community creche – to be locally available – that was loudly and consistently expressed”

The basic principle of the new policy is that it should reflect the many challenges of working with children with disabilities and coming from disadvantage. Many families, and most possibly those who feed into the policy lab, are not likely to experience these challenges. But the yardstick for the policy lab is that all children must be catered for.

Respondents said they had great difficulty / found it impossible to find a creche for children under 2

Parents don't want to go back (post COVID) to getting up at 6am and getting home at 9pm from work, so there needs to be more flexibility in how childcare settings operate

*“Parents wanted childcare - private creches or community creche – to be locally available – that was **loudly and consistently** expressed”*

After pandemic ends, flexible needs of the family will become even greater as working patterns change

Community-led play schools have been lost in our society and need to be re-introduced.

From our survey it emerged that somewhat more parents would opt for community provision rather than private sector providers if they had the choice, but the supply available is predominantly private. However, the survey did not explore how the community dimension should be developed. It is noticeable that the support for state-run services is not evident, with a preference for local variety.

One gap in service that is evident from all respondents is support for children with special needs. This is most acutely felt by staff (50%) but is not far behind among providers and parents (40%).

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) now provides support for children with special needs in the ECCE system. It offers programmes of general support to these settings and has a range of four programmes to assist children experiencing difficulty. These are of different intensity ranging from advice, through equipment, therapeutic support, to staff in the classroom. Almost 6,000 children are supported on an individual basis. **Access to such support varies noticeably across different parts of the country.** This service is solely for children in the ECCE years and difficulties raised were not specifically directed at this programme.

5.3 System Innovation

The role of the **County Childcare Committees** should be strongly developed to take responsibility for the assessment of needs, and for the delivery of a flexible range of support that can stimulate the responsiveness of the sector to local needs.

Develop the **potential to use public community and education buildings and services** in an imaginative way to provide accessible, locally convenient, comprehensive, responsive, well-resourced childcare services and experiences.

5.4 Steps to Get There

Build out the role of **County Childcare Committees** to create a much more influential forum at local level. Along with the development of the Childhood Services Development Agency, an explicit mandate should be given to these Committees to:

- Conduct an assessment of need for the Care of the Child in the County as part of the statutory Five Year Development Plan and seek to establish objectives in the Development Plan for childcare provision, and the capacity of new social enterprise to evolve to deliver community provision;
- To plan and support Community centre funding with a focus on Childhood services and seek to use of Urban and Rural Development Funds to develop childhood care in the community.
- Create District Committees, drawn from parents, staff and providers within the District, who would build the scope for better cooperation, filling supply gaps, evolving common approaches etc.
- Administer a local component of the Innovation Fund to promote scalable initiatives to meet local needs, particularly reaching out to activities that don't fall strictly into the childcare sector, but give children access to a diverse range of cultural and social activities.
- Work with local agencies to promote co-located services, particularly using publicly owned assets.

A significant gap identified is a registration system for **unregulated** childcare providers. At present if a Carer is caring in their own home for three or less children, they can earn up to €15,000 and be exempt from income tax.¹⁰ To qualify, you only need to have notified the HSE of your service. Providing care in the home of the child is not covered by that scheme. A system of regulation which is not bureaucratic is needed to recognise and support this type of care.

It will be important that **AIM services** continue to grow with needs and become more closely integrated in a comprehensive early Identification programme.

A child-care dimension in all post-pandemic policies is needed, so that for example, the development of remote working hubs also considers the new pattern of childcare needs.

5.5 Vision Statement: the future for communities

Care of the child is an essential part of public policy, and its foundation is community-based care. It must build on the desires, aspirations, capabilities and needs of children, families, and communities.

6. Your Government – Your Guarantor

6.1 Introduction

A strong system for supporting early childhood development is the most effective policy tool that can be designed to improve outcomes for children. Social cohesion in a community is strengthened when its children can access services which address their needs and capabilities in that community. Families now face too many pressures when trying to do their best for their children. The state must be seen as an initiator, enabler, and guarantor of a multiplicity of local solutions and democratic experimentation to assist in care of the child.

As a late arrival on the scene, facing a sector with 75% private sector providers and 25% not for profit community-run services, the state has developed many piecemeal programmes in the sector, and has had to retrofit regulation and funding streams.¹¹ This has created some anomalies.

The First Five Strategy which Fine Gael published in government is a ten year vision. It encapsulates much of where we want to get to, but much of the pathway to get there remains to be carved out. It is vital that our changed priorities in post-pandemic society are integrated into this new pathway.

That said, our Survey and Policy Kitchens recognised significant progress which has been made as spending has expanded rapidly, and valuable systems which have been developed, such as the work of Síolta, Aistear, AIM, Pobal and Túsla.

6.2 Key Issues

Several key issues have emerged from our Survey and Policy kitchens regarding the role which government plays in early childhood:

- Although spending has grown rapidly, it is far below most EU countries and is failing to meet aspirations of parents or practitioners.
- There is an unevenness in access to service and choice across the country and real gaps need to be filled.
- The needs of early childhood are not adequately recognised in the work of Departments and agencies, whose policies could contribute successfully to improvements.
- Lack of a coherent approach towards addressing disadvantage.

These high-level issues have given rise to complaints around cost, availability and flexibility affecting parents. They are experiencing enormous stress and anxiety because of these issues. Their family and working lives come under huge pressure. They repeatedly told us that they have no means of reliably assessing the quality of care provided and that they are often constrained from raising issues because of lack of choice in provision. Providers and workers also face a range of difficulties outlined in previous sections. While many involve financial investment, others are related to unnecessary frictions, such as:

- Frustration with multiple inspections.
- Burden of administration not recognised.
- Anomalies in payment schemes.
- Lack of career support structures.

11. <https://www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/children/childcare-services/index.aspx>

Survey Results

There is strong support for a Childhood Services Development Agency amongst parents, childcare workers, and providers. The functions of the Agency will need to be agreed but contributors mentioned continuous professional development, leadership programmes, business development supports, expert advice and technical support and quality assurance and enhancement as areas to be considered. The need for parental involvement in developing the Agency structure and remit was emphasised. It is noteworthy that parents stressed how much they would like a great involvement in the oversight of the sector.

6.3 System Innovation

The key requirement is the elevation of Early Childhood and Childcare within the priorities of the government. It must reach far beyond the confines of one Department and its agencies and become a core element of national planning. However, it must do so in a way that cultivates local solutions and local innovation. We need some real long-term structural changes:

- Early Childhood should become a new pillar in the National Development Plan.
- The regulatory emphasis of the state interaction with practitioners in the sector needs to change into one that is also developmental.
- The diversity of the sector can become a source of strength but needs a willingness of the state to break out of its own silos to look at the needs of children in local communities more holistically and seek to work flexibly with structures and partners that exist in the community to build strengths, fill gaps, ensure equality of opportunity;
- Strategies which promote access to use public assets to meet childhood needs must be vigorously developed.
- Childhood capital needs assessments should be factored into both Local Planning processes and state investment programmes and campus approaches should be encouraged. It must be recognised that the patronage model in Education under which the state hands over management of public assets to private bodies may hamper this proposal and new models to achieve the outcomes outlined here should be developed.

The creation of the **Childhood Services Development Agency**, under the Minister for Children is a unique opportunity to address structural problems. This agency will play a role not as a direct provider of services, but as the enabler of new capabilities and services and the promoter of innovation, while at the same time assuring high quality and opening up the portals through which parents can have better access to information and participation.

There is a strong belief that real benefits can accrue from having both regulatory functions and the developmental mandate for the sector under the one agency, even though steps will need to be in place to ensure the robustness of inspection. It provides the opportunity to integrate the regulation of standards which are now in three separate arenas.

The Childhood Services Development Agency should partner with the County Childcare Committees, and with public and private institutions to foster better design and use of facilities and services, and to promote innovation in responding to the needs of children. It will support leadership, planning and improvement strategies for networks of practitioners to achieve best practice.

Co-location of education and childcare services should be factored in future capital building projects.

A New Model for Citizen Engagement. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has seen a reevaluation of how we live, work and travel. Government policy must both respond to this change and provide leadership on how to develop new societal goals. Crucially, future policy development must be based on the evidence-base provided by hearing what our citizens want to change, to retain and to prioritise. In conjunction with expert advice and international benchmarking, a strong citizen engagement must underpin future planning. The Policy Lab process is based on this triangulated approach.

6.4 Steps to Get There

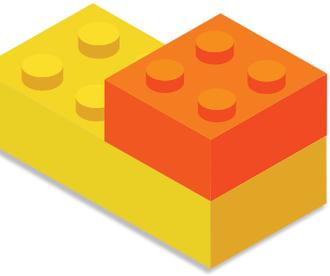
Many practical reforms emerged from our work that would deliver early progress on the ambition:

- Integrate inspections across the different physical, curricular and well-being arenas.
- Involve Parents more in governance and quality evaluation.
- Build technical support capacity at national and local level to help providers aspire to excellence and correct defects that emerge from inspection.
- Extend the Regional Therapeutic Model which has been successfully piloted to deliver therapeutic supports to a local network of 150 schools and preschools. It is an exemplar of how therapeutic supports can achieve more in a care setting than confined to a clinical setting.
- Create Demonstration Projects where physical and virtual campus networks are built which seek to broaden the range of service available and to support the involvement of social, cultural or education bodies in the network.
- Develop a special Even Start programme in a small number of areas of acute disadvantage which would integrate some exemplars of success like "Preparing for Life" in Dublin 17¹² into a flexible and imaginative approach to addressing embedded disadvantage from within the Early Childhood Education and Childcare system and connected to the progression onwards to school. Translate the learning from this and other programmes to wider settings so that disadvantage can be addressed in family-specific contexts.
- Develop Innovation Funds to spur innovation, particularly from local authorities, or others who could enrich the environment or experience for children.

6.5 Vision Statement

The state's role as enabler, innovator, and guarantor of the quality of childcare must be a central pillar of government policy.

12. <https://www.northsidepartnership.ie/children-families/preparing-life/>



Appendix 1

The Potential of the Childhood Services Development Agency

Raising children to be able to fulfil themselves and be creative members of society is one of the most important tasks for our society. Traditionally it was said, "it takes a village to raise a child", where a dense intergenerational network of family, social interaction, skill and learning closely interacted. However now a child does not always have easy access to a rich network of experience, support and learning. The responsibility is thrown back on the family, or too often the mother with insufficient support.

First Five has put in place a new framework in which to plan the development and oversight of policy. However, we need a catalyst to help the individual elements to evolve into the rich network, to which our vision for the Care of the Child aspires.

The ambition for the Childcare Development Agency is to do just that. The work of the Policy Lab has given a great insight into some of the fantastic initiatives across the country. The aim will be to promote that innovation and to help mainstream successes.

Purpose

- To assess needs in early childhood and ensure that the interests of the best Care of the Child are factored into planning right across the state sector, in buildings, spaces, and services.
- To support parents and childcare practitioners with access to information on best practice.
- To integrate the quality framework and assure high standards are delivered.
- To develop policy tools which foster innovation at all levels.
- To provide technical support for leadership and development planning by networks of practitioners.

Specific Functions

There is a lot of good work being developed at local and national level, coordinating services, developing standards, providing inspection, delivering funding mechanisms. The aim of the agency is not to duplicate this work, but rather it is to promote innovative responses to needs, to support new partnerships, to mainstream delivery of excellence:

- To work with County Childcare Teams to build an information resource for parents and practitioners at local level.
- To promote initiatives that support an equal start for children at a disadvantage.
- To support the role of Social and Community Enterprise in start-up and development of models of good practice for the Community.
- To develop codes which would allow better integration of family and work by employers.
- To promote partnerships which promote creative interaction between childcare provision and social, cultural, and environmental entities.

- To promote good practice in the design of residential, travel and recreational areas in the interests of children.
- To develop a Technical Support unit which can promote leadership and improvement planning among practitioners.
- To support access to development opportunities for staff through courses, placements, or other means.
- To promote the active use of publicly funded assets and services for wider use by children.
- To undertake research in areas relevant to these functions.
- To advise the government. relevant to these functions;

Implementation

An interim board should be established pending the passing of legislation. The function of the interim board should be clearly delineated.

The new agency would carve out some of the roles now played by Túsla and Pobal.

Túsla:

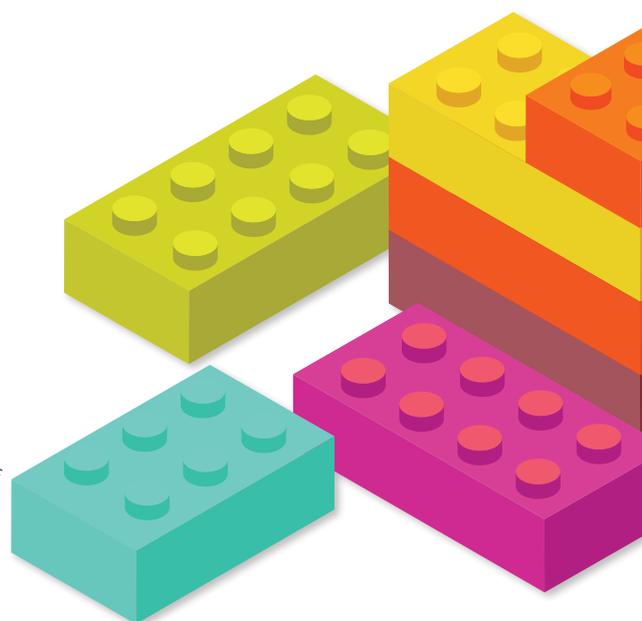
The Child and Family Agency was established on the 1st January 2014 and is now the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. It brings together over 4,000 staff and an operational budget of over €790m.¹³

Pobal:

Pobal, formerly known as Area Development Management, was established in 1992 by the Irish Government in agreement with the European Commission to manage an EU Grant for local development. The role of Pobal today is to provide management and support services to circa 31 programmes in the areas of Social Inclusion and Equality, Inclusive Employment and Enterprise, and Early Years and Young People. It administers these programmes on behalf of the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, as well as the Department of Health/HSE, the Department of Justice, and a number of EU bodies. Allocating circa €717 million in 2020.¹⁴

13. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/TUSLA_English_Annual_Report_Spreads.pdf

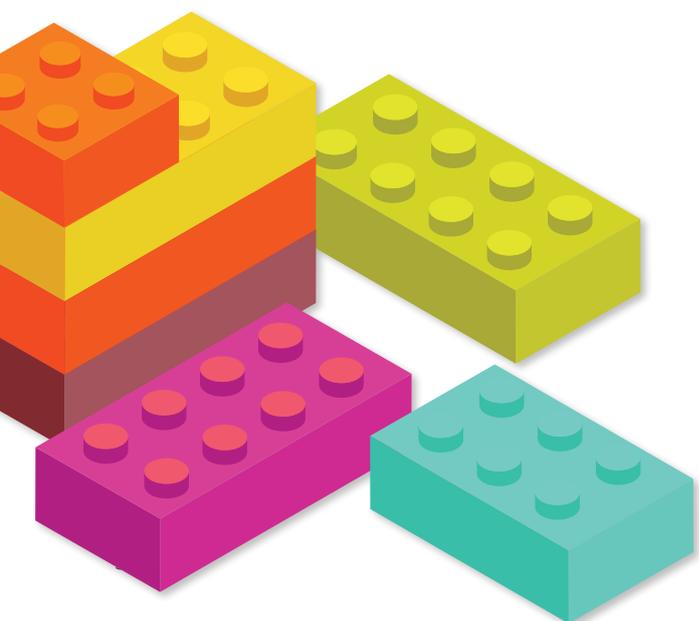
14. <https://www.pobal.ie/about-pobal/funder-departments/>

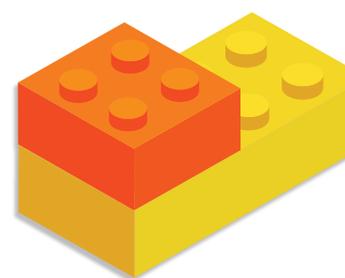


Appendix 2

Glossary of Terms

NCS	National Childcare Scheme
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education Programme
JLC	Joint Labour Committee
Aim	Access and Inclusion Model
NDP	National Development Plan
Aistear	Early Childhood Curriculum
Siolta	National Quality Framework for Early Education





Appendix 3

Survey findings

The Policy Lab fielded an on-line survey over two weeks in March, 2021; Party members were invited to complete it, and also asked to share with family and friends; Public Representatives invited service providers in their constituencies to take part, and the survey was also promoted on the Party's website.

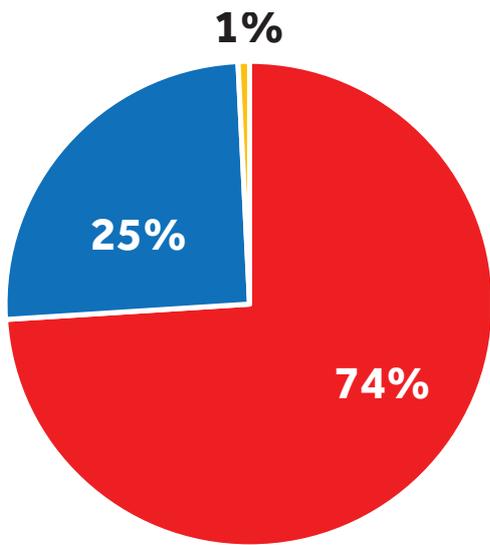
In total, 2,372 people participated; key findings included:

- The gender balance in terms of respondents (74% women to 25% men) is in inverse proportion to our membership (30:70)
 - 62% are aged 35-54 – a key demographic in relation to the topic
 - 81% are parents 61% have children under 5
- 76% feel the most important role of the State is to 'ensure availability and affordability'
- In terms of flexibility – 45% agree that providers offer flexibility, with 27% disagreeing
- Three out of four are satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of care
- Whilst almost two out of three believe more financial support would best strengthen the capacity of the sector to deliver better ways of supporting children in early years, more than one in two believe better career paths for workers would do so
- Almost one in three respondents were service providers, or people who work in the sector
- A much higher proportion of service providers (37%) believe children with special needs are well catered for, compared to parents (25%) and childcare workers (26%)
- When presented with a comprehensive list of options, almost one in two said a crèche (of one sort or another) was their preferred setting for childcare
- Whilst Quality of Care is of great importance to four out of five parents, location is more important as a consideration, than cost
- Whilst pay levels, and recognition of qualifications attracts almost unanimous support from service providers and workers alike, when asked about measures which would best promote the development of the sector – 65% of workers believed 'provision of professional development programmes' would do so, compared to only 50% of service providers
- There is greater support for the establishment of an Early Education and Childcare Development Agency among service workers, than service providers (71% v 59%)
- And in terms of how such an authority could help them – 49% of childcare workers felt that Creating Professional Development Opportunities would do so, compared to 27% of service providers
- Finally – more than three out of every five workers felt that paperwork, cleaning, cooking and administration had an impact on their job, of caring for children

The following charts detail specific replies:

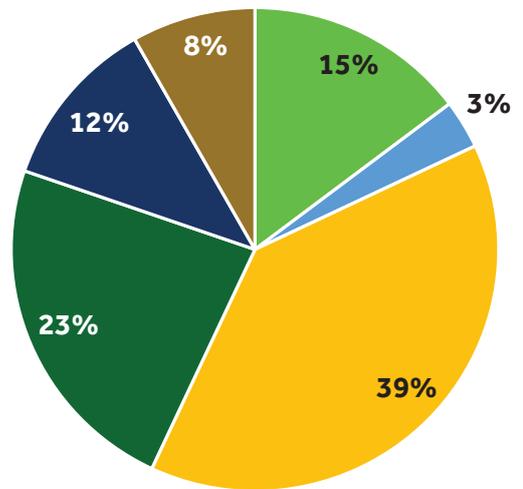
Who took part?

Gender



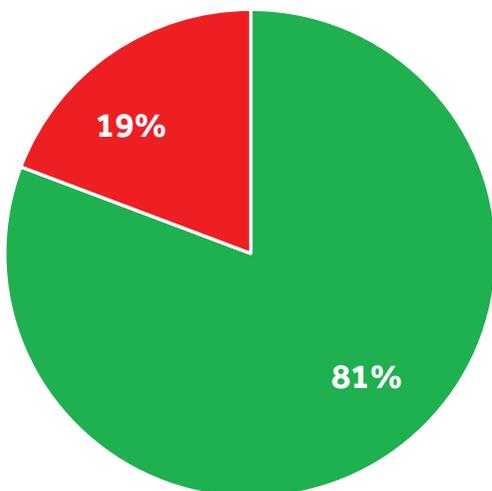
■ Female ■ Male ■ Other/prefer not to say

Age



■ 25-34 ■ 18-24 ■ 35-44 ■ 45-54 ■ 55-64 ■ 65+

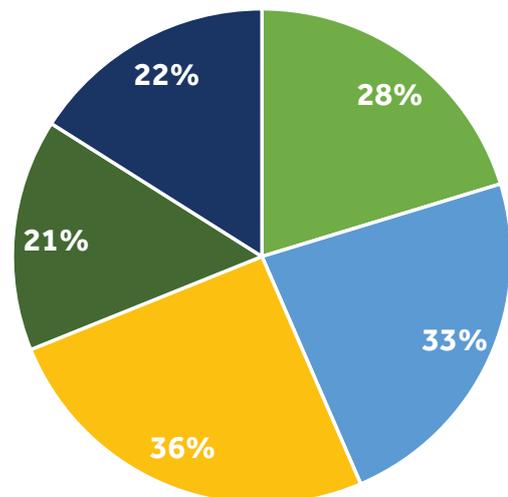
Parent



■ Yes ■ No

N=2372

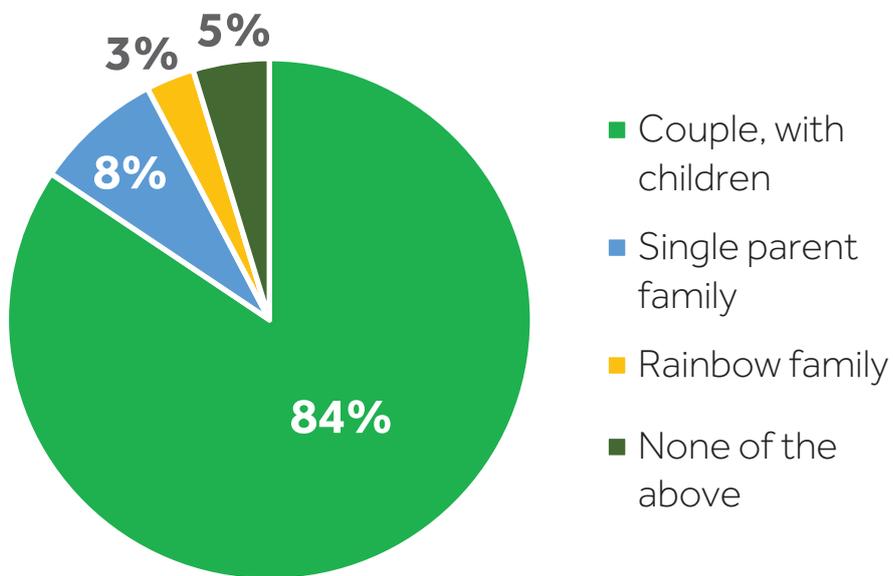
How many children do you have?



■ 0-2 ■ 3-5 ■ 6-12 ■ 13-17 ■ None of the above

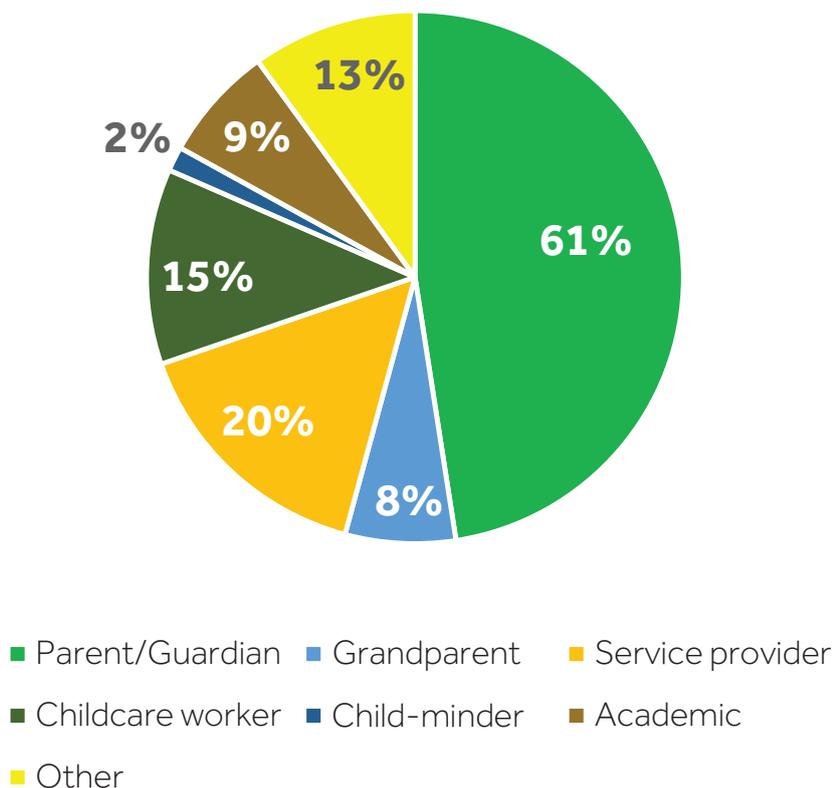
N=1878

Family Type



N=1877

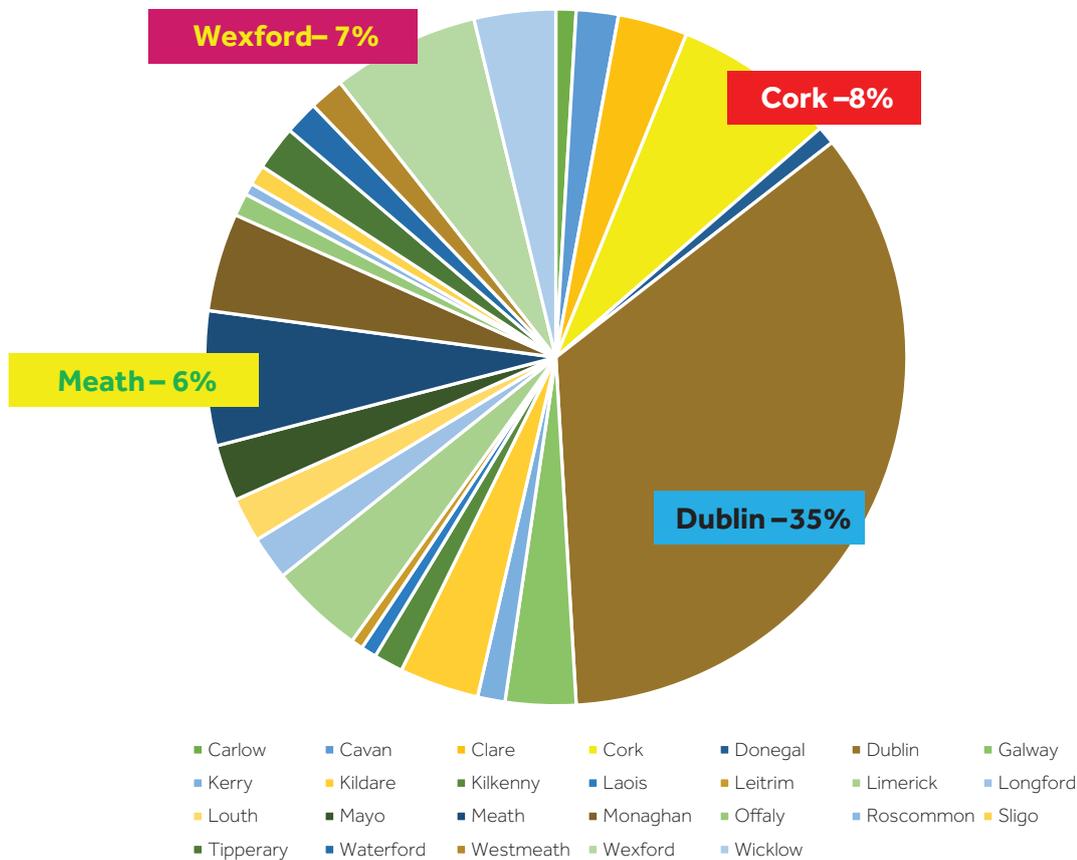
Reason for Interest



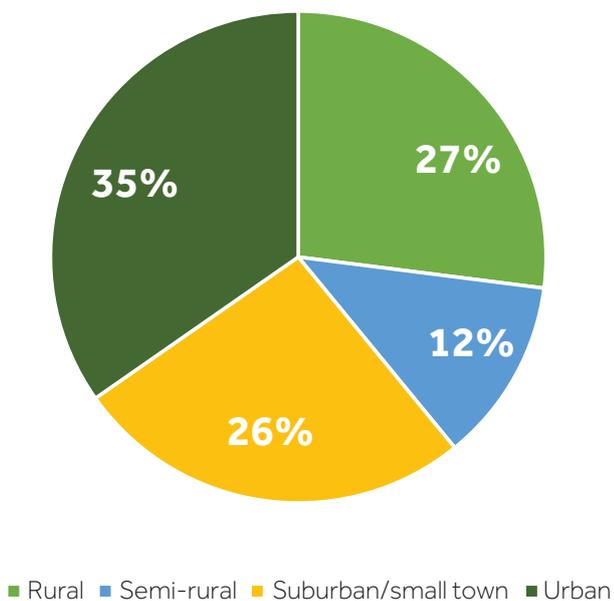
N=2327

Where?

County

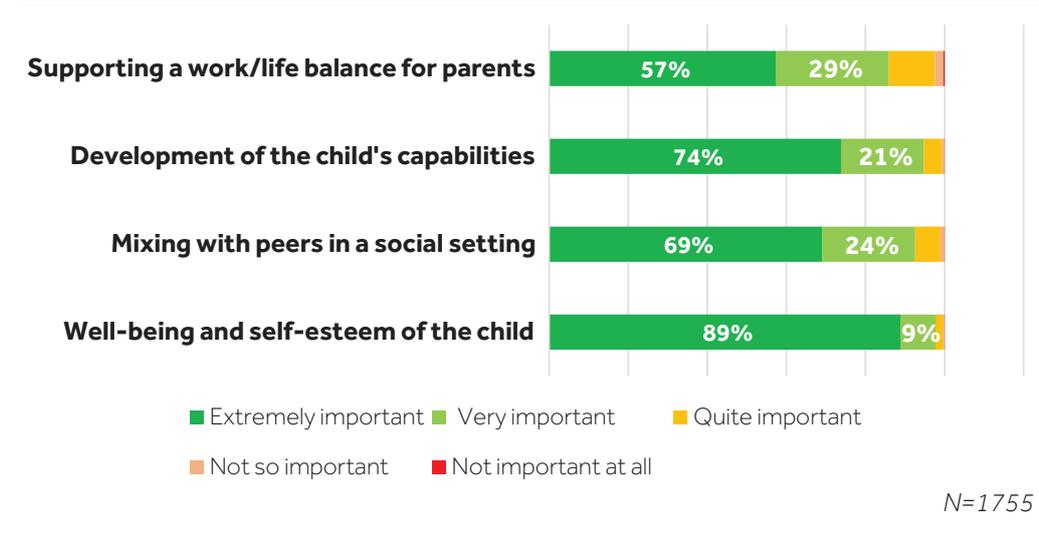


Area

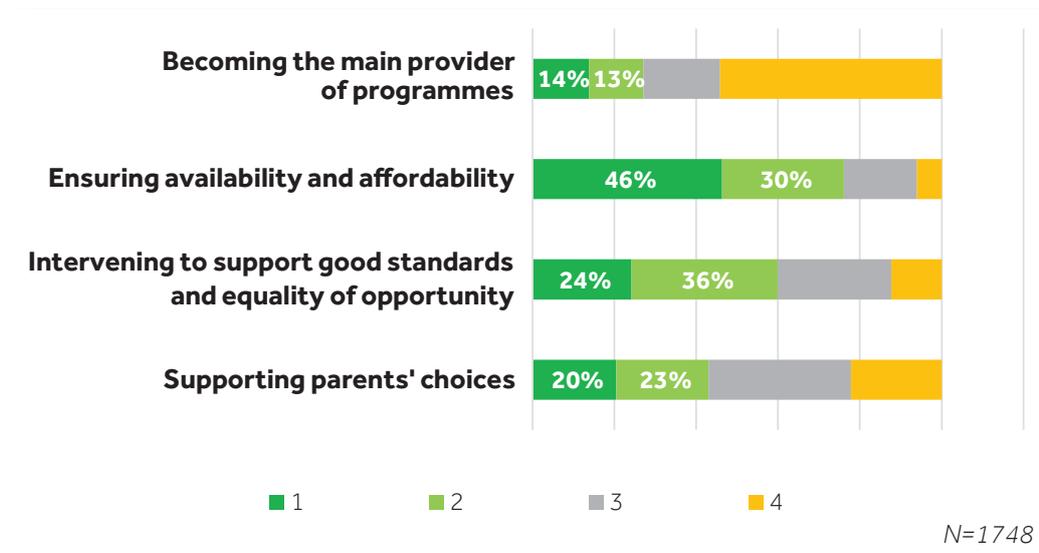


Feedback

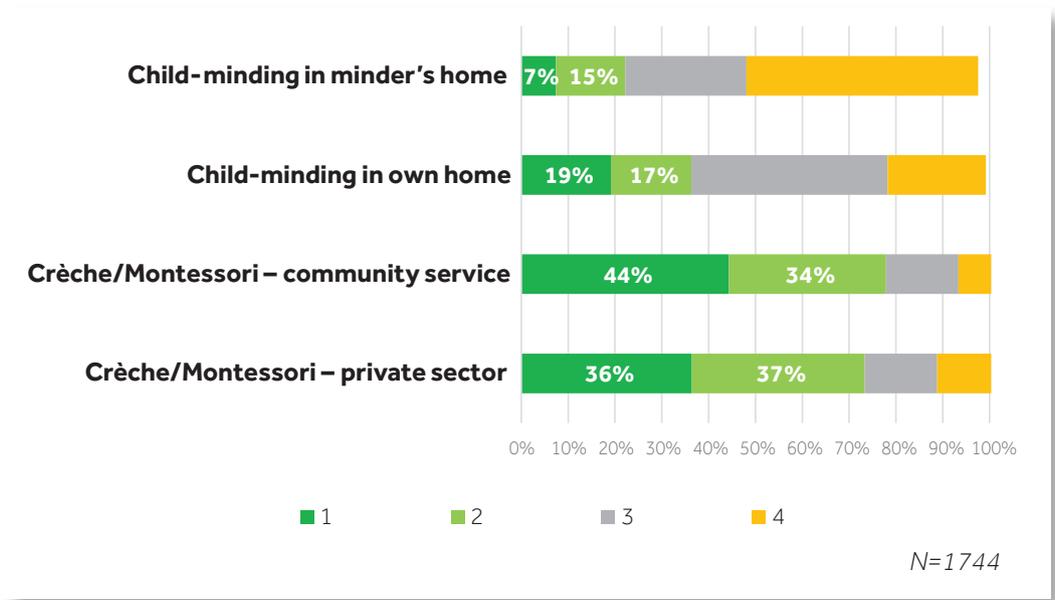
How would you rate the importance of each of the following, in early childhood supports?



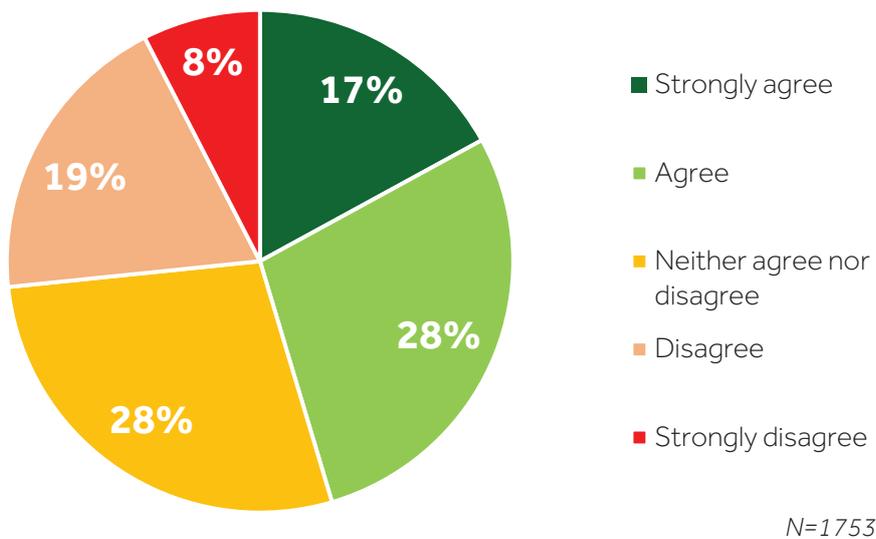
Please rank the following statements, to indicate how best you would describe the appropriate role for the State, 1 being the most important:



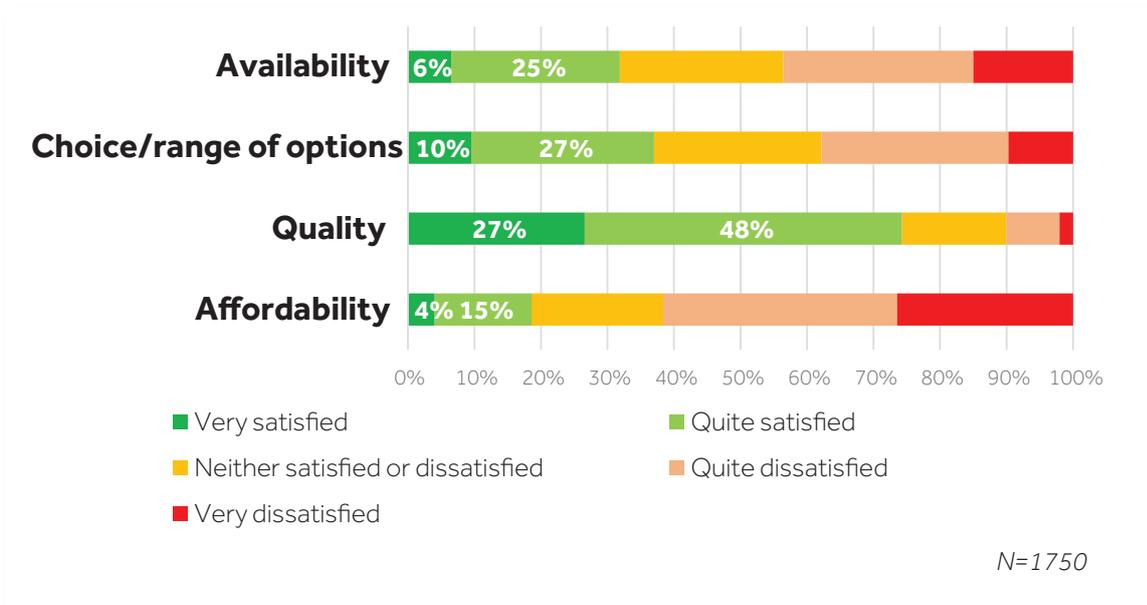
In terms of the provision of early childcare services, please rank the following options in order of your preference - with 1 being your first preference



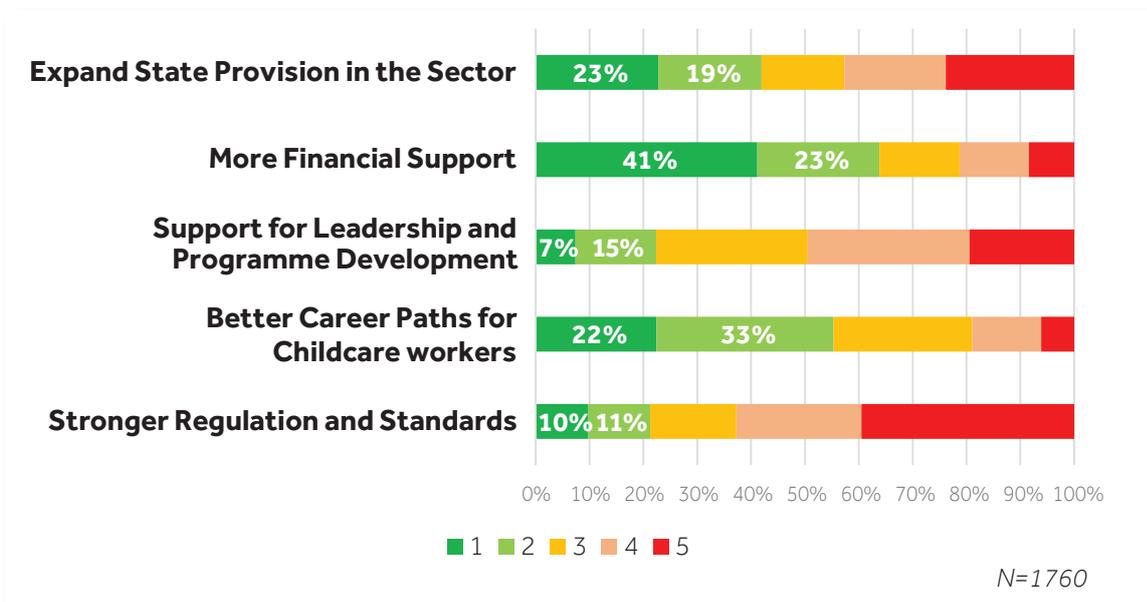
To what extent do you agree that the providers of childcare services in your area offer flexibility?



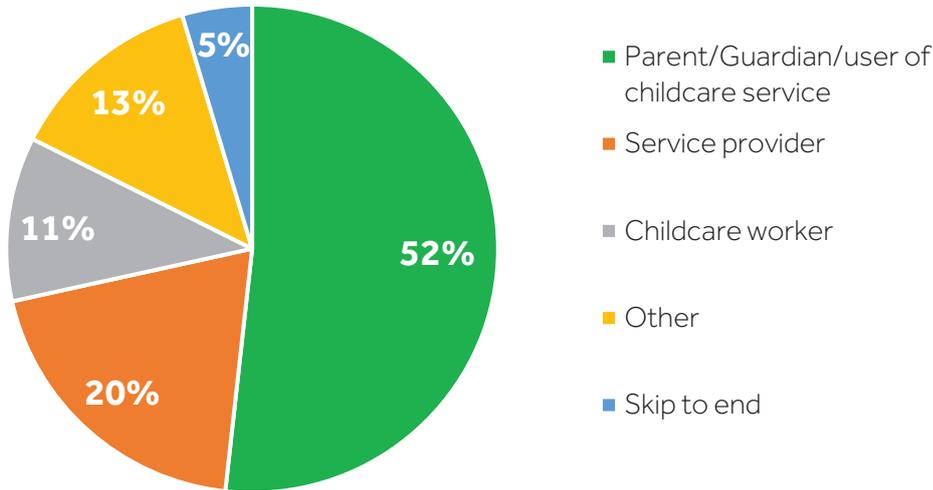
How satisfied are you with the following aspects of childcare in Ireland?



In your opinion, which of these steps would most strengthen the capacity of the sector to deliver better ways of supporting children in early years? Please rank in order of preference, with 1 being the most important



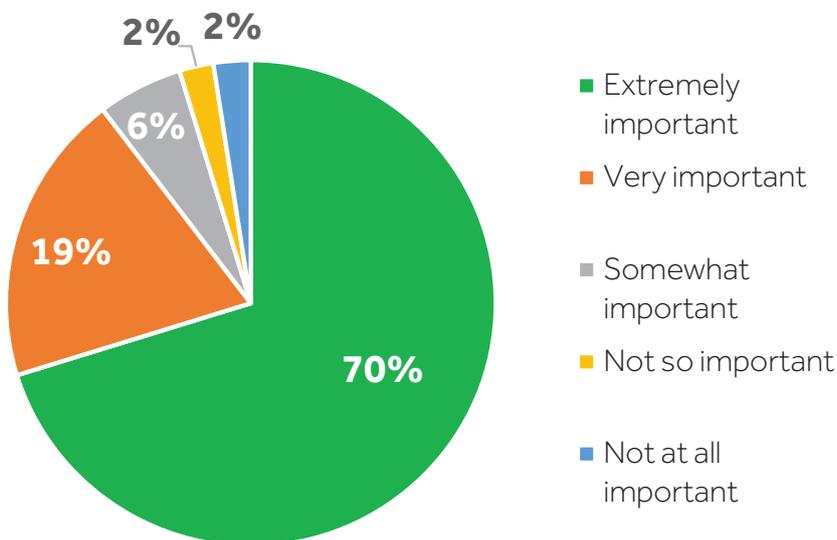
Please indicate which section of the survey is most appropriate to you



N=1718

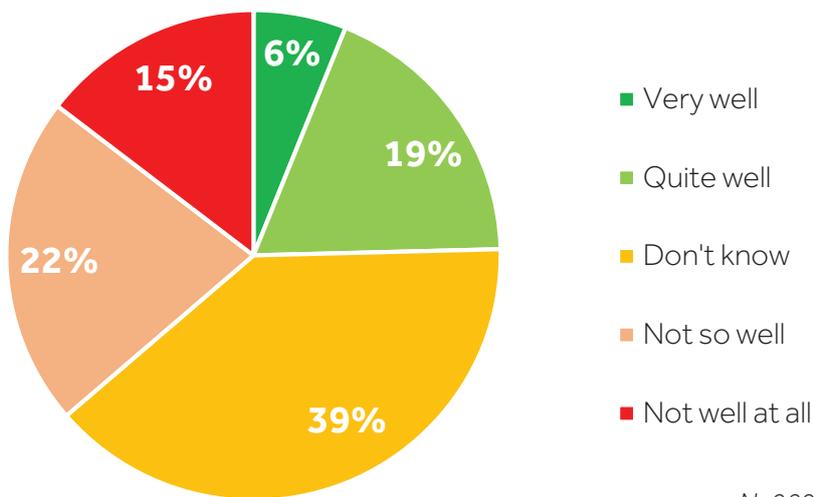
Views from Parents, Guardians and users of childcare services

How important was/is access to an early childhood service to you?



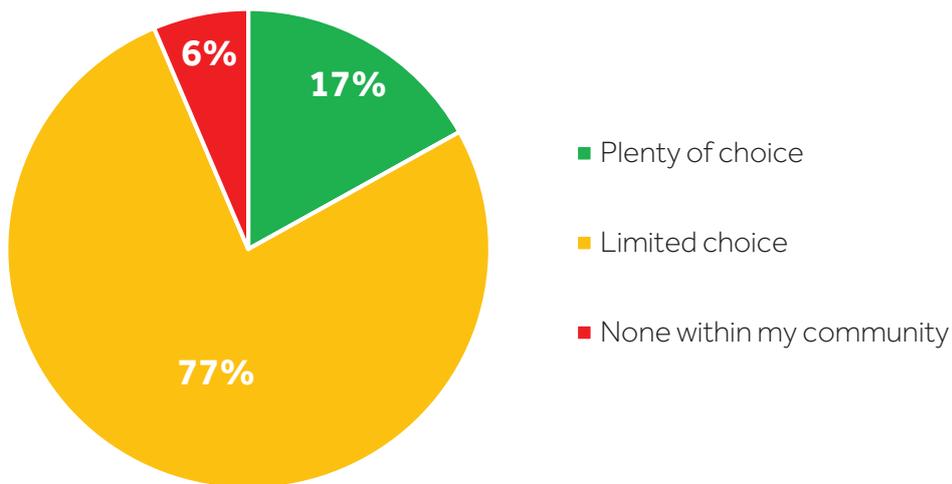
N=978

In your view, how well are children with additional needs catered for in the early years?



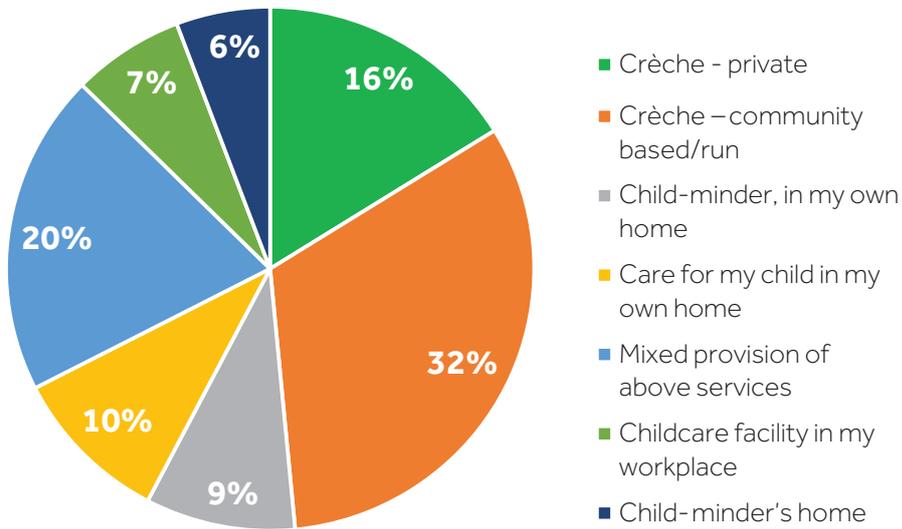
N=989

Thinking of childcare facilities near where you live, how would you describe availability



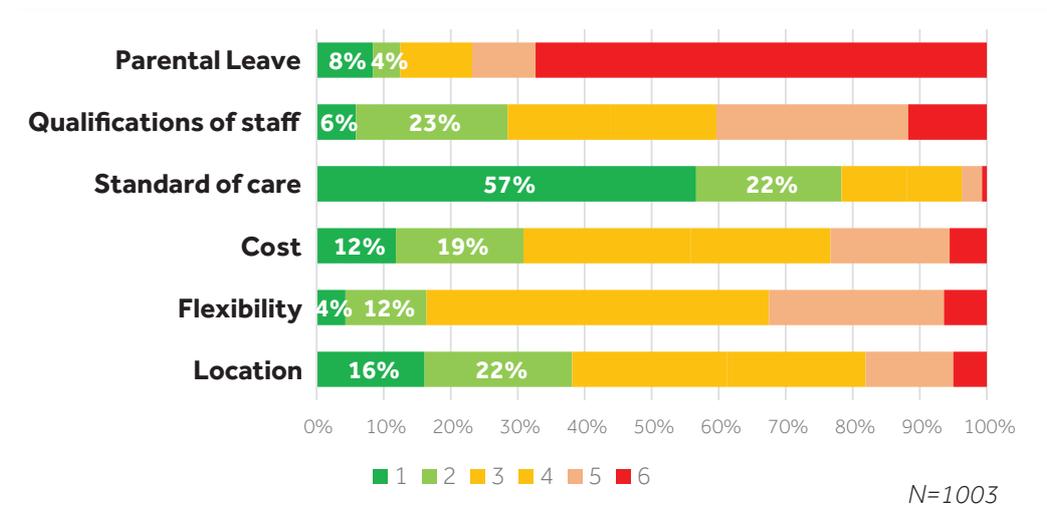
N=990

If you had the option, which is your preferred setting for childcare?



N=991

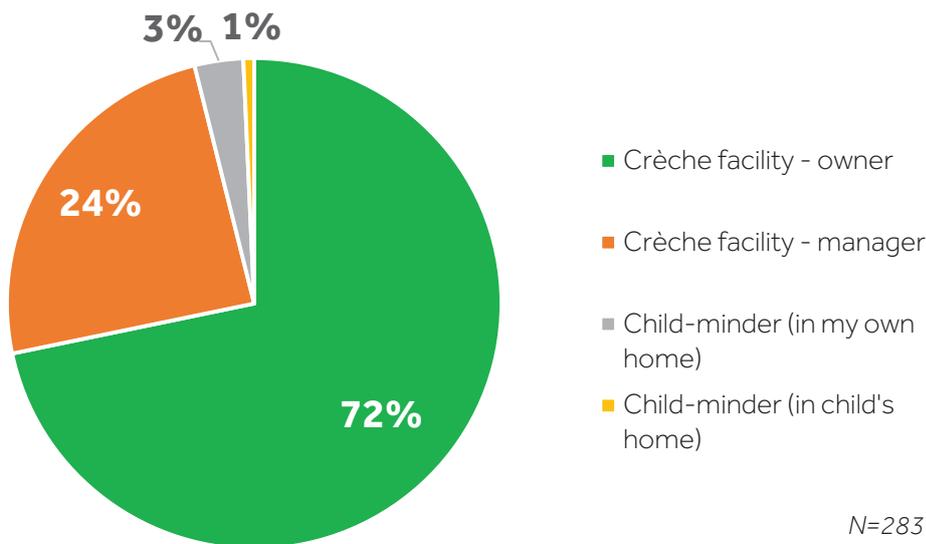
In considering childcare options, please rank the following considerations in terms of their importance to you, where 1 is the most important



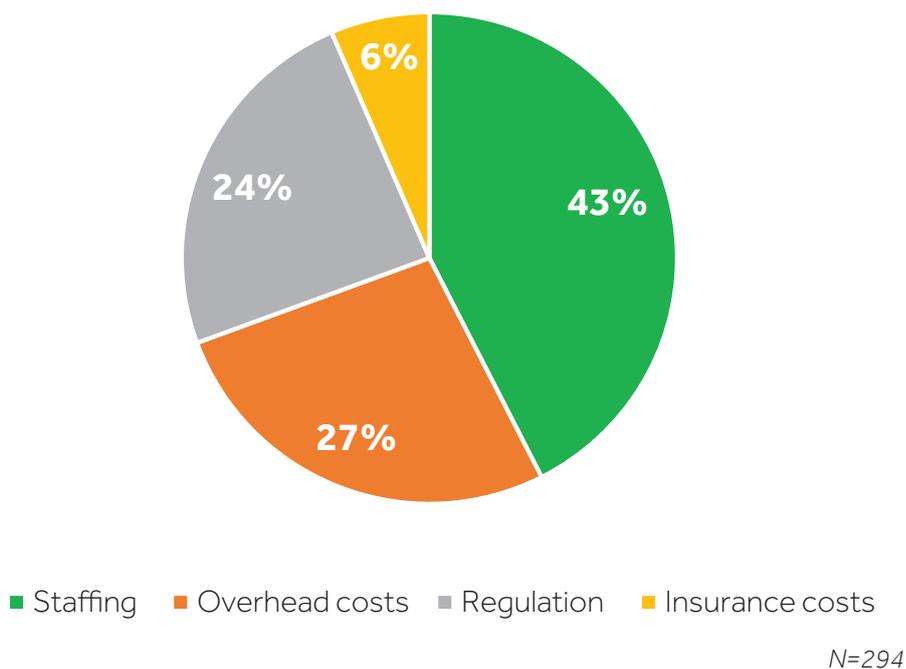
N=1003

Views from Service Providers

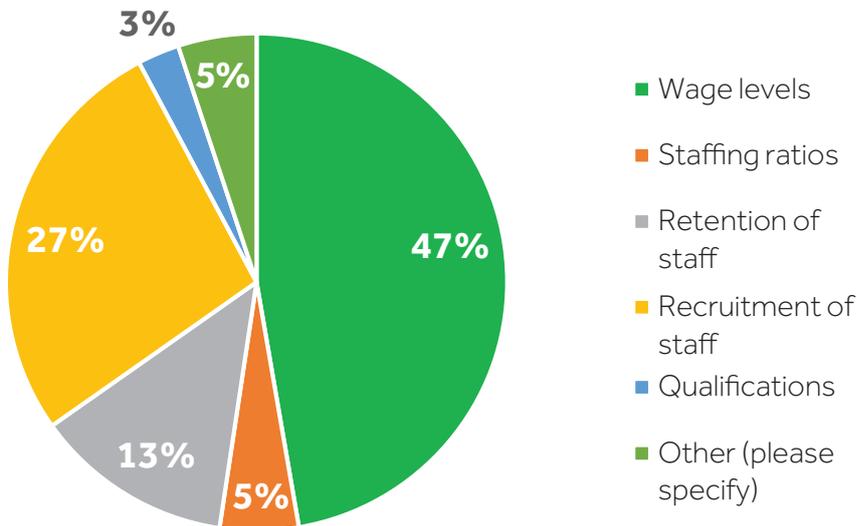
What is the nature of the service you provide?



Which of the following issues do you find the most challenging?

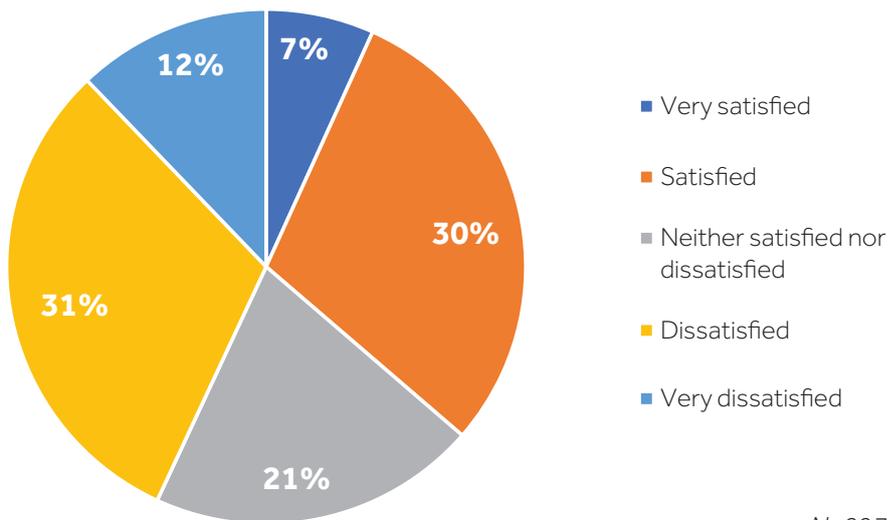


In terms of Staffing – which of these is the biggest cause of concern?



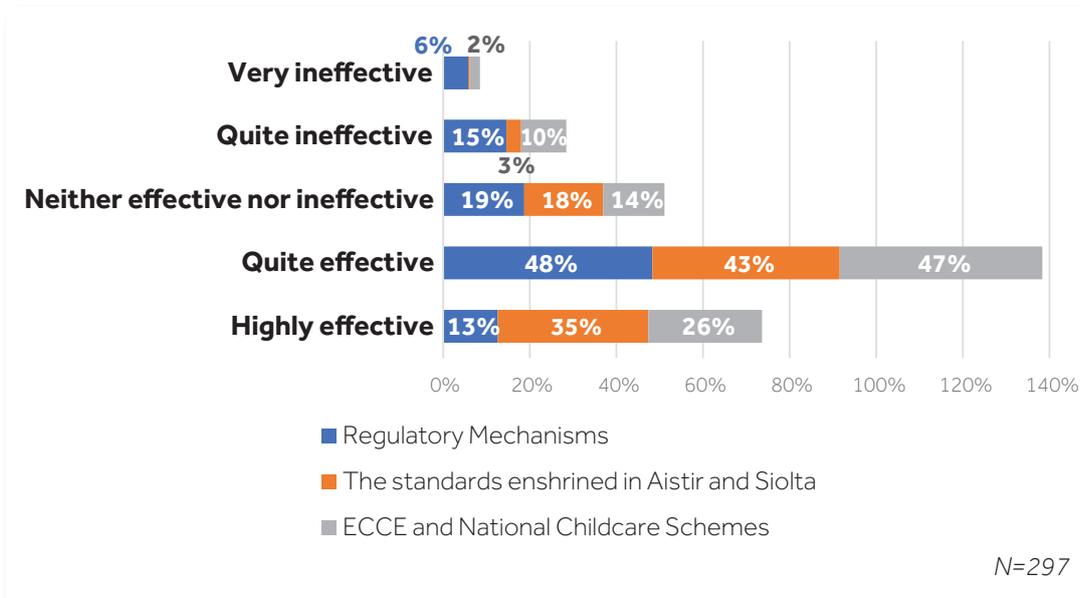
N=296

How satisfied are you with the level of support for children with Additional Needs?

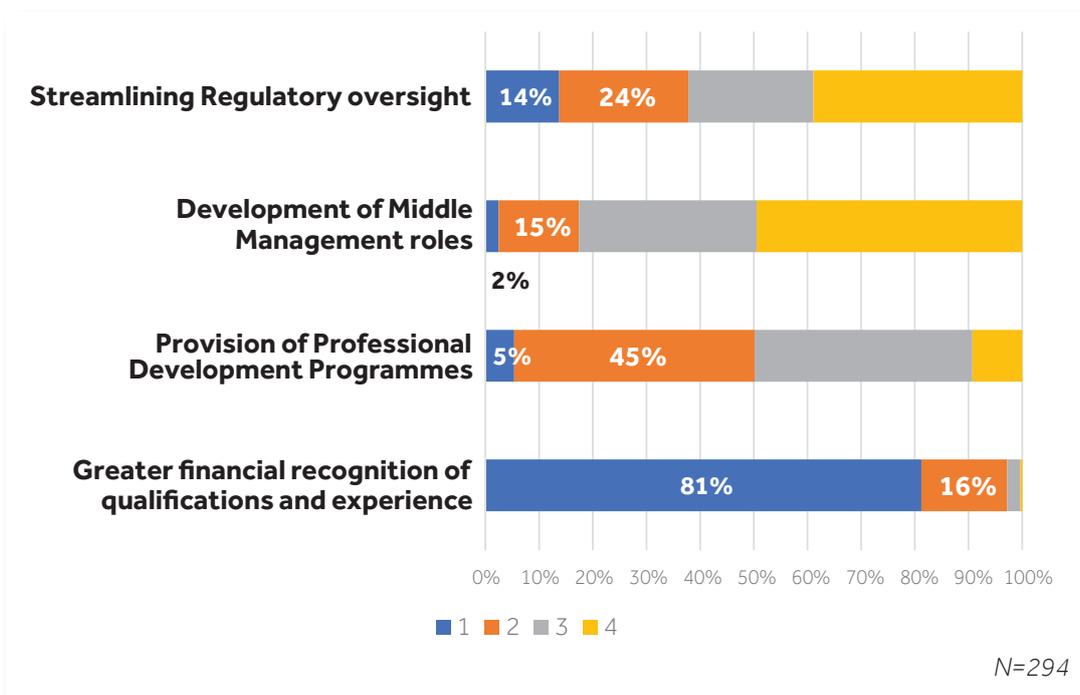


N=297

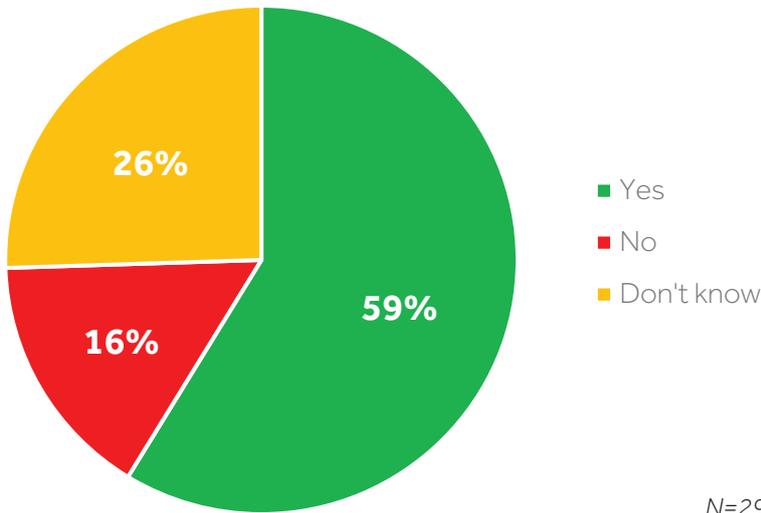
How would you rate the effectiveness of each of the following?



Which of the following measures would best promote the development of your sector? Please rank in order of priority, with 1 being the most important

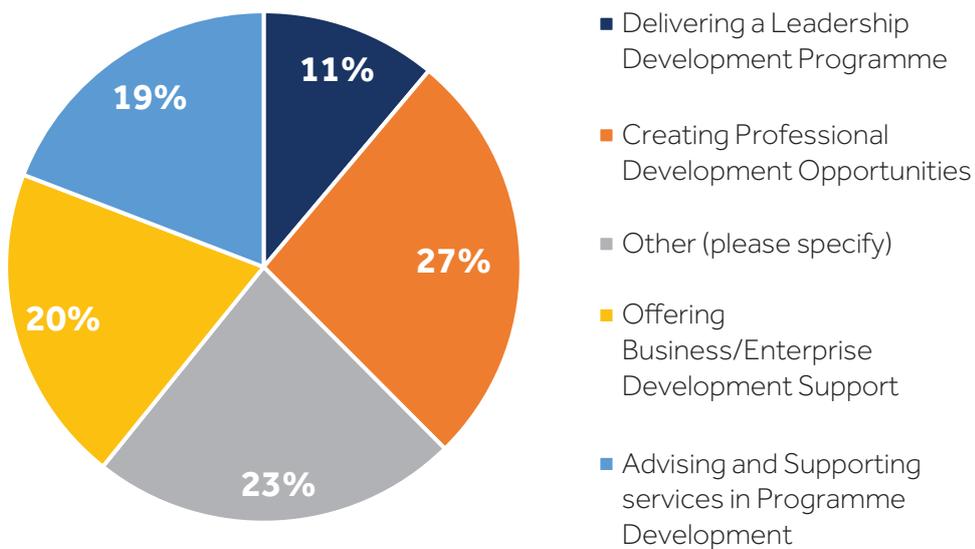


Do you believe that the establishment of an Early Education and Childcare Development Agency is desirable?



N=298

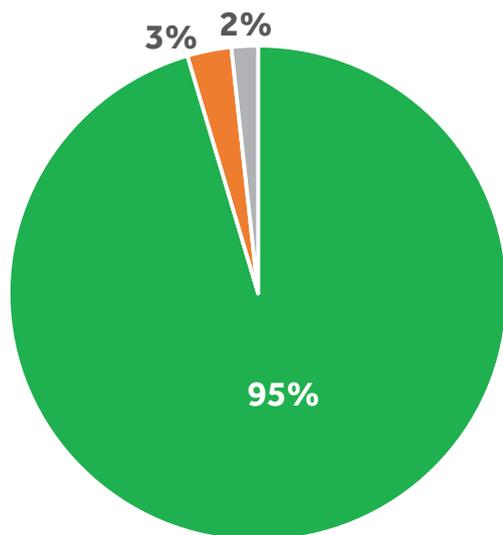
The Government is proposing the establishment of a new Childcare Development Authority; in your opinion, how best could such an authority help you?



N=298

Views from Childcare Workers

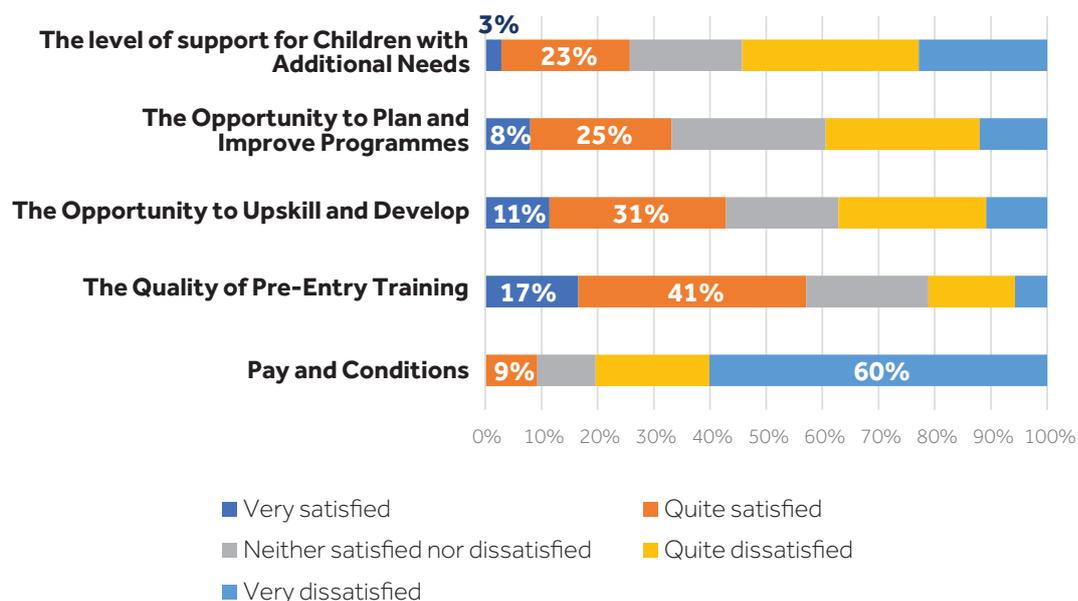
What is the nature of the service you provide?



■ Childcare worker ■ Child-minder (and family member) ■ Child-minder

N=175

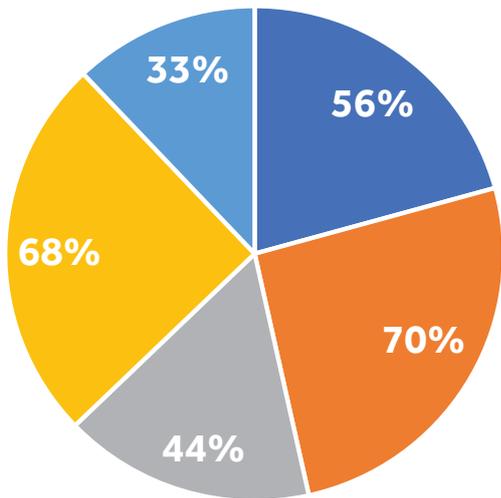
How satisfied are you with each of the following, in your sector?



■ Very satisfied ■ Quite satisfied
 ■ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ■ Quite dissatisfied
 ■ Very dissatisfied

N=175

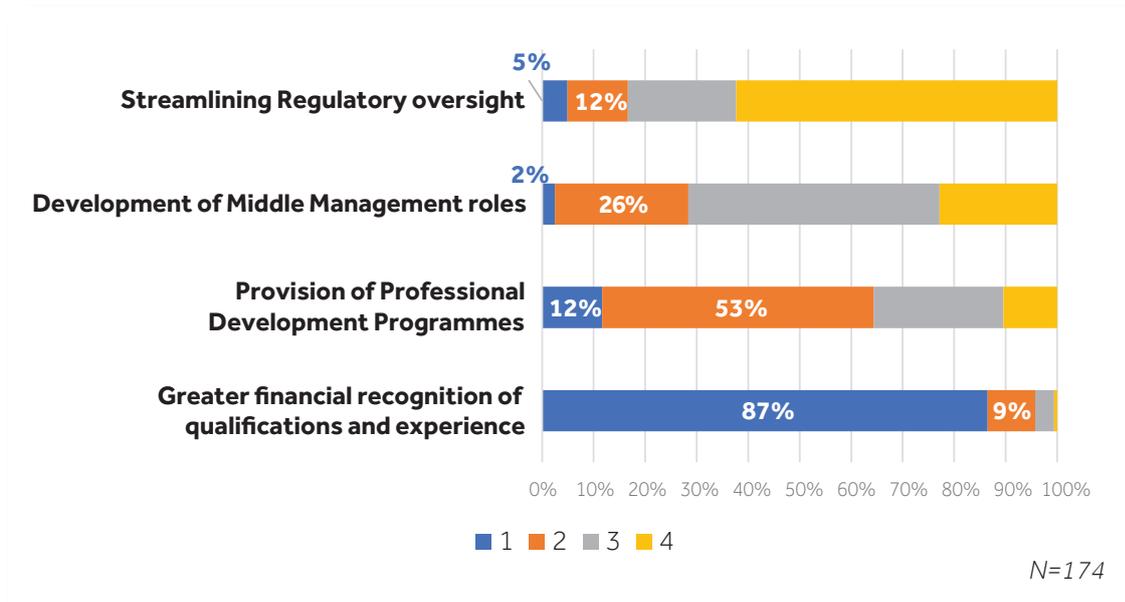
Do you believe that the establishment of an Early Education and Childcare Development Agency is desirable?



- Staffing– shortages & competency
- Documentation that must be maintained to be compliant under TUSLA/ Dept. Of Ed./POBAL Funding Inspections
- Curriculum Planning and Reflective Practice on Daily Schedule
- Non- caring duties such as cleaning, cooking, admin
- Administration of Funding Allocations

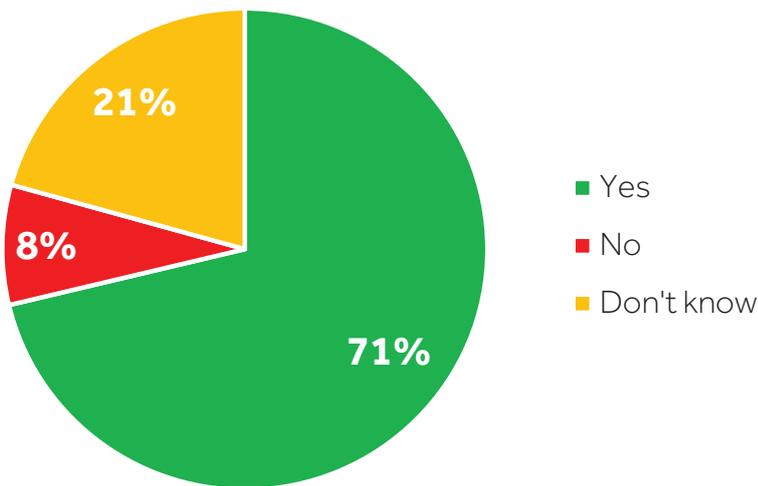
N=174

Which of the following measures would best promote the development of your Profession? Please rank in order of priority, with 1 being the most important



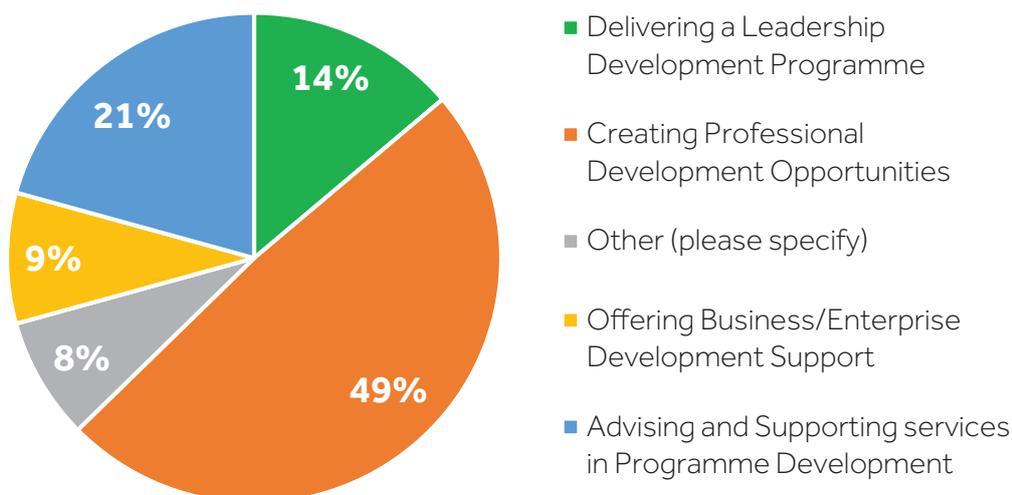
N=174

Do you believe that the establishment of an Early Education and Childcare Development Agency is desirable?



N=174

The Government is proposing the establishment of a new Childcare Development Authority; in your opinion, how best could such an authority help you?



N=174



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