

# Labour Women's Campaign for Universal Childcare

First steps, first words, so many defining moments of a child's early development happen with the Early Years professionals who care for them. But the childcare system in Ireland is in crisis. Held together by subsidies to private companies, tax credits and grants, parents can barely afford crippling fees, and too many workers are poorly paid.

We don't value the Early Years Sector the way we should.

We take it for granted that the State provides primary and second level education, so why don't we expect the same for early years?

For years now empty promises of 'free childcare' have been made Budget day, but these measures only cover a few hours in a work day leaving parents scrambling to fill the gap by reducing their own working time, or asking family for support.

Our children can't wait any longer. We need a public childcare system that treats all the children of the nation equally, and that respects Early Years professionals and their work.

We want to have a conversation about universal early years education and childcare in Ireland – with equality for children, affordability for families and fairness of pay and conditions for professionals at the centre.

We believe the for-profit, market-driven model should be replaced by one which is state-led and universal, as with primary education. This should take place in community childcare settings. There will always be demand for private services, so this reform needs to include private providers.

We are calling for a new approach defined by:

- i) Equality for Children
- ii) Affordability for Families
- iii) Fairness for Professionals



1

# Universal Childcare = Equality for Children



## We call for equitable access to and use of Early Years Services

- » Right now there are not enough childcare places to fulfil demand. Parents are placed under enormous stress when trying to find a place for their child. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, over 180 childcare providers have closed, putting yet more strain on a broken system.
- » In our vision for a universal public childcare system, all children would be guaranteed a place in an appropriate service close to their home, guaranteed by the time their caregiver returns to work.
- » The service would include flexible drop-off times and collection to reflect modern work practices and commute times, and would be based on best practice for education, play and early learning.
- » A high quality of early education is vital to the development and wellbeing of children and this must be provided in a universal and equitable way. arly education is vital to the development and wellbeing of children and it is vital that this is provided in a universal and equitable way.

2

# Universal Childcare = Affordability for Families



## We call for Affordable Early Years Education and Childcare

- » Ireland has the second highest OECD household spend on childcare costs, with couples spending an average of 24% of income and single parents spending 29% of their wages on childcare costs. Childcare cost is a major barrier for families.
- » Labour would develop a universal public system, starting with a €96 million investment in the first year. Our scheme would first address the needs of parents, specifically lone parents, who cannot work because of the prohibitive cost of childcare.
- » Caring and childcare responsibilities still fall predominantly on women in Ireland, which limits women's employment opportunities. A cost effective, accessible childcare model would give women the chance and the choice to work. State-led, universal, high-quality childcare is needed now.

3

# Universal Childcare = Fairness for Professionals



## We call for early years professionals to be treated fairly

- » Early Years professionals are underpaid and undervalued. In a recent survey by SIPTU's Big Start campaign 94% of childcare workers surveyed felt that they were not paid a fair wage. 65% of respondents reported that, if things stayed the same, they would leave the childcare sector within 5 years. This high turnover of staff does a disservice to both children and staff.
- » Early Years services are faced with enormous amounts of administrative work, which can take away from quality time with children. Direct funding of administrative work would ensure that paperwork is kept fully up to date, without children losing out.
- » Smaller private providers do important work providing Early Years services, often facing high insurance costs and other costs associated with running smaller settings. We need to support and facilitate their continuing contribution to the sector and ensure they are included in debate around reform.
- » To have a high-quality service with low turnaround, staff must be paid properly. Early Years Professionals must be paid in line with the essential and vital role they play in our society: educating and caring for children.

In a State funded model, Early Years workers would be paid by the state, as their colleagues in the Primary and Secondary sector currently are. We welcome the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee and demand reforms to regulating pay and conditions for the sector.