



Putting children first

Childcare and pre-school education
October 2005

labour.ie



Preface

What's It All About?

I regularly meet parents who ask me basic questions about family life in modern Ireland.

The phrase 'What's it all about?' is shorthand for a set of difficult and complicated issues facing parents today. Many parents are concerned about how to spend more time at home with their children. They want to have the option to leave the workforce, if only for a short number of years, they want to be able to work part-time, or to have some form of flexible working option. Those options, however, can be expensive, in terms of lost income.

So many of our parents are put to the pin of their collar to get up in the morning, get the kids to childcare, travel long distances to work, get home, spend some time with the kids, and at the end of it all keep paying the bills, including hefty bills for childcare.

Despite all these difficulties, many women want to maintain their links with the workforce.

This issue is increasingly being presented in terms of what is, to me, a divisive distinction between 'working parents' and 'stay at home parents'. Let us not put people in boxes like that. At the end of the day, we are talking about parents. People who want the best for their families. And that is what we want for them as well.

Labour's approach to childcare and early education is based on the principle of putting children first. It is deliberately intended to respect and enhance the choices that parents make for their children, and to offer parents higher levels of support and flexibility in how they meet the challenges of nurturing their children.

All parents are deeply concerned about the quality of their children's lives. Do you stay at home and nurture your children yourself? How do you assure yourself that you have found the right crèche or childminder for your child? The absence of a formal quality standard for both centre-based care and childminders makes parents' decisions no easier.

Early childhood is a precious time of life. We cherish those years, as we share the joy of discovery, of watching children learning about the world and about how they relate to people around them. We watch them acquire the most basic, and yet the most important, of human abilities: understanding and communication. Learning how to learn.

Only if we keep our focus firmly on children themselves, will we work our way successfully through the problems of 'work-life balance' and the childcare crisis.

As a society, we face fundamental choices about how we nurture our children, and protect family life. This document is Labour's response to help people answer for themselves the question 'What's it all about?'



Pat Rabbitte

Leader of the Labour Party

Summary of Proposals

Labour is committed to the creation of a national child-centred learning-focused structure for childcare and pre-school education. It will support parental choice and put children first.

We are committed to ensuring that every child, as an individual citizen, gets the opportunity to have the best possible care and education.

We believe that the State should treat all children and their families equally.

We are committed to supporting family life in the face of the numerous pressures of modern society. We want a structure for childcare and pre-school education which will serve children, families, and the communities in which they live.

We see childcare and early education as central planks in breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality, and in building a Fair Society.

Our proposals fall under five headings:

Time to for Parents

- Paid Parental Leave, modelled on Maternity Benefit, paid from social insurance, for up to one year, with an option for fathers to take part of that time.
- A legal right to take up to three years career break. We will explore appropriate fiscal support for employers.
- A right to part-time work, subject to reasonable conditions.

Meeting the Cost to Parents

- An Early Years Subsidy of €50 per week for each child, payable to **all parents** from the expiration of maternity leave (or from birth, where a mother does not receive Maternity Benefit) until the child enters state-subsidised pre-school
- An Early Years Subsidy of €25 per week for each child payable to **all parents** for primary school children, up to the age of 12.

Pre-school education

- Provide one year of free pre-school education (five half days per week) for every child.

Childcare Places

- Work with providers to expand the number of childcare places
- Provide childcare facilities established and run directly by the state, or other non-profit entities in some circumstances.
- Ensure that childcare facilities are integrated into plans for residential developments
- Where possible develop childcare facilities at or near primary schools
- Build childcare and early education facilities into plans for new primary schools
- Increase support for childcare centres in disadvantaged areas

- Promote supervised after-school activities in schools and a wide range of positive after-school options for children
- Ensure adequate provision of primary school places, to prevent feedback of pressure on childcare places.

Enhancing Quality

- Develop standards for childcare which include developmental and educational goals, not just bricks and mortar regulations
- Establish a register of all childcare facilities and providers, including for over-6s, as the basis on which there can be positive engagement to enhance skills
- Bring childminders out of the black economy by allowing up to €8,000 per annum to be earned tax free from childcare in the home
- Develop outreach services to enhance the skills of childcare workers and childminders, linked to resource centres supporting networks of childminders
- Require care-settings to include outdoor play areas
- Develop an inspectorate of facilities comprised of childcare professionals
- Develop a system of information and consultation with parents
- Develop a quality-mark system for childcare facilities
- Conduct a national audit of training and qualification levels in the childcare and early education sector, and develop targets accordingly
- Garda clearance for all childcare staff

Implementation

We have costed our proposals as follows:

	€
Early Years Subsidy	1,071
Paid Parental Leave	259
Free Pre-School	163
Quality Enhancement Measures Fund	40
	€1,533 million

The implementation of these proposals is subject to the overriding requirement to maintain stable public finances. Some measures, particularly free pre-school education, will take time to roll out, but the current costs shown relate to the cost after full implementation. Our proposals contain a number of measures to enhance the quality of childcare. To this end, we have specified a fund of €40m to cover a number of such initiatives as equipment grants to childminders, support for after-school activities, the registration of childminders etc. The expansion of places will also require capital expenditure. It is by no means clear that the existing allocation to the EOCP for capital grants will be fully allocated by the end of 2006. We will review the requirements for capital funding under the EOCP, and provide additional capital funding if needed.

Introduction

Putting children first – that is the starting point of this policy proposal on the care and education of our youngest citizens.

We believe that as a nation, we have an exciting, but urgent, opportunity – that is, to put in place the best possible structure for the care and education of our children, and in doing so, to support parents in the important work they do, so that everyone in our community can fulfil their human potential.

The Labour Party is committed to ensuring that the delivery of our policy on the care and education of our youngest citizens does just that – puts children first.

We are committed to ensuring that every child, as a right, as an individual citizen, gets the opportunity to have the best possible care and education he or she needs.

We are committed to ensuring that every parent, regardless of their income, is allowed to choose the best possible parenting option for their child.

And we are committed to building a child-centred early education structure which serves the child, their parents, all families and the communities in which they live.

We see childcare and early pre-school education as central planks in breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality, and in building a Fair Society.

We believe that in the process of building and putting this system in place, we will underpin our economic prosperity for future generations, allow everyone to participate in it, and allow communities, especially new and growing communities – to be just that – communities.

All of this is possible, but it is not happening ...

The care and education of our youngest children must rank as the single most important issue for our society to address – but it is not being addressed. Nor is the issue of the pressure on the modern family, and the difficulties faced particularly by new communities struggling without supports.

The context in which the Irish family exists has changed radically in the last number of years, with a huge impact on family life and the care of children. Living in commuter communities, being absent from home almost all day, living a long distance from other family members, and having very little time together, is undermining the quality of family and community life.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Across Europe, it is the norm for the state to provide a range of different supports for childcare and early education. Different countries use different models, but there is a constant theme throughout – that this is an area which requires substantial state investment and support.

While we can learn from the experiences of other countries, in Ireland we must build our own model for childcare and pre-school education, based on our own values, traditions and expectations.

These days, 50% of children under five are being cared for by someone other than their parent while that parent is at work. Many thousands of children of school going age do not go home when school finishes. This is not in itself a bad thing, but does raise questions for us as a community to examine closely.

And the biggest one is – are we happy as a society with how we are managing the care and education of our young children, especially those of working parents?

The answer must be no.

For a start, we know that as a country, we have one of the lowest levels of investment in early childhood care and education among OECD countries. We have not chosen, so far at least, to spend our new found wealth on our children.

We know that many parents are, however, spending a lot on children. Many are crippled by the cost of childcare – for some it is higher than their mortgage.

Many thousands of children would benefit from pre-school education, but it is only available to those who can pay for it.

We know that many parents want to spend more time with their children, but they can't afford not to work.

Many workers are in jobs which do not allow them to look for flexible working hours, part time work, or a career break if needed to care for young children.

We know that many parents have little or no choice when it comes to the type of childcare they use, because of the pressure on places.

We know that women are giving up their job and their career rather than continue with the pressure of combining working outside the home and parenting, and that this will have a detrimental effect on their future earning power, and their pensions when they are older.

We know that many parents are away from their children for long hours every day while they are at work, leaving little time for parenting and family relationship-building.

We know that for many lone parents, and those on low incomes or living on social welfare payments, the struggle to be at work or in education is made impossible if childcare is not available, or affordable.

We know that 1 in 7 of our children live in consistent poverty, and that having access to quality pre-school education would make an enormous difference to them.

We know that our early school leaving rate is as high as it was during our years of high unemployment – and that good quality early education would have made a difference.

We know that many publicly-funded childcare centres are staffed largely by workers on Community Employment Schemes – not in itself a bad thing, but indicative of the low level of funding given to these centres, as well as a sign of how uncertain publicly funded childcare is.

We know that many communities have struggled, and continue to struggle, to provide care and education for pre-school children and are not being supported by Government policy.

Many childminders are operating in the black economy, isolated but in fear of the impact the taxman might have on their income. Since the vast majority of them are women, this is having an impact on their future income, especially pensions. They do not have the social protection to which they are entitled.

But this Government, despite having the means to do so and the opportunity, has failed to come forward with a coherent plan for the development of an early childhood care and education system.

In 1999 this Government published a White Paper on Early Childhood Education. But a policy audit recently published by the National Economic and Social Forum has concluded that the Government is guilty of “inaction, peripheral implementation and drift” when it comes to implementing policy on early childhood care and education.

What we have is several different Ministers and several different Government Departments, making it up as they go along, a little bit of spending here, another announcement there.

But it falls far short of what is needed – a comprehensive plan for the development of a childcare system for our country which puts children first, which works for all parents and communities and which tackles the serious issue of child poverty and disadvantage.

This Government is failing our children, their parents and the communities they live in. And they are putting our economic prosperity at risk by failing to put in place a hugely important piece of the jigsaw which is creating our economic success – childcare.

And the Government has failed parents. With 50% of the parents of children under five out at work, it is astonishing that this Government has failed to support parents, expecting them to manage all their roles, alone.

Cost

We have to accept that the availability and affordability of childcare are key issues for a growing number of Irish parents. The cost of having a child cared for, as well as finding a quality crèche place or childminder, has become a bigger problem as the Government has failed to put a childcare infrastructure in place. It is now commonplace for couples with two children to pay more for childcare than for their mortgage.

The result is financial pressure on families, the closing down of career options for parents, the loss to the economy of skilled employees who opt out of the workplace, as well as the inability of many on social welfare who are parents of small children, to be at work.

Affordability and availability, however, are only part of the picture.

Time to be a parent – flexible working

For many parents, the issue is as much about time, as it is about money. Being a parent is about spending time with your children, and for many, juggling many competing demands, there is little time left to be a parent. This issue is as important as the high cost of childcare.

Many women are being forced to give up their career, not by choice, but due either to the high cost of childcare or the absence of flexible work options which would allow them to combine their responsibilities as parents as well as staying in the workforce.

Flexible working options, including career breaks, are giving many employees the opportunity to be parents as well as workers. It is time these were also made more generally available.

Employers are losing out too...

The loss of skilled and experienced women to the workforce is a serious problem for many employers, who want to see the development of a coherent childcare strategy which allows workers to be parents too.

Pre-School Education for all our children

For society, the issue is as much about child development. The pre-school years are vital in terms of learning and personal development and we have a very low spend on early years education in this country.

Children With Special Needs

Special consideration should be given to children with special needs, particularly in relation to pre-school and after-school services. There is a requirement to address the particular difficulties experienced by parents of children with special needs, for whom the problems associated with childcare and early education are even more acute.

There are answers...

There are answers to the childcare issues which we face now.

Other European countries have sophisticated and mature systems of childcare which meet the needs of children, parents, society and the economy.

We are well capable of coming up with our own solutions here in Ireland – solutions which meet childrens needs first and foremost.

But these issues will not be solved overnight. We need a coherent vision, a workable strategy which can deliver an early childhood care and education system for Ireland which delivers first and foremost for our children.

Labour's Vision

A national child-centred learning-focused system of childcare and pre-school education

At the centre of our vision is the child.

The pre-school and early school years are the most important in anyone's development. It is the time when we learn most quickly about the world, and when we learn how to learn. Every child, no matter what their family circumstances, should have an equal opportunity to have the best possible educational start in life.

Parents are the best judge of what that experience should be. Each family forms its own judgement on how best to care for, nurture and develop their children in these years. The role of Government is to empower parents in the choices they make, to offer them flexibility, practical help and a supportive environment.

We are at a crossroads. We have decisions to make about how we deliver quality childcare and pre-school education.

In a global, knowledge-based economy, our future depends more than ever on investing in the education and nurturing of our children. Yet childcare is intrinsically labour-intensive and consequently expensive to provide. If left to the market to supply, it will remain expensive, often be provided by relatively poorly paid and untrained staff, and become the preserve of better-off and more highly paid parents. Moreover, as a recent OECD review concludes, without public investment "the children who need the best services often receive the poorest quality".

The alternative is substantial public investment in childcare. And it works. Numerous studies point to enormous social and economic returns from investment in our children.

Investment is essential to expand provision, make childcare and pre-school education available to all, and ensure the highest standards.

This has barely been recognised by the current administration. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme has so far created a substantial number of childcare places, but with no guarantee of ongoing and adequate funding, most of these facilities will continue to survive on a shoestring, with low paid staff and an over-reliance on community employment workers to keep them in business.

Public investment in pre-school education is also the channel through which educational disadvantage can be tackled most readily and least expensively. The return to society of investment in this area is simply enormous

Labour wants to build a national child-centred learning-focused structure for childcare and pre-school education. We want that system to respect and facilitate the choices parents make for their children. We want that system to be built on existing foundations, working with existing providers, developing a mix of childcare and pre-school options. And we want that system to be built around children and their parents.

Five Key Areas

The Childcare crisis will not be tackled overnight. A national structure for childcare, built on existing foundations, will take time to develop. But we must also tackle the immediate crisis facing today's parents.

There is no magic wand. No simple solution. What is required is concerted action on the following five fronts:

Time for Parents

- A year's paid parental leave, helping both parents to be with their children, particularly in the first year of their child's life, and child to be together in the first year of the child's life, and the right to flexible working options, including career breaks and part-time work

Meeting the Cost to Parents

- A direct subsidy of the cost of childcare payable to all parents

Pre-school education

- Pre-school education must be available to every child, as a key element in their development

Childcare Places

- More childcare and pre-school places, and in convenient locations

Enhancing Quality

- A Strong Focus on maintaining and enhancing the quality of childcare, including a register of childminders, with an income tax disregard of €8000 for childminders to encourage them to register.

Time for Parents

For many parents, juggling home and work commitments is about both time and money. Many parents would like to spend more time with their children, but they simply can't afford to take unpaid leave.

In Ireland, with 14 weeks unpaid leave, we have one of the worst entitlements to parental leave in Europe.

This problem is particularly acute in the first year of a child's life. Paid maternity leave in Ireland is so short that mothers routinely work well into their ninth month of pregnancy, so as to maximise the time available with the baby after birth. This also contributes to Ireland's low breastfeeding rate, since some mothers feel compelled to wean babies early, in advance of returning to work.

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform Review of the Parental Leave Act 2001 shows only 20 per cent of eligible employees have taken leave since it was introduced. The vast majority of those returning to work cite economic reasons for not taking more time at home.

The solution is longer and paid parental leave.

Labour in Government would legislate so that, when combined with existing maternity leave arrangements, parents can spend up to a year off from work, paid on a basis similar to existing maternity benefit. This period would include a provision for couples to share time, so that fathers would also be entitled to paid parental leave.

There is also an on-going need for flexibility in working arrangements. Labour favours the development of a right to part-time work, and to career breaks, subject to reasonable conditions for employers. The onus of proof would be on the employer to demonstrate that flexibility is not feasible. These arrangements have substantial benefits for employers, as detailed by the OECD, including better employee relations, improved commitment and motivation, lower staff turnover, better productivity, lower absenteeism and stronger financial performance.

Labour is proposing:

- Paid Parental Leave, modelled on Maternity Benefit, paid from social insurance, for up to one year, with an option for fathers to take part of that time.
- A legal right to take up to three years career break. We will explore appropriate fiscal support for employers.
- A right to part-time work, subject to reasonable conditions

Cost

The cost of childcare is crippling for many Irish families. A recent OECD study of childcare in Ireland estimated costs at 30 per cent of disposable family income in contrast to an EU average of 8 per cent – a situation it found to be “unsustainable”¹. Numerous young families have reported that childcare is a greater financial burden on one-third of young Irish families than their mortgage. As a result, Ireland shows a particularly high drop-out rate (from the workforce) after the birth of a first and second child.

The high cost of childcare to lone parents, even when subsidised, is also contributing to the high level of unemployment and poverty among lone parents. Being unable to access affordable childcare is preventing lone parents from being in the workforce, or from getting training to join the workforce. By failing to make childcare accessible and affordable, we are refusing lone parents and their children the opportunity to participate fully in the workforce and in the community.

Of its nature, childcare and pre-school education is expensive and labour-intensive to provide. With infants under one

year, for example, a three-to-one staff ratio means that three families combined have to pay for the full salary of a childcare staff member, plus light, heat, insurance and all other costs, and all from after-tax income. While staff ratios are less stringent for older children, it remains true that parents have to be earning quite high salaries to make working financially worthwhile. This is all the more true when a family has two or more children.

Good quality childcare costs money – but at the moment the cost is being borne by the parent. The crisis for parents can only be resolved, therefore, through state subsidy of childcare.

This is in everyone's interest, both economically, since it increases labour force participation, and socially, since it provides for better quality childcare. As the Centre for Early Childhood Development has argued "Quality in early childhood education is only achievable if strong Government support is present."

We propose that subsidies be channelled directly to parents. This will empower parents to make their own choices about the type of childcare which best suits them, whether in the form of a crèche, a playgroup, or a childminder. As a CSO study has shown, crèches and other institutions are still in the minority in terms of the number of children in non-parental childcare – an indication of the informal, and highly personal, nature of childcare.

Labour is proposing an Early Years Subsidy for all families. We will examine the administrative and other policy advantages of delivering this as a refundable tax credit or as a direct payment (a refundable credit is one whereby, should a family's tax bill be too low to fully avail of the full amount of the credit, the balance is paid directly to the family. This means that the benefit from the credit is not related to the family's income.)

The Early years subsidy will initially be set at €50 per week payable from the expiration of maternity leave (or from birth, where a mother does not receive Maternity Benefit) until the child enters state-subsidised pre-school. It will be resumed when a child enters primary school, at a lower rate of €25 per week

The Early Years Subsidy will be paid for each child, irrespective of their parents' labour force status.

Labour is proposing:

- An Early Years Subsidy of €50 per week for each child payable from the expiration of maternity leave (or from birth, where a mother does not receive Maternity Benefit) until the child enters state-subsidised pre-school
- An Early Years Subsidy of €25 per week for each child for primary school children, up to the age of 12.

¹ OECD, Report on Early Childhood Education in Ireland, Dec. 2003

Pre-School Education

Pre-school is the Cinderella Sector in Irish education. Existing provision is patchy, and there is no national aspiration to provide pre-school education to every Irish child. As pointed out by the NESF, 'Ireland has by far the lowest rate of enrolment in state-funded ECCC by comparison with other countries'.

Yet, there is substantial international evidence to show that pre-school education, in a number of different forms, can be hugely beneficial for children. Structured play and early education are important elements in developing a child's capacity to interact with others, and to learn how to learn. Pre-school education is also a fundamental element in tackling educational disadvantage, which can often be detected in children of pre-school age. Pre-school can help to tackle these disadvantages at the youngest possible age, at a fraction of the cost to society, and to the child themselves, of subsequent interventions. The return on investment, socially and economically, is enormous. There is ample evidence that childcare and early education costs pay for themselves as much as seven times over².

There is much evidence to show that pre-school education is the key to tackling our high rate of school drop out.

Labour believes that every child in Ireland should be entitled to free pre-school education. We would see this entitlement involving provision of five half-days per week, in the year immediately prior to entry to primary school. Where parents are working full-time, this would be provided in a day-care facility, so that children's pre-school is an integral part of their day-care. Free pre-school, however, would be available to every child in Ireland, whatever their parent's labour force status.

We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge involved in delivering on this promise. It is a major project, involving building new facilities, or converting existing ones, and training and deploying a significant number of staff. We would see it as essential to work through existing providers, so as, as far as possible, to knit pre-school education into the broader childcare infrastructure. Yet we also believe that this element in our broader strategy is essential, if we are to re-orientate childcare away from simply 'minding' children, towards a focus on early education and giving every child the best possible start in life.

Labour in Government will:

- Provide one year of free pre-school education (five half days per week) for every child.

² Highscope Preschool Model Research in the USA, "Talking Educational Disadvantage" our recent policy document. See also OECD Report p.59 for 6 different studies.

Supply

While the cost of childcare is a serious problem for parents, finding a childcare place is still a major issue. This need, coupled with the objective of providing for universal pre-school education, means there is a major requirement for additional places.

Currently Irish coverage for the 3-6 age group is the second lowest in Europe (see Table 6, Appendix 1, OECD Review par.58) and for the 0-3 age group it is in the 10%-15% range. This contrasts with our commitment with our EU partners ³ to provide childcare by 2010, to at least 90% of children aged between 3 years and mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.

Labour believes that measures taken in this respect up to now have been piecemeal and partial. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, for example, has provided staffing grants to some crèches, the future of which is uncertain, since these facilities are supposed to become self-sustaining over time. Quite what process is expected to bring this about is unspecified. In areas of disadvantage, in particular, on-going subsidisation of staff costs is a requirement.

There is a need for concerted planning to increase the supply of childcare and early education places, in some circumstances through direct provision by the State, or some agent of the state.

There is a need for childcare needs to be built into planning permissions and the development of residential housing projects, with developers providing sites, or where appropriate, financial contributions towards childcare facilities. We favour the development of childcare and pre-school education facilities, where possible, on sites adjacent to primary schools so as to physically integrate these facilities into the broader education system.

In future, all new primary schools should have childcare and early education facilities built in at the planning stage. We stress, however, that it is essential that we work with existing providers so as to protect and enhance existing provision, while also providing new places.

We would also seek to develop after-school programmes in schools. This would involve extending the opening hours of school buildings, and providing for supervised activity after normal school hours. (Labour is committed to undertaking a detailed study of the problem of insurance costs in schools, and we would factor the issue of longer opening hours into this study, and into any solutions identified.) We believe that children should be given access to a wide range of after-school activities, which should contribute both to their development as rounded individuals, while also answering a childcare need. It is important, however, that these are seen as positive options, rather than being simply an extension of the school day, and greater regimentation of children's lives.

In this respect, it is important to also ensure that inadequate numbers of places in primary schools does not create pressure on childcare places.

Labour in Government will:

- Work with providers to expand the number of childcare places
- Provide childcare facilities established and run directly by the state, or other non-profit entities in some circumstances
- Ensure that childcare facilities are integrated into plans for residential developments
- Where possible develop childcare facilities at or near primary schools
- Build childcare and early education facilities into plans for new primary schools
- Increase support for childcare centres in disadvantaged areas
- Promote supervised after-school activities in schools and a wide range of positive after-school options for children.
- Ensure adequate provision of primary school places, to prevent feedback of pressure on childcare places.

³ Under the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council

Quality

Nothing is more important to parents than the quality of their children's care. Yet, there is a dearth of information on the quality of childcare and pre-school education in Ireland. For many years, the voluntary and community sector has attempted to meet the demand for quality care and while there has been progress in recent years in developing standards for childcare, this mostly relates to the physical structure of buildings and staff-child ratios. It has little to do with the content of a child's day or the quality of their experience in terms of stimulation and play opportunities through which they can learn.

This relates, in large measure, to the informality of childcare provision in Ireland and the total absence of an overall policy or vision informing this sector and coming from the Government. Policy is ad hoc and delivery dependent on the commitment of passionate individuals, many poorly rewarded for their effort.

Some 70% of children in non-parental childcare are cared for by childminders, rather than in the more formal setting of a crèche. This trend is likely to expand, given the decreasing number of unpaid relatives (grannies and aunts) available to act as childminders. We know little or nothing about the educational or developmental content of these childminder arrangements. Some may be outstanding, others inadequate – we simply don't know, and it is difficult for parents to know either, before entering into any arrangement. Childcare staff are often untrained, and poorly paid. There is still no adequate Garda vetting of staff working with children.

Labour believes that the way to improve childcare quality is through a pro-active, positive and supportive engagement with childcare providers. We favour the development of childcare outreach programmes, such that those providing childcare can develop their skills 'on-the-job', as well as through formal training. Childcare resource centres could support networks of childminders and childcare facilities, enhancing the quality of provision and developing mutual support. Such networks operate in other countries, including France. For this to be possible requires the registration of childcare providers, something which will only happen if childminders are encouraged to come out of the black economy. This in turn has benefits for the persons concerned including access to pension entitlements.

It is also important to ensure that parents have a strong role in the governance structures of publicly-run childcare facilities, and that there is an appropriate grievance procedure.

Clearly, training and qualification of staff is central to the delivery of quality care. There is also a need to examine the level of training and qualification of staff across the childcare and pre-school area.

Labour in Government will:

- Develop standards for childcare which include developmental and educational goals, not just bricks and mortar regulations
- Establish a register of all childcare facilities and providers, including for over-6s, as the basis on which there can be positive engagement to enhance skills
- Bring childminders out of the black economy by allowing up to €8,000 per annum to be earned tax free from childcare in the home
- Develop outreach services to enhance the skills of childcare workers and childminders, linked to resource centres supporting networks of childminders
- Require care-settings to include outdoor play areas
- Develop an inspectorate of facilities comprised of childcare professionals
- Develop a system of information and consultation with parents
- Develop a quality-mark system for childcare facilities
- Conduct a national audit of training and qualification levels and develop targets accordingly
- Garda clearance for all childcare staff.

Delivery

Labour is committed to nothing less than a national child-centred learning-focused childcare system which supports parents, sustains our economic success and allows everyone to participate. The task of delivering on it is not a small one, and will not come cheap. But quality childcare cannot be delivered cheaply and our children deserve the best. And we can afford it.

We can build on what is now a small but committed structure on the ground – the County Childcare Committees – and on the range of committed voluntary and community effort which is struggling to meet the huge demand for quality childcare.

But ultimately this exciting and essential policy needs to be driven with passion and commitment. Labour in Government, therefore, will place childcare and early education at the forefront of our agenda

And put children first.