



Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on
Children, Disability, Equality and Integration

National Action Plan for Childminding

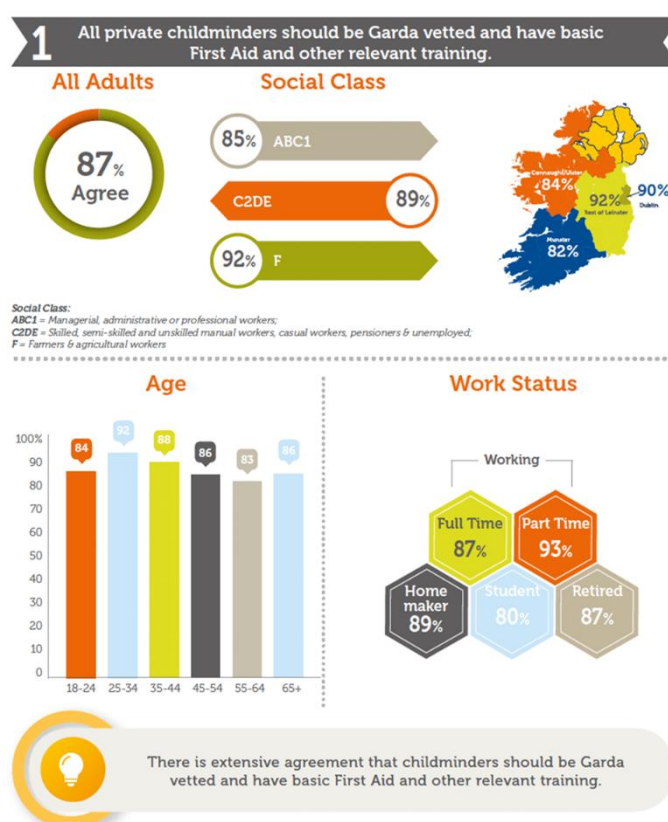
25 May 2021

Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the opportunity to present to the Committee today about the recently published National Action Plan for Childminding. As the leading support organisation in our sector in Ireland, we have also broadly welcomed the Plan. Childminding is regulated in most European countries and Early Childhood Ireland believes that the move to regulate the current informal childminding sector in Ireland in the very best interests of children here.

As the Plan recognises, childminding plays a central role in the provision of both early learning and care (ELC), and school-age childcare (SAC) in Ireland. The Plan follows through on the commitments made in the First 5 strategy published in 2019 and in last year's Programme for Government. It estimates that there are approximately 15,000 (non-relative) childminders in Ireland. The Child Care Act 1991 exempts most childminders from regulation. Currently, fewer than 80 childminders are registered with Tusla. One consequence of this is that the vast majority of childminders cannot take part in the National Childcare Scheme, so thousands of families cannot access subsidies to reduce the fees they pay.

Our second [Annual Childcare Barometer](#), which was published in 2019, showed overwhelming public support for ensuring regulations and supports were extended to all paid childminders. At that time, 87% of Irish adults were in favour of Garda vetting and basic training requirements for childminding and we believe that this was testament to the importance of this option for families.



As members of the Committee know, the National Action Plan mainly addresses self-employed childminders who work in their own homes. It is not primarily concerned with au pairs or nannies who work in the child's home. The Action Plan does, however, include an action to develop

information and training resources in relation to them. The Action Plan will not extend regulation to those who solely care for children who are related to them.

A Phased Transition

Early Childhood Ireland recognises the scale of the challenge in moving childminding from an invisible, informal sector to a regulated, formal sector that sits within the ELC and SAC system.

Our learning from, and experience of, transitioning from an unregulated centre-based informal childcare sector to a regulated, publicly funded one, highlights the importance of the availability of appropriate supports, and phased transition periods.

It is also imperative that the registration process is smooth and clear for childminders. The timing of the phases will need to be signalled well in advance to them and to the statutory and non-governmental organisations tasked with supporting the sector, so that we can be ready.

The Action Plan sets out a phased approach to reform:

- Phase 1 will be a preparatory phase lasting 2-3 years, will involve: the development of specific childminder regulations; development of bespoke training and supports; detailed costings; and further consultation;
- Phase 2 will be a transition phase lasting 3-5 years, will see new regulations coming into force, access opened to the National Childcare Scheme, transitional training requirements, and expansion of supports;
- Phase 3 will involve full implementation, with the end of transitional arrangements, and childminders regulated and able to access multiple supports.

Early Childhood Ireland believes that the phased approach to reform as set out in the Plan is reasonable.

We have a concern about a caveat in the Plan about timing, however, *“While the end-point is clear, the Action Plan leaves open the precise timing of movement between Phases 1, 2 and 3. Given the potential cost to the Exchequer of opening the National Childcare Scheme to childminders, the timing of the transition from Phase 1 to 2 will be Budget-dependent and will depend on agreement with the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform¹.”*

The government needs to prioritise completing these phases, given the interests of children and their families and to avoid any unnecessary delays for childminders. The estimates indicated in the Plan are not exorbitant, rising to €23m per annum by Phase 3. This amount of investment is not beyond the reach of a wealthy country. It is vital that children of all ages can benefit from quality experiences whether their parents avail of a childminder and/or a setting.

¹ National Action Plan for Childminding (2021 – 2028), p.42

Conclusion

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the launch of the National Action Plan for Childminding. It is a positive step forward, as childminders already play a vital role in the provision of both Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare in Ireland. This needs to be recognised, valued and supported. We hope that members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration will play a role, collectively, and individually within your communities, to support and promote this Plan.

Finally we wish to thank the Chairperson for the invitation on your behalf to attend today and to the Clerk and her team for their support in advance of this meeting.

/Ends