



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

# Child Poverty

23 November 2021

## Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the opportunity to present to the Committee today on the theme of child poverty. Our main focus will be on the National Childcare Scheme, and we wish to also raise an issue which is having an impact on all children, with a particular potential effect on disadvantaged children.

## National Childcare Scheme

As the leading support organisation in our sector, we have welcomed the National Childcare Scheme as the mechanism through which our system of childcare can be transformed to meet the needs of young children and their families.

The National Childcare Scheme is described as Ireland's pathway to quality, accessible, affordable early learning and care and school aged childcare. It was intended that it would replace the previous childcare programmes with a single, streamlined and more user-friendly scheme.

Its objectives, to improve outcomes for children and support lifelong learning, to reduce poverty, to facilitate labour market activation, and to reduce the cost of childcare in Ireland are worthy.

As Members of the Committee will be aware, the intention to bring the previous Schemes under the National Childcare Scheme was reversed, which means that in some families there are children with different subsidies to each other. This is very regrettable, but in hindsight seems inevitable. While the policy objectives of the National Childcare Scheme are not dissimilar to such Schemes in other jurisdictions, they are very challenging given their somewhat contradictory nature. There is a work-study test and a sponsorship system which although improved, is unwieldy for families and as Members will know has left some families with reduced subsidies.

Early Childhood Ireland suggests that the poverty reduction objective needs to be prioritised by government. This would help the most disadvantaged families as well as the wider objective to reduce overall child poverty levels. The mechanics of how this would work would need to be agreed, but we hope that the review of the Scheme will address this issue.

## Data Collection

Early Childhood Ireland operates a national information service for providers, and in the last few weeks, we are hearing of increasing baby room closures. We are monitoring this carefully, as we are concerned that there is a hidden crisis burgeoning in our sector. Our belief is that this is happening now, as government winds back the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme and providers are facing difficult decisions, which were postponed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The closures themselves are of concern; but this is also a key capacity metric about which currently no data is being collected. The issue of closures impacts on every family, but if we are facing into decreasing provision for very young children, this will have a particular effect on those who are disadvantaged. They may have a sponsorship agreement, but no place in an early years setting; thus reducing access to important early intervention to children. Early Childhood Ireland is asking Members of the Committee to request that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth immediately begins to gather data on room closures in real time, and to use this data to develop a robust policy response, so that all families can have access to quality early years care and education.

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