

Ireland case study:

Promoting integrated delivery of early childhood education and care services

Pamela Abbott, Lucia D'Ambruoso, University of Aberdeen,
Elizabeth Nixon, Trinity College Dublin¹

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1. Introduction

This case study is implemented within the project 'Fostering policy support for child and family wellbeing - Learning from international experience'. Using a thematic and analytic framework for the project that draws on Kingdon's multi-streams theory,² we are gathering and sharing evidence and learning on what has led to increased policy recognition of and policy change in family and child health and wellbeing (FCHW). In specific countries that have demonstrated policy recognition and change in FCHW post 2000, we are exploring within their context how different policy actors have come together to raise policy attention, develop policy options and promote their political adoption as processes for policy change, taking advantage of windows of opportunity for that change. The case studies were implemented with a local focal person with direct knowledge or experience of the policy process and include evidence from published and grey literature and interview of key informants involved in the policy processes.

The case study explores a policy shift post 2000 to promoting FCHW through integrated delivery of services for young children and families.

The main window of opportunity was in 1997 when the Fianna Fail government was elected, with a commitment to greater state involvement in early childhood care and education (ECEC). The main issues addressed were: the need to provide care for infants and young children so their mothers could have paid employment to meet the growing economy's labour market shortages; to ensure that children were ready for primary school, to improve performance, enable them to fulfil potential; and to reduce child poverty and break the cycle of disadvantage.

The main advocates in the late 1990s were the EU, OECD, American Philanthropies, trade unions, employers, women's organisations and academia and, by the 2000s, two powerful non-state actors, Start Strong and the Children's Rights Alliance. From the late 1990s, the need for integrated care and education for children under-6 years and particularly for under-3 year olds, for their and the country's development was acknowledged by the government and expressed in policy. Further shifts occurred in 2006, when childhood and youth affairs became part of an Office within the Prime Minister's Department, led by a junior minister and, in 2011, an independent department with a cabinet minister. Since 2016, the government unit dealing with ECEC has grown from 7 to 80 staff members. In 2018, it published *First Five*, the long-awaited implementation strategy for policies of the late 1990s, based on integrated services for children aged 0-6 years.

The shift remains in transition. The government has developed policies for 0-6-year-olds, but in practice they still distinguish between care for the under-3 year olds to help working mothers and pre-school for 3-6-year-olds as school preparation. This may be partly attributed to traditional Catholic family values that have persisted, with successive governments reluctant to intervene in the family.

2. The context

The Republic of Ireland is a high-income country in northern Europe. It is a liberal parliamentary democracy with a vibrant civil society and has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 1973. In 2000, the population was 3.8 million with 29% under the age of 18 years (Inter-Departmental Group, 2000). The total fertility rate at 1.9 was one of the highest among high-income countries although still below replacement rate. Nevertheless, concerns were raised as to how a shrinking proportion of workers could provide for the health and social care of an ageing population and maintain a strong economy.

Both lone-parent and dual-earner families increased after 1980, with the latter predicted to continue to increase. Half (48%) of married women were in employment in 2002, compared to 31% in 1990 (Corrigan, 2004). The human development index was 0.86 in 2000. The poverty rate in 2004 was higher for children, at 15.7%, than general poverty which was 10.8%. Children who had disabilities, were homeless or from ethnic minorities were especially disadvantaged (Inter-Departmental Group, 2000).

Historically, Catholicism has shaped attitudes to the family and children in Ireland, emphasising traditional gender roles, family responsibility for children's upbringing and a strong influence of the church over social policy as the main provider of social and educational services (Fahey and Nixon, 2014). In the 2016 Census, 78.3% of the population identified as Catholic, a decrease from its post-World War peak of 95% in 1961. Catholicism is reflected in the Constitution, which prioritises the rights of the family over those of individuals, makes the family responsible for the education of children, and gives the Church a significant role in education (Corrigan, 2004). Traditional views of the role of the family changed after the 1960s and by the 2000s, there was strong public support for women having their own income, albeit with men retaining primary provider roles (Fine-Davis, 2011). Family and child policies were still conservative and although state-provided family income support had broadened, there was little in the way of family services (Fahey and Nixon, 2014).

Nevertheless, the 1990s marked a watershed, with more attention to family policy and a focus on children as a specific group distinct from the family. The Commission on the Family, in 1998, recommended that the overall objective of policy should be to promote family wellbeing, with an emphasis on preventative services and interventions for disadvantaged families (Commission on the Family, 1998). Reducing child poverty was a main objective: in 2000 Ireland was ranked 18th worst out of 23 OECD countries for child poverty and the government developed a childcare policy to enable parents to reconcile work and care, enhance child development and increase household incomes (Daly and Clavero, 2002). There was also an increase in family services and increased emphasis on children's rights.

Until the 1990s, ECEC service development was mainly driven by the voluntary sector, with family support services for disadvantaged children provided by charitable organisations including the Catholic church (Hayes, 2006). However, the 1991 [Child Care Act](#), which updated legislation from 1905, marked a shift from reactive child protection to a preventive system. The Act set out the state's responsibility for child welfare and, for the first time, regulations for early years services. In 1994 the [Early Start Programme](#) was introduced, providing a year of pre-school to a very limited number of children from deprived homes. By 2000, however, Ireland still had no universal ECEC provision, although some provision was made for under-6-year-olds in primary schools, and some financial support from Department of Health for community-based services for children at risk and needing protection (Corrigan, 2004). The gap in pre-school provision, combined with increased demand as more mothers became active in the labour market, was met by extended family members, local childminders and a growing number of private-sector and not-for-profit providers.



Map of Ireland. Creative Commons, undated

3. The policy change

This section describes the process of developing integrated national policy for ECEC 1999-2019.

In 1997, a coalition government led by the centre-right party Fianna Fail came to power. The party was committed to state funding of preschool education, linking provision of ECEC to the need to encourage women to join the workforce to increase prosperity. Ireland had a strong economy, low unemployment and an increasing demand for women in the labour market to meet labour shortages (Barry and Sherlock, 2008). These changes directly impacted on family life as more married women joined the labour force, and this provided the context for a significant policy shift in ECEC, with an increase in demand for affordable services and state involvement (Hayes, 2010).

Since 1999, the policy on children has been framed within an explicit FCHW discourse. The shift from *welfare to wellbeing* was set out in the national strategy [Our Children Their Lives](#), in 2000. The strategy had three goals: giving children a voice; evidence-informed services and services of sufficient quality to promote all aspects of development. A key objective was to meet children's early education and development needs through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures. The state was responsible for supporting parents to bring up their children, with the government driving changes to improve wellbeing of all children (Inter-Departmental Group, 2000). The 1999 White Paper on ECEC, [Ready To Learn](#), covered the educational needs of children from birth to 6-years, noting that children have to start primary school at six years, although many start earlier. However, it focused on preschool education for 3-6-year-olds.

Meanwhile, the *National Development Plan 2000-6* emphasised that the primary objective of childcare for those under-3 years was to enable parents to reconcile work with care and to tackle deprivation, rather than to improve the wellbeing of all children (Corrigan, 2004). The increase in the supply of childcare places in home- and centre-based services was driven by the 1999 National Childcare Strategy with substantial EU funding under the [Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme](#). In 2002, the National Childcare Coordination Committee was set up in the Ministry of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to coordinate the delivery of services to children. In 2006, it became the Office of the Minister for Children with the appointment of a Junior Minister. In 2011, a separate Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs was founded, headed by a full cabinet minister.

In 2001, the Department of Education and Science funded a centre of excellence, managed by the Dublin Institute of Technology and St Patrick's Teacher Training College, as an investment in early years education and research. The Centre developed the first national ECEC quality framework, introduced in 2006, which is still used. However, funding was cut as a result of the economic crisis in 2008. The crisis also had an impact on ECEC generally.

The Government had introduced a universal flat-rate *Early Childcare Supplement* in 2000 to all families with young children to recognise caring and to help with ECEC costs, but this was abolished when the free preschool year, a much cheaper alternative, was introduced in 2010. This marked a shift towards a more child-centred policy, acknowledging a collective responsibility for child wellbeing rather than seeing it as a private matter for the family.

By 2014, the division between a care service for children under-3 year olds, aimed primarily at children of low-income families, including lone mothers and children at risk, and a part-time pre-school education service for all children was still in place. The only direct state funding was for the free preschool year, and state investment in ECEC was still comparatively low at 0.4% of GDP (OECD, 2015). The strategy for centre-based ECEC remained one of encouraging a mixed economy of care, with service delivery by private, voluntary and informal sector providers. A shift had begun, however, from a focus on only increasing the number of places in care and for preschool education to concern with the quality of service provision. Reflecting this shift, a national quality framework, [Siolta](#), was introduced in 2006 and an early childhood curriculum framework, [Aistear](#), in 2009 (Murphy, 2015).

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, the national development strategy for children and young people 2014-20 reiterated commitments in *Our Children Their Lives* to promoting wellbeing of all children. It was not until 2018, however, that the government published its integrated strategy for babies, young children and families, *First 5*. Going beyond ECEC, it included all services for children under-6 years: increasing paid parental leave; establishing a universal and a targeted parenting service; making ECEC affordable; increasing its quality, improving working conditions and developing a graduate-led profession; and regulating and supporting paid childminders. At the same time, the government introduced a universal childcare strategy for all children aged 0-3 years.

Timeline of policy and reforms on early childhood education and care

Year	Policy/ law/ program
1997	Fianna Fail, formed a government committed to introducing policies for ECEC
1999	National Childcare Strategy first concerted attempt to develop a coherent and comprehensive government childcare policy Ready to Learn: White paper on early childhood education set out proposals for improving quality of ECEC and enabling all children to meet their potential
2000	National Children’s Strategy: Our children their lives 10-year plan for improving children’s wellbeing and well-becoming <i>Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme</i> supplement paid to all parents to help with costs of ECEC
2001	Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECDE) set up to achieve the goals set out in <i>Ready to Learn</i> for quality ECEC and carrying out research
2002	National Childcare Coordination Committee established to coordinate policy
2006	<i>Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (a junior minister)</i> established Siolta a quality framework for ECEC, which was developed but not made compulsory
2008	Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development disbanded
2009	Aistear National Early Childhood Curriculum Framework launched
2010	<i>Universal Free Preschool Year Initiative</i> <i>National Childcare Investment Programme</i> withdrawn
2011	General election Fine Gael form coalition government Establishment of Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs
2012	Following a national referendum, the Constitution was amended to recognise the rights of the child (Article 42A)
2014	Tusla (Child and Family Support Agency) brought together health and social services for families and children under one agency Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: national policy framework for children and young people , follow-on to <i>Our Children Their Lives</i> , emphasised child wellbeing and ECEC
2018	First Five: A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families 10-year plan for reforming ECEC including new funding model, comprehensive systems review and workforce plan
2019	The National Childcare Scheme from November 2019 provides: universal, non-means tested subsidy for children under-3 up to maximum 40 hours a week towards costs of registered childcare places; and means-tested subsidy for children aged from 24 weeks to 15 years, for 40 hours a week if parents are working and 15 hours for children who have at least one non-working parent

Sources: Corrigan, 2004; Hayes, 2014; O’Donnell, 2018

Since the late 1990s, the government has made progress in developing an integrated pattern of provision for children aged 0-6 years, covering all aspects of their current wellbeing and future development. By 2019, all children under 4 years had access to subsidised ECEC and all children over 2 years 10 months benefit from the universal free preschool program, which has almost universal uptake (OECD, 2017). However, elements of *Ready to Learn* have not yet been implemented, including addressing the [working conditions](#) and qualification of the ECEC workforce.

Standards and practices of preschool provision are variable and there is still a failure to recognise that quality services for young children require both care and learning. Provision is fragmented into childcare for working parents (for under 3-year-olds) and early education for 3-6 year-olds as a school-readiness initiative and continues to be provided by the non-government sectors, mainly childminders. The primary focus has been on creating childcare spaces rather than on meeting children's needs and rights. Catholic family values continue to influence policy, with a tension between policies to promote child wellbeing and respecting the privacy of the family.



Preschool children Dublin, [Jason Clarke](#), 2013

4. The story of the change

4.1 Raising the issue

This section explores the actors, processes and evidence that raised motivations to address the issues relating to state provision of an integrated early childhood and education services.

The window of opportunity for a shift to greater government involvement in ECEC came in 1997 with the election of the Fianna Fail government committed to ECEC. In *Ready to Learn 1999*, the government argued that quality ECEC benefits all children as well as addressing socioeconomic disadvantage. It also argued that it makes economic sense as it yields high social as well as individual returns (Government of Ireland, 1999). The White Paper was a response to: increased demand for childcare by parents, trade unions, employers and women's groups as more mothers took paid employment; greater recognition by the government and civil society of the educational, social and economic benefits of ECEC; and EU funding for infrastructure development. It also made ECEC visible as a public policy concern and provided the conceptual space for the issue to be taken up and advanced by international and domestic actors advocating for specific policies and holding the government to account for its commitments.

The policy shift in ECEC took place between 1997 and 2007, and since then advocacy groups have kept it on the agenda, arguing especially for integrated ECEC for all children aged 0-6 and for improvements in its quality (Hayes, 2010). Issue-raising in Ireland was complex: there were a number of different groups of actors, including government, with overlapping membership, agendas and channels of influence.

The main actors can be divided into five main groups, shown in the table overleaf. Overall, advocacy for ECEC identified a number of issues, including: the need for adequate, affordable childcare to enable women to take on paid employment to meet the demands for labour in a booming economy; the need for integrated ECEC for 0-6-year-olds, to ensure that all children reach their full potential; the need to improve quality of ECEC; and the need for targeted interventions for young children living in deprived neighbourhoods.

Initially, international actors raised the issue as one that government should address and prioritise: most notably OECD, EU, UNICEF, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and [Atlantic Philanthropies](#). These actors continued to exert influence on the government by, for example, publication of UNICEF [Report Cards](#), the [OECD's](#) comparative reports on ECEC services, EU recommendations on ECEC and Directives on parental leave (EC, 2011, 2013), periodic reports by the CRC monitoring committee (CRC, 1998, 2016). [Atlantic Philanthropies](#) had success in building relationships with government.

National actors also became involved in getting the issue onto government's agenda and raising its priority. Children's advocacy groups, trade unions, employers, civil society, academics, the media and national voluntary organisations initially raised the issues through policy briefs and existing channels of influence in government, including representation on the Social Partnerships. They were increasingly involved with reports and consultations prepared for government (Hayes, 2006). The most influential local advocacy groups have been coalition organisations, [Start Strong](#) and the [Children's Rights Alliance](#), both funded by Atlantic Philanthropies until 2016. A Start Strong staff member moved to the Children's Rights Alliance in 2016 to head an early-years' desk when 'Start Strong' was wound up.

The EU was especially influential in the development of childcare for children under 3 years. This was partly because Ireland had to bring EU directives for maternity, paternity and family leave into domestic law. It was also partly because Ireland had 'Objective 1 status', making it eligible for EU structural funding and a civil service which saw the potential of using European funding to develop ECEC. However, the funding was mainly used to build infrastructure, its designated purpose, rather than as an investment in staff training to improve quality, which might have been seen to be as important, given the poor quality of existing provision.

Actors and advocacy positions: Raising the issue of ECEC

Organisations and actors	Main advocacy position	Main channels of influence	When influential
<p>International</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OECD • European Union • UNICEF <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee on the Rights of the Child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECEC important for child, for wellbeing and well-becoming, and also to facilitate the employment of mothers • Integrative approach to provision for 0-6-year olds • Children have a right to ECEC under the <i>Convention on the rights of the child</i> (CRC), which Ireland ratified in 1992 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy dialogues with government. EU directives on maternity/parental leave • OECD Thematic Review of ECEC 2004 • Reports comparing progress in Ireland with other EU/ OECD countries • Periodic reports on progress towards implementing the CRC 	From the 1990s
<p>Advocacy Groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children’s Rights Alliance (1995-) • Academics, including the CECDE funded by Government (2002-08) • Start Strong (2004-16) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child wellbeing as a collective responsibility • Importance of ECEC for social and cognitive development of children and of integrated services for 0-6-year-olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports and policy briefings • Response to public consultations on policy • Membership of expert working groups set up by government 	From the 1990s
<p>Policy actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for ECEC by both main political parties: Fianna Fail and Fine Gael 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership of NESF, NESC and working groups 	From the 1990s
<p>Social Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade unions • Employers • Women’s organisations • Civil society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECEC and maternity leave and parental leave to enable mothers to combine paid employment and care • Economic returns on investment in ECEC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) • Membership of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) social partnership with government • 2005 report Early childhood care and education • National Women’s Council (NWC) report An accessible childcare model • Membership of expert working groups set up by government 	Mainly from 1990s to 2010

Actors and advocacy positions: Raising the issue of ECEC, continued.

Organisations and actors	Main advocacy position	Main channels of influence	When influential
Funders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU • Atlantic Philanthropies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding infrastructure for ECEC in early 2000s • Funding advocacy groups and ECEC demonstration projects in deprived neighbourhoods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct <i>relationship</i> with government • Direct contact with government officials and politicians, through funding advocacy groups and rigorous pilot project evaluations 	<p>From 1990s to mid-2000s</p> <p>From 1990s to 2016, when the foundation was wound up</p>

The OECD raised ECEC and child poverty as advocacy issues and published league tables in the early 2000s showing that Ireland was doing relative poorly. At the government’s request it carried out a review of ECEC policy, published in 2004 (Schonfeld et al., 2005). The CRC was used in raising the issue in two main ways: periodic reviews by the Committee for the Rights of the Child highlighted areas for improvement in upholding children’s rights and the government’s ratification of the CRC in 1992 spurred the foundation of the Children’s Rights Alliance. The Alliance, with more than a hundred bodies as members has advocated for the implementation of the CRC and ECEC in Ireland as a right for young children.

Four influential documents were published in the early 2000s that raised issues relating to ECEC in Ireland. Two of these, one by the OECD and one by the National Economic and Social Forum, a social partnership group founded by the government in 1993, were produced at the request of the government. The OECD report shone an international spotlight on the weaknesses in Ireland’s ECEC. A third report was produced by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, funded by government, and a fourth by the National Women’s Council of Ireland (Corrigan, 2004; Hayes et al., 2005; NESF, 2005; OECD, 2004; Schonfeld et al., 2005).

The recommendations [of the OEDC report] represents an important milestone in the ongoing formulation of public policy in relation to early childhood education and care in this country.

Sile de Valera, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science, 2004.

The OECD and National Economic and Social Forum reports concluded that there was weak access especially for children from low-income homes and lack of coordination between responsible departments. Early education was the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science, while provision of childcare fell between the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. Both reports highlighted the importance of ECEC to enable children to flourish and make the most of their lives. They proposed that all children aged 3-6 years be offered a free pre-school place; emphasised the need for more affordable childcare to encourage more mothers with dependent children to take up employment to fill labour-market shortages; and recommended an increase in maternity leave.

Moreover, they suggested that the *Early Start* project for children living in deprived neighbourhoods should be scaled up and that children attend for a full day at the youngest age possible. ECEC was essential, they argued, to avoid wasting talent, to enable all children to achieve their full potential and to ensure sufficient skilled and educated workers to meet the demands of the labour market and maintain economic competitiveness and growth. They felt that government investment in ECEC was inadequate and recommended that investment should increase from less than 0.2% of GDP to the OECD-recommended 0.5%.

The National Economic and Social Forum's report summarised international research findings, showing that quality preschool programs have lifelong benefits, including: improved cognitive and social skills, improved health and wellbeing, increased earnings and labour-force participation, reduced welfare dependence, increased contribution through taxation, reduced crime rates and the integration of disadvantaged children into mainstream society. They computed the return on investment of every euro spent on ECEC as between €4.6 and €7.10, depending on assumptions. However, the report also questioned the government's commitment to implementing its ECEC policy, given the lack of progress in implementing *Ready to Learn* (see below on policy options and building political support) (Corrigan, 2004; Hayes et al., 2005; NESF, 2005; Schonfeld et al., 2005).

The National Women's Council in their 2005 report raised the issues of inadequate provision of maternal, paternal and parental leave, the availability of affordable quality childcare and child poverty. They suggested that lack of affordable childcare was a barrier to women's paid employment, thereby increasing child poverty and threatening family wellbeing. They pointed out the higher rates of child poverty in Ireland relative to most other OECD countries, although it was one of the richest, with especially high rates among children in lone-parent families. High childcare costs, they argued, force some women to withdraw from paid work.

Women's labour-market participation in Ireland in 2002 was 65.8% for women with no children compared to 40.8% for those with at least two, the lowest level in 23 OECD countries. It also had a detrimental impact on women's careers, restricting choices around work/life balance and women's participation in the public sphere, as well as compromising Ireland's ability to meet commitments under the *Beijing Platform for Action*, *Lisbon Strategy* and *Barcelona Summit* (Hayes et al., 2005).

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education conference in 2004 raised the issue of the quality of service provision in Ireland, as well as how to put systems in place for measuring quality. The link between the quality of ECEC and the nature and extent of benefits for children was a central concern among delegates. The large number of government departments involved in ECEC was seen as problematic and, while not inevitable, had resulted in tensions between policy aimed at supporting the economy and enabling parents to have equal employment opportunities, and tackling educational disadvantage with high levels of parental involvement in ECEC.

In addition, ECEC funding was seen as problematic for assuring quality, with the government not funding provision directly and parents being responsible for the care and education of their young children. Government regulation of pre-school services did not start until 1997 and accreditation remained the responsibility of voluntary membership organisations with varying quality standards. There were no statutory requirements for worker qualifications and qualifications of most staff were of a low level, despite the strong correlation between workers' qualifications and quality of service (Duignan, 2005; Schonfeld et al., 2005).

Independent of their representation on social partnership committees, trade unions and employers' organisations also raised concerns with the government about the lack of policies to support working families. Three main barriers to women with dependent children working were highlighted: lack of affordable childcare, shortage of places and lack of family-friendly policies in the workplace. In 2002, Joan Carmichael, then Assistant General Secretary of the Irish Council of Trade Unions, argued that the government should make [providing, adequate and affordable childcare](#) a priority.

In 2003, the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland argued that labour-force shortages were exacerbated by the childcare crisis. David Begg, General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, argued on several occasions that lack of affordable childcare was an urgent priority, that failure to deal with it would do long-term economic and social damage, and to avoid this, childcare should have the status of a *public good* (Fine-Davis, 2007). Parents shared these concerns, pointing out that the lack of provision for under-3s and part-time provision for 3-5-year-olds did not meet the needs of parents combining care and work (Hayes et al., 2005; Horgan et al., 2014).

After the mid-to-late 2000s, it was mainly the international actors and the local child advocacy groups that kept the issue on the table. They were critical of the government's failure to implement its commitments on the provision of integrated quality ECEC in *Ready to Learn*, as reiterated in subsequent policy documents. In 2008, in an OECD comparative report, Ireland came bottom on the ECEC league table of 25 countries and only met one of the 10 minimum standards. *Start Strong*, discussed below, was heavily influenced in its advocacy work by the OECD policy advice to the government for ECEC (Buis and Wolfe, 2019).

Local actors continued to raise the issue through their representation on the Social Partnership and other advocacy forums, including with political actors, discussed later. They argued that there had been a lack of investment in the sector and that ECEC was not seen as a priority. ECEC policy and strategy remained organisationally fragmented, with uncoordinated delivery from responsible government departments variously located in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (from 2011 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs), the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Education and Science. There had been rapid change, they argued, without transformation. ECEC remained a dysfunctional and poorly resourced service, fragmented, costly for parents and of low quality. There had been little government involvement in service delivery or investment in training, and preschool education for 3-5-year-olds has been prioritized over quality care for those under-3 and the educational dimension of care played down. ECEC services continued to be seen as either a response to a *childcare crisis* or a remedy for educational disadvantage, rather than as providing holistic and integrated care for 0-5-year-olds to meet their developmental and learning needs in line with OECD guidelines.

Advocacy groups also raised concerns that the ECEC workforce was poorly qualified and remunerated; graduates with ECEC qualifications were paid significantly less than primary- and secondary-school teachers and tended to leave the profession (Horgan et al., 2014; Kiersey and Hayes, 2010; OECD, 2017). More recently, there have been media reports on lack of compliance with standards in centre-based care for 0-3-year-olds and the [Breach of Trust documentary](#) in 2013 showed children being subjected to emotional abuse by childcare workers, with media coverage given to [poor-quality provision](#) in a further [exposé broadcasted in 2019](#). The impact of poor quality provision was further highlighted by the OECD in its Irish briefing (OECD, 2017). The expected differences in school performance of 15-year-olds who had attended preschool education and those that had not, after controlling for social class, were not found in Ireland, most likely due to poor quality provision and insufficient investment in the sector.

A major factor in the failure to deliver integrated, affordable and accessible ECEC of good quality has been an enduring unwillingness on the part of the Irish Government to intervene in the sphere of the family. While the exposure of the Catholic Church by the media in the 1990s and 2000s for covering up [child abuse](#) led to greater public acceptance of collective responsibility for children, the government remained reluctant to intervene in the family and the Constitution has continued to reflect the conservative influence of the Catholic Church (Hayes, 2016). The issue and advocacy did make children more visible, however, in political and public spaces. It raised important questions about policies for children, particularly the government's implicit policy of supporting mothers rather than paying directly for child services, focusing on women rather than children. This opened the space for a more collective response to the care and education of young children and a shift from raising children being seen as a private family matter to being seen as a collective responsibility for raising the next generation.

4.2 Developing policy options

This subsection describes the actors and processes that informed policy options, how credible policy options were developed, with what reflection and alignment of actors, including implementers.

In 2005, the National Economic and Social Forum set out a rich set of ideas, recommendations, and examples of good international practice for decision makers. They argued that what was necessary was to develop a comprehensive, coordinated policy implementation process to provide high-quality ECEC for all children 0-to-6-years. They recommended a policy framework for a 10-year program to implement a universal comprehensive ECEC system providing holistic support for young children's wellbeing, learning and development, based on the implementation of the *National Children's Strategy* and other initiatives.

There were also a number of home-grown ECEC initiatives for children in deprived neighbourhoods that were available to build policy options on. These included the [Rutland Street Intervention Project](#), set up in the late 1960s by the government as a demonstration project on preschool education for deprived children. Building on this project, *Early Start Centres* were set up in deprived neighbourhoods in the 1990s for 3-4 year olds. An EU-funded early childcare project for training workers in the sector had also been set up in the 1990s. These initiatives offered the government options and opportunities to review childcare services, to identify training requirements and to develop a model framework for training and educating early-years staff (Hayes, 2006).

The National and Economic and Social Forum had put the issue of childcare on the agenda in the late 1990s, which led to the establishment of a Childcare Strategy Expert Working Group of civil servants, civil society, trade unions and employers' associations (Corrigan, 2004; Inter-Departmental Group, 2000). The working group were further advised by service providers, research findings. They carried out extensive consultations through the national press. Submissions were invited from parents and others who worked with children (NESF, 2005). The group recommended policies to support working parents, with a focus on quality as well as quantity of ECEC; financial support for new and existing services; coordinated service delivery and tax relief on childcare costs (DJELR, 2004; NESF, 2005). The working group identified themes from the consultation that influenced the *National Childcare Strategy* published in 1999.



Children from a playgroup on a walk, Shutterstock, undated

Following publication of the White Paper on *Early Childhood Education* in 1999, the government funded and established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education at St Patricks Teacher Training College and Dublin Institute of Technology. The Centre's mandate was to: develop a quality framework for early-years education; interventions that could be targeted at young children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs; and prepare the ground for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (Corrigan, 2004).

A number of other initiatives provided a bases for determining policy options, arising from the implementation of the White Paper. The EU funded the pilot *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme* 2000-06 implemented by the Department of Equality and Law Reform. This program made capital investment in childcare facilities in disadvantaged areas to enable mothers/parents to get employment, training or education. It demonstrated that while the rhetoric might be based on an integrated, child-centred model, the division between childcare for workers and development for school readiness continued to inform practice (DJELR, 2004). The *Prevention and Early Intervention in Children and Young People's Services 2006-13* program and the *National Area-Based Childhood Programme 2013-17* funded by the government and Atlantic Philanthropies built on the earlier EU programs (Frazer, 2016; Rochford et al., 2014).

At the same time, and on the basis of a review of international childcare policies, the National Women's Council of Ireland argued for ECEC subsidies that would cost less than 1% of GDP but that would bring Ireland's expenditure in line with international standards. The Council also recommended implementation of the EU directives on maternity, paternity and parental leave. They proposed that by 2010 there be 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, five days paid paternity leave, 26 weeks paid parental leave, universal free ECEC for all 3-5-year-olds, subsidised extended care for parents who needed more hours than were provided and subsidised full-day care for all 1-3-year-olds (Hayes et al., 2005).

The government consulted widely, set up advisory groups for developing policy and researched international and national best practice. The National Coordinating Childcare Committee, for example, developed a framework for training and professional development in ECEC in 1999 following wide-ranging consultations (DJELR, 2002). The framework set out requirements for initial training and career progression from basic to expert practitioner.

The National Council for Curriculum Development (NCCD), in developing *Aistear*, responded to broad curriculum guidelines for 0 to 3-year-olds and a *specimen curriculum* for 4 year olds drawn up by a forum that was held when the government was developing the White Paper on Early Childhood Education in 1999 (Foster, 2007). The early childhood sector also contributed to the development of the curriculum, parents and young children were consulted and four research papers were commissioned to provide information on national and international best practice (NCCA, 2009). *Siolta*, the quality framework for ECEC, was also developed in consultation with ECEC stakeholders, including parents (O'Dwyer, 2007).

Atlantic Philanthropies played an important role in policy development from the early 2000s, until it ceased to operate in 2016. In addition to financing advocacy agencies, discussed earlier, it partnered with the Ministry of Education and Skills to invest in a number of ECEC projects, especially in deprived areas. [Atlantic Philanthropies](#) were influential in Ireland, investing €6.5 billion between the late 1980s and 2016, including €21 million on child development initiatives between 2007 and 2016 (Collins, 2017). They required that the government matched the money donated to show commitment and ensure sustainability. The group funded ECEC demonstration projects, carried out rigorous evaluations to demonstrate effectiveness, and built a relationship with government to ensure that its prevention and early intervention approach was mainstreamed (The Atlantic Philanthropies, 2015). They are also, in part, credited with building alliances that resulted in the children's rights amendment to the Constitution being approved in a referendum in 2012.

Elsewhere, [Start Strong for Children](#), a campaigning group of organisations and individuals advocating for ECEC, published *Children 2020: Children's Early Care and Education in Ireland* in 2010. They recommended a vision for ECEC in Ireland (Start Strong, 2010). This was based on: a review of national and international benchmarks and standards; a review of provision in New Zealand and Sweden; a review of local projects and programs; and extensive consultation with a range of stakeholders, including young children and parents. The consultation included interviews and group discussions with children aged 2-6 years and stakeholders, as well as written submissions and a national consultation meeting.

Their recommendations, in line with research and with international standards, had support from a range of stakeholders involved with ECEC. The conclusions were child-centred: children come first, all children have a right to services to support wellbeing and this should be the driving force for ECEC policies; government should prioritise quality in services, fully implementing *Siolta* and *Aistear*, and professionalising the workforce; quality services should be universally available, affordable and accessible for children, and should meet their needs, with additional support for children from disadvantaged families; mainstream services should support families in caring for their children, including paid parental leave and provision of advice and support to families; services should be coordinated, with a full government minister and department responsible for ECEC; and preschool and school services should be linked so that children make successful transitions.

In 2013, the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy, founded to make recommendations for Ireland's first-ever Early Years Strategy, published its report [Right From the Start](#) (DCYA and EAG, 2013). It recommended a strategy based on *progressive individualism*, a focus on universal services for all children with additional help for those that need it most. The committee went beyond recommending integration of education and care to integration of all services for young children. It also recommended increased investment in ECEC, from 0.4% to the OECD-recommended 1% of GDP. This group also set out that high-quality services should be accessible to all children and so be inclusive, that paid parental leave should be increased to one year after the birth of a child, and that support should be provided for all parents in gaining parenting skills. The report further recognised that home visits to all families with young children were a priority and recommended extending entitlement to the free school year to all children from 3-years.

First 5, the early-years strategy launched by the government in 2018, was strongly informed by *Right from the Start*. It was designed to take a holistic view of young children's lives and their development, not just ECEC, and was heavily informed by the CRC's child rights perspective. It integrated three systems: the family and community, the health system and early learning and care. At an early stage, there was consultation with the Children's Rights Alliance Early Years Advisory Group, which brought together representatives from across the sector, including service providers. Subsequently a draft was put out for public consultation, including with [young children](#) (using a *mosaic approach* involving art and play), open debates involving representatives of stakeholders and submissions from groups and organisations working in the ECEC sector.

4.3 Engaging and building support of political actors and decision makers

This subsection describes how and with whom attention and support of political actors was engaged for shifting to integrated early childhood care and education service provision.

In 1997, after attending the launch of a report by the [Combat Poverty Agency](#), Michael Martin, the then leader of the Fianna Fail opposition party, placed child care on the party's election manifesto. When they came to power in the same year, Fianna Fail committed to developing early years education perceiving its long-term economic and societal advantages. In 1999, they launched the National Childcare Coordinating Agency to implement the *National Child Care Strategy* in stages (O'Donnell, 2018). The government also implemented its 2000 *National Children's Strategy* and established the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2006, embedding children and children's issues into the centre of government.

In 2011, Fine Gael, a liberal-conservative party, came to power in coalition with the Labour Party and following the 2016 general election continued to lead the government in coalition with independents. On coming to power in 2011, the Fine Gael government created a Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs, so that children became represented at cabinet level. Since 2011, there have been two strong ministers who have kept children and families high on the political agenda: Frances Fitzgerald, a former social worker, and the current minister, Katherine Zappone, who set up a centre providing ECEC in a deprived community of West Dublin before becoming a member of parliament.

There is now broad consensus among political parties for ECEC. Whereas children were not a political priority before the late 1990s, the main parties now include policies for children in their manifestos and programs. Fianna Fail's [2016 general election manifesto](#), for example, included raising the quality of ECEC, expanding maternity benefits and helping parents with the costs of childcare. [The government program](#) of the current Fine Gael/independents coalition also includes additional paid parental leave in the first year and providing high-quality, affordable childcare, as well as increasing the duration of the free preschool year to two years, 10-months, supporting parents who choose to care for young children at home and tackling child poverty.

The establishment of the first National Childcare Coordination Committee in 2002, followed by the Office for Children and Youth Affairs in 2006 (under a junior minister) and then a Ministry for Children and Youth Affairs with a full cabinet minister in 2011, has pushed children and young people, including ECEC, up the political agenda. While the establishment of a ministry means that children are represented in the cabinet, ministers do not necessarily prioritise ECEC (or young children) over other issues, however, and young children are not seen as a priority for spending.

Nevertheless, a number of ministers have introduced important developments; for example, Barry Andrews introduced the preschool year in 2010 and Frances Fitzgerald led the development of the second children's strategy *Better Futures Brighter Outcomes* in 2014. Since 2016, the unit for young children in the ministry has expanded from about seven staff members to around 80. Recent appointments include a former worker with *Start Strong*, people well qualified in early years theory and practice and people with experience in working in ECEC service delivery.

Beyond Atlantic Philanthropies, there are three main policy actor groups linking issues and policies and building alliances in the government for ECEC: the social partners (trade unions, employers' associations), international organisations, and civil society including the child advocacy groups.

The social partners have regular meetings with government and have included advocacy for ECEC in their meetings (Corrigan, 2004). The National Economic and Social Council, for example, meets on a quarterly basis with the government, with meetings chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister). This Council, founded in 1973, represents trade unions, business organisations, civil society and experts (social partners) and advises the Taoiseach on strategy, and has recommended that Ireland invest in young children, as this yields collective returns (NESC, 2005). The National Competitiveness Council was established in 1997 as a social partner body reporting to the Taoiseach on key competitiveness issues facing the Irish economy. The Council has also argued that Ireland should invest more in services for young children (NCC, 2009). Furthermore, the National Economic and Social Forum had a strong influence on the national childcare strategy.

Civil society organisations campaigning on ECEC are represented on the Community and Voluntary Pillar of the Social Partnership and are consulted by the government on ECEC. These include: the [National Childhood Network](#) providing services to improve the quality of ECEC; [Early Childhood Ireland](#), representing ECEC service providers and advocating for investment to improve quality, affordability and sustainability in the sector; the [National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative](#), representing eight NGOs in the ECEC sector; the [Children's Rights Alliance](#), representing over 100 civil-society organisations; and [Start Strong](#), which was a time-limited campaign group whose work transferred to the Children's Rights Alliance in 2016.

Start Strong concentrated on influencing policy actors placing a strong emphasis on evidence-informed policy-making and established a reputation as a serious advocate for early years in Ireland (Buis and Wolfe, 2019). It regularly published policy briefs and working papers and responded to government consultations. They also provided key government departments with information, research and policy analysis, being involved in drafting the Expert Advisory Group final report *Right From The Start*, a report that the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs publicly endorsed. One key recommendation from this report has been implemented: extension of the free preschool year. Two others are being considered: a year's paid maternity leave and regulation of child minders. The group also influenced *First 5*, the government's strategy for children aged 0-5 years. Start Strong's research officer transferred for two years (2016-18) to work with civil servants on developing the *Affordable Child Care Scheme*.

In 2016, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs established a [National Collaborative Forum for the Early Years Care and Education Sector](#) to exchange ideas, concerns and issues in ECEC delivery, with membership including representatives of early years providers, NGOs, government departments, agencies and organisations involved in delivering its early years agenda (DCYA, 2016).

International organisations, most notably the EU and OECD, have been powerful actors building political alliances and support for ECEC (Hayes, 2006). The EU has made recommendations to government on achieving the *Barcelona Objectives* for ECEC and has made proposals on improving quality, with Ireland learning from best practice across the EU (EC, 2013). The advice tends to be child-centred.

In 2016, for example, the EU noted that early ECEC improves cognitive and social development of children, especially those living in disadvantaged households, enhances educational and labour-market prospects later in life and is a key tool for work-life balance. It recommended that all children should have access to good, affordable ECEC delivered by adequately qualified staff and that specific measures should be taken to encourage the attendance of disadvantaged children (Frazer, 2016). The OECD have also engaged with the government, and its 2004 report influenced government policy, including establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2006 (O'Connor, 2011).

Overall, the discursive battle for integrated and child-centred provision over the full range of early years has been won, but the old rhetorical justification for expanding care (without necessarily improving its content) to free mothers for work has not disappeared and the government still appears hesitant to intervene in what traditional Ireland tends to regard as the private area of the family.

5. Summary of and learning on key drivers of the policy change

5.1 Summary of key drivers and processes fostering policy change

The issue of ECEC was initially raised in the 1990s, driven by political, social and economic factors. On the one hand, there was the obligation to implement EU gender equality directives, the need to increase the size of the workforce and increased demand from working parents, trade unions, women's groups and employers for affordable childcare. On the other, there were reports from international agencies such as OECD and UNICEF showing that Ireland was performing comparatively poorly in the wellbeing of young children and an increasingly large research literature on the crucial importance of early years for later development.

The availability of EU funding to build an infrastructure for ECEC was a cross-cutting and enabling factor. Revelations of child abuse by Catholic priests, monks and nuns made children more visible in the public sphere. The issue has been kept on the table by international organisations' periodic reports showing Ireland's poor performance compared to other OECD countries in terms of both investment in and provision of services for young children. Domestic actors have also kept it on the table, including national advocacy groups, academics, social partners and parents who want affordable quality ECEC that meets the needs of all young children, not just those of working families.

Policy options have been put forward by a range of domestic and international actors. Indeed, it has been the prioritisation of ECEC, not policy options for it, that has been challenging. Different actors had different priorities, however. The trade unions, employers, women's groups and parents were concerned about availability of affordable childcare, and tended not to see education as a relevant concept for the 0-3 age group, while the government tended to prioritise school readiness. The main child advocacy groups, academics, UNCRC, OECD and UNICEF were concerned about providing ECEC that met social, cognitive and physical needs of young children and provided an integrated service in the best interests of the child. The influential Atlantic Philanthropies, while investing in demonstration projects for children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, also funded two main advocacy groups, the Children's Rights Alliance and Start Strong. After 2010, trade unions and employers had less influence whilst advocacy groups continued to argue for integrated child-centred provision, recognising collective responsibility for children's wellbeing.

While government policy documents recognised the importance of an integrated strategy for ECEC, a division has persisted between care for those under-3-years that is mainly aimed at meeting the needs of working parents, and preschool provision that is primarily aimed at preparing children for school. Government funding has been invested in ways that have primarily supported the provision of infrastructure and subsidies for parents, rather than directly improving quality of care. Despite this, [First 5: A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families](#) (2018) returned to a more holistic view of the child and places the child at the centre of policy.

Several politicians have supported ECEC, including Michael Martin, the leader of the opposition in the late 1990s, who included ECEC in the Fianna Fail manifesto in 1997. There is broad consensus among political parties for collective responsibility for ECEC. Atlantic Philanthropies played an important role engaging with government and building political support for an integrated and child-centred policy, as have children's advocacy groups and groups representing ECEC providers.

This perspective has prevailed overall, and there has been a shift from *child welfare* and seeing the family as a private sphere responsible for childcare. In government practice of policy *implementation*, however, there has not as yet been a full shift to promoting child wellbeing as a central aim. Changing strongly held conservative views of the family and putting children at the centre of policy takes time. Policies, especially those for under-3s, have focused more on mothers and the choices they want to make about their roles, i.e. whether they take paid employment or remain at home as the main carer of their young children, than they have on children themselves.

5.2 Learning and insights on changing mindsets and norms

This section outlines learning and insights that may be shared or adapted for those involved in promoting policy recognition and change in FCHW.

In raising and keeping the issue on the policy and political agenda: Childcare until the 1990s was framed as two separate issues, childcare for under-3-year-olds and school readiness for 3-5-year-olds. Although international actors and advocacy groups argued for integrated care from the late 1990s, it has been difficult to change this framing and gain recognition of the need for under 3 year olds to have stimulating environments with play-based learning to support social and cognitive development. Although the government has made commitments to improve quality of care in its policies, it has been reluctant to follow through and implement. This, at least until 2011, was partly due to different ministries responsible for preschool education for 3-6-year-olds and childcare (and education) for 0-3-year-olds. Nevertheless, child advocacy groups, academics and influential international organisations, the EU and OECD, have kept the issue on the agenda.

For development and adoption of policy options: the major change in rhetoric has been the adoption, strongly influenced by research evidence, of a holistic and child-centred approach to the early years when developing a strategy for integrated service delivery for under-6-year-olds, as presented in *First 5*. It is too early to tell if this will deliver integrated services to children and families, however, overcoming priorities of different ministries with a stake in services for 0-6-year olds is a barrier to coordinated service delivery. Developing integrated ECEC can be difficult if the objectives of provision for those under-3-years are different from the objectives for those aged 3-5 years, and in the absence of clear and practical understanding of priorities. Having a mixed provision economy relying on private and voluntary sectors makes regulation difficult and care unaffordable. Similarly, parental subsidies to help pay for childcare comes at the expense of investing in training and education for ECEC professionals and improving their employment terms, which undermines quality improvement.

In building political and public support and sustaining policy implementation: Having a social partnership enabled trade unions, employers and civil society to hold regular meetings with government officials and to advocate for policies. Together, these groups had a powerful voice, more than any one of them would have had alone. However, there were different priorities among advocacy groups, the trade unions, employers and women's organisations were campaigning for ECEC to enable women to return to paid employment while civil society organisations were arguing for child-centred high quality integrated ECEC as something to which children had a right. Politicians were more receptive to arguments for childcare for 0-3-year-olds and preschool education for 3-5-year-olds than to integrated care for 0-5-year-olds although rhetorically they accepted the latter.

Building political support does not necessarily mean that the policies implemented meet the demands of those advocating for FCHW. The sector remains a low priority, inadequately funded and poorly regulated, with most services delivered by private, voluntary and informal groups. Provision also does not ensure an enjoyable early childhood nor provide the foundations for development. At the same time, insufficient investment in ECEC and a continuing hesitancy by the government to accept that it is a collective responsibility mean that ECEC is failing to deliver on reducing child poverty and breaking the cycle of deprivation. There has not as yet been a cultural shift to seeing the first five years as a continuum, with the best interests of the child as the main concern.

The shift in practice promised in *Ready to Learn 1999* and the *National Children's Strategy 2000* and reiterated in *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* in 2014, to ECEC services that promote FCHW, have not yet been fulfilled. With the adoption of *First 5* in 2018, a strategy for integrated services is in place together with a strengthened unit in the Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs responsible for delivering it. However, shedding the legacy of conservative Catholic family values has not been easy. Continuing to see childcare as a private family matter, even if with state support, remains a potential barrier to developing quality ECEC services, especially for children under 3 years. In this context, how the government delivers on *First 5* remains to be seen.

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Endnotes

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- 2 See Loewenson and Masotyia (2018) for information on the conceptual and analytical framework used.