



Note on the launch of two new Action Plans for the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Sector

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) has published two new policies that are being rolled out in parallel, and focus on improving affordability, quality and sustainability in childcare while reducing the administrative burden - *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)*, and *Simplify and Support: Action Plan for Simplification*. Importantly, these reforms will support the expansion and roll-out of existing measures, including Equal Start. We will be undertaking further work on these policies to examine their impact on Traveller and Roma children's and families' experiences of engaging with early years services. We are aware that there is interest and some uncertainty about what the new policies mean in practice, so we wanted to share this information with you at this stage. We will provide more detailed updates on the direct impacts as they become available. In the meantime, you can find further information at the following [link](#).

Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)

The Phase 1 Report of *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan* outlines short-term actions to strengthen early learning and childcare (ELC) and school-age childcare in 2026. The plan aims to make childcare more affordable, accessible, and of higher quality for children and families, while also supporting the workforce and providers. It takes a phased approach, with Phase 1 focusing on actions that can be delivered in 2026 and Phase 2 (2027–2029) to be shaped by a broad public consultation later in 2026.

Key actions in Phase 1:

1. Reducing Childcare Costs

Lower maximum fees: Childcare services participating in Core Funding will have reduced maximum fees - a maximum of €200 per month over the lifetime of the Government.

Expanded subsidies: The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) income thresholds will rise; the lower limit from €26,000 to €34,000, and the upper limit from €60,000 to €68,000, meaning more

families will benefit from financial support.

Multiple-child support: Larger families receive an adjusted income calculation so they qualify for greater subsidies.

2. Increasing Accessibility and Supply

The plan supports growth in childcare places, especially for younger children where demand and staffing ratios are higher.

Investment will help expand state-led services and provide grants for existing providers to increase capacity.

Continued rollout of inclusion-focused initiatives, like Equal Start, AIM and support children at risk of disadvantage.

3. Improving Quality

New regulations for school-age childcare services will be introduced in 2026.

Work will begin on a single quality framework to replace existing standards, helping align evaluation and improvement across early years services.

Funding is ring-fenced (up to €15 million in 2026) to support wage improvements for early years educators and practitioners - key to retaining skilled staff and boosting quality.

What this means for families and communities

- More support for families with childcare costs. Expanded subsidy eligibility and fee reductions aim to ease financial pressure.
- Increased access to places. More state-backed provision and support for expanding services will help meet demand.
- Quality improvements. Stricter regulations and a unified quality framework will help ensure better learning and developmental outcomes for children.
- Sector engagement ahead. A public consultation next year will help shape the longer-term reforms in Phase 2.

*Phase 2 will be rolled out throughout 2027-2029. A broad public consultation will be undertaken to inform phase 2 actions.

Simplify and Support: Action Plan for Simplification

This new strategic plan is designed to cut red tape, reduce administrative burden, and make the early learning and childcare (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) system easier to use for everyone - families, providers, educators and practitioners. The plan responds to concerns from the sector that excessive paperwork and complex regulatory requirements are taking time and energy away from delivering high-quality care and learning for children. It aims to:

- Simplify processes and regulations while keeping strong standards for child safety and service quality.
- Eliminate duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy, allowing providers to focus more on children and families.
- Use better digital systems and clearer procedures to improve efficiency across the sector.

Key actions in the plan:

1. Simplified Applications

A single application process will replace multiple forms for the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), including AIM, AIM Plus and AIM non-term. This reduces repeated paperwork for supports

2. Improved National Childcare Scheme Processes

Children will receive one long-term CHICK code (Childcare Identifier Code Key) rather than needing to renew it each year. This makes claiming subsidies easier and reduces repeat tasks for parents and providers.

3. Streamlined Regulations

The plan commits to a single, comprehensive set of regulatory requirements to replace separate regulations for ELC and SAC, making compliance simpler and clearer for services.

4. Digital Improvements

Upgrades to the digital system used for childcare support and reporting will help make interactions faster and more user-friendly for providers and families.

What this means for families and service providers

- Providers and staff: Less time spent on paperwork means more time focused on

children's development and day-to-day service delivery.

- Parents and families: Fewer steps and simpler digital tools make accessing supports like subsidies more straightforward.
- Sector growth and quality: Clearer regulation and reduced administrative burden can help services expand and improve quality without unnecessary complexity.

The two plans - *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan* and *Simplify and Support: Action Plan for Simplification* - work together to bring about positive change in the early years and school-age childcare sector in Ireland. While each focuses on different areas, their goals are complementary.