

# Lack of childcare spaces 'forcing parents to rely on unqualified, unregulated childcare services'

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

A survey of childcare providers undertaken by Seas Suas, has revealed that the number of places for babies and toddlers (under 2s) in childcare and crèche facilities is falling, despite increasing demand.

A shortage of staff, changes to regulatory requirements, and the lack of State supports to providers for under 2s are leading many creches to reduce their provision for this age group.

While all children over 3 years of age are supported by the State through the ECCE scheme, babies and toddlers are not - even though this age group, naturally, requires the greatest level of care and attention.

The survey by the representative organisation for independent childcare and early education providers looked at several key areas for providers including existing levels of provision, the expansion or reduction plans of providers, staff recruitment and retention issues and the impact of administration of State schemes on providers.

It found that 44% of providers currently have vacancies at their facilities, with 30% responding that it can take up to 4 months to fill each vacancy.

Two out of three providers (65%) cited that the staff shortage issue was now impacting on their services. Specifically, 68% of providers said the staff shortage issue had caused them to either decrease or decide not to expand their service.

Almost 60% (58%) of providers admitted that they feared that the staff shortage could place them at risk of not meeting their regulatory requirements on staff ratios.

On solutions to address the staff shortage, a variety of options were considered, with almost 69% supporting the introduction of a specific State subsidy to pay higher wages to staff to recruit and retain them in the sector, while 16% support an apprenticeship scheme to allow for 'on-the-job' training as a path to full qualification, with 15% supporting broader qualification requirements including recognising prior education and experience.

Commenting on the survey results, Chairperson of Seas Suas, Regina Bushell, said: "The survey confirms a lot of what we have been hearing from providers on the ground. Many providers are finding it increasingly challenging to cater for babies and toddlers - those under two years of age, as part of their service offering.

"The absence of sufficient State supports to providers to care for this age category, is making it unsustainable for providers to continue to offer this service in a scenario where costs – staff, overheads, rents - have all increased.

"Ultimately, any reduction in services impacts on families, employers and our wider economy because available, affordable childcare services is crucial for parents to get to work."

"It will also impact on services for vulnerable children and parents returning to education.

"Ireland already has a below average rate of female participation in the labour market in Ireland, with only 40% of Irish women going back to work after having children.

"The current underinvestment in childcare services overall, risks making this situation worse."

"If mothers returning to work after maternity leave struggle to find childcare places for their babies, this creates a further barrier for them. It can also force parents to rely on unqualified, unregulated childcare services."

"Staffing shortages is now also a huge problem for our sector. Without qualified staff, providers will be forced to reduce their capacity, at a time when expansion is required."

"It's clear that a long-term Strategy for our sector is now long overdue. This Strategy must map how the sector must develop for the

coming decades, how this will be funded and above all places our children at its heart”

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