

The childcare conundrum ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Just as swallows herald the arrival of summer, the scramble by political parties in recent days to declare their childcare credentials is a sure sign of pre-election fever. This week Labour launched its “Let’s Talk About Childcare” policy, pledging high-quality, affordable childcare for young families.

“Our aim is to give all the young parents of Ireland a real choice in how they live their lives,” said Tánaiste Joan Burton, based on the findings of a little-known working group set up during the summer.

Elsewhere, smoke signals from next week’s budget hinted at plans to introduce a series of childcare reforms: paid paternity leave, longer parental leave and subsidised childcare for thousands of low-income parents.

Backbench Fine Gael deputies were quick to bask in the glow of pledges to make childcare more affordable.

“Childcare is placing a severe financial burden on already hard-pressed families,” the Fine Gael TD Jerry Buttimer said this week. “It’s important that in next week’s budget the Government commits to strategic investment in childcare.”

If the pledges sound familiar it’s no surprise. Governments have a habit of discovering childcare in the crosshairs of an election.

And although they have an excellent record of producing reports with feelgood rhetoric and noble aspirations, their record of turning them into reality is lamentable.

Crisis point

The irony is that, despite the pledges, the childcare issue has now reached crisis point for many. Parents here are saddled with some of the highest childcare costs in the world.

The sector has also suffered from huge underinvestment, some of the lowest levels in the developed world. Quality, too, is patchy, given that staff with no qualifications are allowed to work in childcare settings. Childcare workers’ wages are also poor, their career prospects dismal and their status lowly.

So why has a sector with so many tens of thousands of potential voters, and so crucial to the development of young children, been so badly neglected for so long? In searching for an answer we need to wind back the clock.

A decade ago a State think tank advocated an ambitious blueprint for childcare: large-scale investment in early childhood education that would deliver savings in the long term through better outcomes for young people

The government, it argued, was at a crossroads: it could choose to leave behind a major social legacy by creating an affordable, high-quality childcare system that could rival those in Scandinavia.

“I would say, hand on heart, it was one of the best reports I have seen on childcare, before or since. I’m still proud of it,” says Dr Maureen Gaffney, one of its authors.

She recalls arguing passionately to convince ministers and TDs to implement the findings at a Fianna Fáil think-in a few months later. Gaffney received a rapturous response.

Shortly after the address she spoke with a senior member of government. “He said to me, ‘It’s really fantastic. But, you know, we’d love to do it, but we have to remember the stay-at-home lobby.’”

Political anxiety over anything seen to favour working parents over stay-at-home parents has been a major obstacle to progress in the area.

But that’s just part of the answer. Governments, obsessed with five-year election cycles, are much keener on short-term measures that can deliver votes than they are in long-term planning.

But there is no quick fix for childcare. Building up an affordable, high-quality system requires sustained political will, major investment and a long-term strategy .

Instead, ministers have opted for sticking-plaster solutions that deal properly with neither the cost nor the quality of childcare.

The result today is one of the most expensive childcare services in Europe populated mostly by for-profit childcare providers which, in some cases, have been able to skimp on staffing and training because of lax regulations.

Investing in these services should be an obvious decision: long-term studies show that every euro invested in good-quality early-years care and education can deliver a sevenfold return in terms of improved outcomes for children.

Once again, decisionmakers are faced with a choice. A Government working-group report, published last April, is yet another ambitious blueprint. It offers the promise of a solid foundation for providing a service that could make care more affordable and improve outcomes for children.

The idea that working parents could receive State subsidies for children up to the age of 12 in creches or afterschool care would help cushion costs for many on lower and middle incomes.

Extending paid parental leave from six months to a full year would allow children to spend the first year of their lives at home, a move supported by child-development experts.

Expanding the free preschool year to allow children up to two years of care and education also makes sense, as does a renewed focus on quality and training in these settings.

After almost five years of inaction, next week's budget may well provide the first step towards some of these aims. But it will take many years of investment and political leadership if they are to see the light of day.

Cost of childcare

Parents can't wait any longer. Those with two children in childcare need to earn up to €30,000 a year just to cover its cost. This is way out of line with the rest of Europe. While childcare accounts for about 35 per cent of income for Irish parents with two children in care, the average in the rest of the EU is between 10 and 12 per cent.

In the meantime, the cost of childcare is preventing parents from working, forcing some mothers and fathers into part-time work and forcing many to rely on the unregulated world of paid childminders.

Any past political reluctance to do anything that might favour working parents over stay-at-home parents must surely be fading fast.

Double-income families are increasingly the norm. And both stay-at-home parents and working parents benefit from access to childcare. Ninety-six per cent of parents – both stay-at-home and working parents – avail of the free preschool year.

Warm and fuzzy pre-election pledges on easing the burden on working parents may come and go. But we can't have great expectations for high-quality, affordable, accessible childcare without the investment to make it happen.

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