

Fine Gael agrees childcare deal with Katherine Zappone ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A subsidised childcare scheme worth up to €2,000 for working parents with children under three forms part of a key pledge Fine Gael has committed to in exchange for support from Independent TDs.

At present the vast majority of parents do not receive any specific childcare subsidy until their children become eligible for the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme.

In talks with Independent TD Katherine Zappone, senior party officials have pledged to introduce a new affordable childcare scheme for children of working parents aged between nine months and three years.

The commitment states that an annual subsidy would be paid directly to centre- based childcare providers and registered childminders for children of this age range.

The size of the subsidy under consideration is about €2,000 per child per year, or about €20 million per year.

The commitment states that the investment will be forthcoming in the autumn budget for 2017.

Education

Ms Zappone said a number of issues remained to be decided such as whether the scheme would be available to part-time workers or those in education.

The structuring of the payment will be important, she said, to ensure that savings are passed on to families and that it is used to support quality childcare.

"There is a gap in terms of affordable childcare from between the end of maternity or parental leave, and when a child reaches three years of age," Ms Zappone said.

Other policy commitments agreed in talks include a new strategy to help promise greater pluralism in the school system. This includes a re-engagement on the divestment of some of the denominational schools to new patrons and increasing the number of multidenominational schools to 400 by 2030.

Only a handful of denominational schools have handed over to multidenominational patrons despite the Government's much-vaunted "divestment" process.

Greater choice

Ms Zappone said the new strategy would also look at any other options which could provide parents with greater choice.

Fine Gael has also pledged to enact a new admissions Bill for the 2017-2018 academic year.

Ms Zappone said more detailed issues – such as whether a limit would be placed on the number of school places set aside for children of past pupils – will be matters for discussion.

Ms Zappone said Fine Gael has also pledged to establish an independent examination to identify the supports and barriers to access to higher education for lone parents, and measures to increase participation. She said recommendations on foot of this process would be published before this autumn's budget.

In addition, a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender "equality road map" will be developed by a new government, encompassing education, youth services, health, mental health and other services.

-reprinted from The Irish Times

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