

Early Years Education Is Political

How the early years sector campaigned successfully for better pay



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This article describes how professionals in the early years education sector campaigned for, and won, a pay deal in 2022, and outlines the efforts that went into winning that deal. It describes the challenges faced and surmounted, how momentum was sustained through the pandemic, and what the future holds for the sector.

The invaluable role childcare plays in the day-to-day lives of thousands of families throughout the country cannot be overstated. Our early years and childcare workers, who care for and educate our children, deserve our support and should be paid a wage appropriate to the responsibilities they carry. —Minister Michael McGrath, Budget 2022 Statement (Oireachtas, 2021a)

Authors' note: In this article we use *early years* and *childcare* interchangeably in referring to our sector. *Early years* is the term the sector has adopted informally, and *childcare* is the common term by which many people know us. *Early Childhood Care and Education* is the internationally recognised name. *Early Learning and Care* is the moniker put on us by the Department of Children in an unpopular policy move. Workers in the sector are referred to here as early years professionals (EYPs).

Early years needed to get political

If you search for 'childcare' in the debate archive of Dáil Éireann, you'll find it mentioned just 22 times during the 1980s; and only around 2,520 times from 1980 to 2015, a 35-year span. The seven years from 2015 to 2022 saw it mentioned 2,705 times (Oireachtas, 2022). This is relevant because childcare needed to get political to make change happen, so that's what EYPs have done. Through the Big Start campaign of our trade union, SIPTU (Big Start, 2022), we have placed early years firmly in the political domain, accelerating ongoing positive change that will secure a brighter future for our previously overlooked and underappreciated sector.

The sector's fragmented nature, low pay, and high turnover were documented by a White Paper decades ago (DES, 1999), but successive governments made no effort to improve pay and conditions in the

years up to 2022. During the 2010s, Marian Quinn and the Association of Childhood Professionals started a grassroots movement to highlight the need for change by setting up a professional association and holding protests. Progressive research commissioned by the National Childhood Network (NCN) and Crann started valuable discussions on the pay rates that EYPs should be getting (Duncan & Thomas, 2018).

Only when SIPTU launched the Big Start campaign in 2016 did early years truly start to develop our voice politically. It was then that change became possible through nationwide activism, the success of which is clearly shown by a 430% average increase in political coverage of 'childcare' in Dáil Éireann over the past seven years (Oireachtas, 2022).

How did early years become political?

EYPs, with support from our trade union, began to speak to our local representatives. We lobbied the government with 'A New Deal for Early Years' (Big Start, 2021). We developed our media and social media skills, explaining to the public and our peers what needed to be done to improve our working lives (Heaney, 2020; RTÉ News, 2021). We explained the real-life experiences of EYPs through surveys, and we explained the troubling reality of working in early years in a presentation to the DCEDIY Oireachtas Joint Committee in October 2021 (Oireachtas, 2021b). In February 2020 we protested with the Together for Early Years coalition (SIPTU, 2020) in one of the largest ever protests on the streets of Dublin (Ní Aodha, 2020), and we built membership of our trade union to fight for a hopeful future for our sector.

“ Childcare needed to get political to make change happen, so that's what Early Years Professionals (EYPs) have done.

Key political actions and documents had a significant effect on EYPs' progression towards better pay and conditions. The annual Pobal sector profile reports have provided an invaluable resource on what the early years sector has looked like since 2012, documenting that low pay and high turnover are distinguishing and interdependent features of the sector (Pobal, 2022a).

A 2017 report on the sector's working conditions by the DCYA Oireachtas Joint Committee (2017) incorporated the voices of early years activists and painted a bleak but honest picture. Subsequently Kathleen Funchion TD proposed in the Dáil that EYPs' pay and conditions needed to improve through investment; the motion was passed unopposed (Oireachtas, 2017). Minister Katherine Zappone followed with encouraging words, stating that if she were a childcare worker she 'would join a union' (Zappone, 2017). Politics was finally waking up to EYPs' determination to create change.

Some key policy actions were taken in 2019. The government launched the First 5 document (DCYA, 2019a), which aims among other goals to raise the professional status of early years, support employers to offer better working conditions, and support the attraction and retention of staff.

One of its goals was to establish a workforce development plan and a new funding model. In 2019 Minister Zappone launched a funding model expert group and a workforce development plan steering group to progress this (DCYA, 2019b).

Challenges along the way

2020 began powerfully for EYPs. SIPTU played a pivotal role in the Together for Early Years coalition (SIPTU, 2020), whose protest on the streets of Dublin on 5 February saw 30,000 EYPs and supporters demand better pay and conditions for the sector. The protest cemented public support. Unfortunately, the forward motion was put on pause when the Covid-19 pandemic closed schools and early years services in March (RTÉ News, 2020).

Despite the cruelty of the pandemic, it did highlight the care economy internationally, and crucially it underscored the role that the early years sector plays in the care and education of children. It also spotlighted the sector's key role in the economy, by allowing parents of young children to go to work. There was a lot of investment during the pandemic, with the annual equivalent of over €1 billion put into our sector (DCEDIY, 2022a), 80% of wages paid through the wage subsidy scheme (Oireachtas, 2021c), and extensive grants provided for reopening, outdoor play, and personal protective equipment. That extra funding, along with all the regular income streams from parents, the National Childcare Scheme, and the ECCE scheme, kept early years afloat when other businesses were experiencing challenges.

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Despite this investment, EYPs' wages remained low. The annual Pobal report indicated that the average wage for early years assistants, who make up 50% of the sector, was €12.10 an hour (Pobal, 2022b). Further evidence that EYPs were struggling is seen in a Back to Work survey, which highlighted that 84% of EYPs couldn't cope with unexpected expenses and 61% found it difficult to make ends meet (Big Start, 2020).

Time for change

Our sector was hugely disappointed in October 2020 when EYPs got no mention in the Budget 2021 statement (Government of Ireland, 2020). EYPs turned this disappointment into continued activism in 2021, when their political pressure finally paid off.

Firstly, the government put a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for early years in its Programme for Government (Irish Government, 2020). Secondly, Minister O'Gorman expedited the work of both research groups. The Workforce Development Plan steering group published Nurturing Skills (DCEDIY, 2021a), which sets out its goals of having a valued workforce in a competent early years system. Concurrently the expert group on the

funding model published a document called Partnership for Public Good (DCEDIY, 2021b), which lays out recommendations for new types of funding, support for the JLC, and recommendations for parent fee management.

Thirdly, the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality made significant recommendations for early years, such as: to plan for public provision of childcare, to increase investment, and to improve pay and develop a career structure for the sector (Citizens' Assembly, 2021). Finally, we received a historic amount of investment from Budget 2022 of €221 million in core funding. €138 million was intended 'first and foremost' for EYPs' pay and conditions, with a further €38 million for an expanded graduate uplift fund. That budget statement was the first to refer to EYPs by name – a very significant political recognition (Oireachtas, 2021a).

A key part of Partnership for Public Good is core funding. Phase 1 of core funding was adopted as government policy, to be rolled out in 2022. Core funding is specific to each early years service, it depends on capacity for children and opening hours, and it requires services to freeze their fees. Core funding channels money towards staff pay and conditions, and the drawing down of core funding in 2022 was contingent on Employment Regulation Order (ERO) pay rates being developed for the entire sector (DCEDIY, 2022b).

How the sector got better pay

A Joint Labour Committee is a method for collective bargaining for an entire sector that is laid out in Irish law (Irish Government, 1990). Collective bargaining refers to negotiations between employees and employer(s) on pay and working conditions. An online pre-JLC process was initiated in December 2020 by Minister Roderic O'Gorman. It was chaired by Kevin Duffy and was asked to consider whether a JLC was appropriate for our sector. The chair's report in February 2021 (Oireachtas, 2021d) recommended to the Minister that a JLC be established. In June an Establishment Order was put in place by Minister Damien English, requesting that the Labour Court establish a JLC (Irish Government, 2021).

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JLC committee nominations were sent to the Labour Court, six members on the employees' side and six on the employer's, along with an independent chair and deputy chair. Negotiations in line with the statutory JLC process began in December 2021 and continued until August 2022. They combined online and in-person meetings, and negotiations were lengthy. It was the first JLC to seek a recommendation from the Labour Court under section 42B(4) of the Industrial Relations Act (Irish Government, 1990) during the JLC process, not once but twice. Recommendations LCR22575 and LCR22586 give an insight into how far apart the two sides were in our vision for pay in the sector and for the future of its workforce (Labour Court, 2022a; 2022b).

Despite the challenges and delays of the JLC negotiations, two EROs for the sector were written into law by Minister English on 15 September 2022. An ERO is a legally binding document setting out minimum rates of pay and possibly conditions for various defined roles in a sector. ERO 1 contains a statutory minimum rate of pay for early years educators of €13.00 (DETE, 2022a), and ERO 2 contains statutory minimum rates of pay for lead educators, deputy managers, and managers of €14.00, €15.70, and €16.50, respectively, along with two higher rates of pay for graduate lead educators and graduate managers of €15.50 and €17.25 (DETE, 2022b).

The EROs make particular reference to payment of wages: that all educators and managers should receive payment for all hours worked, all contact and non-contact time. This is especially relevant given that a recent survey found that 68% of EYPs regularly do unpaid work (Big Start, 2021). This is backed up by a Pobal report which states that 60% of EYPs do not have non-contact time (Pobal, 2022b) It's vital that all EYPs understand that they should be paid for all hours worked each week.

Future for early years

There is a palpable sense that change is happening in the Irish early years sector in 2022. Around 20,000 EYPs have received a pay increase, many of whom thought it was impossible (DCEDIY, 2022a) – but early years trade union activists around Ireland knew it was possible. All of the stars seemed to align for EYPs this year through government policy and investment, though some of those stars were dragged into place by activists.

There was another hopeful Budget statement in September 2022 (Irish Government, 2022), which saw investment in early years increase to over €1 billion a year – five years ahead of schedule for the DCEDIY. Much of the additional funding is intended to reduce fees for parents, but core funding for pay has been increased by €59 million.

Jim Larkin, one of the founders and leaders of Irish trade unionism in the early 20th century, coined the phrase 'A fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. This year has brought about a solid foundation for EYPs' pay through both EROs. But we need more investment, and we need to see year-on-year increases to our pay until we receive the fair day's pay that we deserve. Early years has become political, and there is no looking back.

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