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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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GLOSSARY

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model, in Ireland
BAS	British Ability Scale
CCEA	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education Programme in Ireland
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
ERO	Employment Regulation Order
ETI	Education Training Inspectorate
EU-SILC	EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions
EYEI	Early Years Education Inspection
FRS	Family Resources Survey, conducted in Northern Ireland
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GUI	*Growing Up in Ireland* study, conducted in Ireland
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years Care
MCS	Millennium Cohort Study, conducted in Northern Ireland
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCS	National Childcare Scheme in Ireland
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RQIA	Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, Northern Ireland
SCOTENS	Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
Tusla	The Child and Family Agency, Ireland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early childhood is a key life stage and early childhood experiences are crucial not only for children's well-being, but for their subsequent development. There is increasing evidence that social inequalities in outcomes emerge even before children start school, and a large body of international research highlights that investing in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can benefit children's cognitive and non-cognitive development. Affordable childcare has an important role in facilitating parental employment, which in turn can reduce child poverty. There has been increasing recognition of the importance of ECEC in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, with considerable recent energy and investment in early years policy in Ireland, and a renewed impetus in policy development in Northern Ireland given by the recent Fair Start report, which emphasised the importance of early years for tackling educational inequality (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland, 2021).

This report draws on survey and administrative data, as well as in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, to document the nature of early years provision in Northern Ireland and Ireland. It explores the use of different forms of early care and education in both jurisdictions, and how this varies for different groups of families. It also compares young children's cognitive and social outcomes, using survey data, and discusses the challenges related to early years provision.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Universal preschool provision is provided for children in the year preceding primary school in Northern Ireland and for two years preceding primary school in Ireland. Participation rates are very high in both preschool programmes and they are regarded highly by stakeholders.
- Preschool programmes are part-time for most children. In Ireland, the entitlement is to 15 hours per week. In Northern Ireland, this entitlement is currently at 12.5 hours per week, considerably below that of other UK regions, although in practice some children are receiving 22.5 hours of preschool, depending on where they live. Outside the preschool programmes, in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, most working parents access ECEC through a variety of providers. In both jurisdictions government subsidies reduce the costs, particularly for lower-income families, but for middle and higher income families, ECEC costs are higher than in many other European countries.
- Survey data for 2018/2021 show similarities in ECEC use in both systems; for example, centre-based care is more common as the main form of ECEC among three and four year olds than it is among younger children, reflecting the entitlement to free preschool provision. Considering all children aged nought to four years, centre-based care is more commonly used by higher-income families in both contexts.

- Despite this, notable differences do occur. Centre-based care and childminding is much more common in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, with parents in Northern Ireland relying more on family and friends for care. This may reflect gaps in provision, as well as affordability issues. Children from lower income groups in both jurisdictions are more likely to be looked after by relatives or full-time by their parents.
- Childcare use is more strongly associated with maternal employment in Ireland. Mothers of young children work longer hours and are more reliant on formal provision in Ireland, whereas in Northern Ireland mothers are more likely to work part-time and may need to fit paid work around support from family or friends to a greater extent.
- Stakeholders also report that ECEC participation varies somewhat for different groups. In the context of overall very high participation in free preschool programmes, some groups – those with disabilities or special needs and Traveller and Roma children – are less likely to participate.
- Using the *Growing Up in Ireland* Cohort '08 study and the Millennium Cohort Study for Northern Ireland, we found vocabulary test scores at age five are similar in the two jurisdictions, while teacher ratings of language and linking sounds/letters skills at five are higher in Ireland, and teacher ratings of number skills are higher in Northern Ireland.
- We found evidence of social inequality in children's outcomes in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. At age five, children from lower income households and/or those whose mothers have lower educational qualifications have poorer vocabulary and teacher-rated skills.
- Differences between child outcomes depending on their experience of early childhood education and care at nine months and three years were modest, though the surveys predated significant policy changes in Ireland and do not contain measures indicating the quality of care in either context. The home learning environment (such as being read to) has a much clearer positive association with skills at age five.
- Exposure to school appears to be linked to cognitive outcomes, with children with longer exposure to school having higher vocabulary scores and teacher-rated skills. This is true in both jurisdictions, but particularly pronounced in Ireland. Conversely, children who started school earlier in Northern Ireland experience greater socio-emotional problems than those who started later. No significant difference is found in Ireland.
- Socio-emotional difficulty scores are higher in Ireland (7.4) than in Northern Ireland (6.8). In both jurisdictions, socio-emotional difficulties are more prevalent among boys, those with disabilities/special educational needs, those whose mothers have lower levels of education and those living in rented accommodation.
- Interviews with key stakeholders from Ireland and Northern Ireland indicate many commonalities in terms of the strengths and challenges faced by early years providers and families of young children. Identified strengths include

preschool programmes and curricula while identified challenges include affordability, flexibility and pay and conditions of early years staff.

- Stakeholders highlighted the significant investment required in the early years sector, given the critical window these years represent for children. This is in the context of ongoing and planned significant increases in funding in Ireland, and a review of the childcare strategy in Northern Ireland.
- In terms of North–South cooperation and potential policy learning, the stakeholder interviews revealed numerous forms of cross-border collaboration, which are viewed as mutually beneficial and worthwhile. However, the informal nature of such collaboration, while valued, means it may be somewhat ad-hoc, and involve a reliance on specific individuals, which poses a question about sustainability.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- There has been considerable momentum in Ireland around the expansion of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme from one to two years of preschool provision, and recent substantial investment in the early years sector, while in Northern Ireland provision has fallen behind developments in the rest of the UK, where there have been increased entitlements to a greater number of preschool hours.
- Both systems face problems of staff recruitment and retention. Low pay for workers in the sector is inconsistent with the demand for a highly qualified workforce to deliver high quality ECEC. In Ireland there has been a considerable increase in qualifications in recent years and the new Core Funding model and employment regulation orders from the Workplace Relations Commission aim to increase wages in the sector without increasing charges to parents. In Northern Ireland, there remains a wide gap between the educational credentials among those working in private/voluntary settings as compared to those in the statutory sector, as well as disparities in staff pay and working conditions between the two sectors.
- Our analysis of data from *Growing Up in Ireland* and the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrates that inequalities in cognitive outcomes can already be present at three years of age. There is a need for greater supports for children under three in both jurisdictions. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland emphasised the need for curricular development to support the learning needs of this age group. In Ireland, stakeholders noted that some supports such as the Action and Inclusion Model (AIM) do not currently extend to the under threes.
- There have been recent developments to address out-of-pocket costs to parents, through the tax and universal credit system in Northern Ireland and the National Childcare Scheme in Ireland. Nevertheless, middle- and higher-income parents with very young children (nought to two), or multiple children in full-time care, still face costs that are considerably higher than those found in other wealthy countries in Europe.

- The different approaches to targeting supports for disadvantaged groups provide a number of opportunities for policy learning. In Ireland, the AIM programme for children with a disability was recognised as an example of good practice. In Northern Ireland, the provision of integrated supports for those in disadvantaged areas through Sure Start and bespoke programmes for Traveller children were highlighted as options that should be considered in Ireland.
- A notable difference across jurisdictions concerns the regulation of childminders. In Northern Ireland, the majority of childminders are centrally registered. In Ireland, steps have been taken to move in this direction under the new National Action Plan for Childminding, although there is much learning to be gleaned from how this registration and regulation operates in Northern Ireland, including making registration an attractive prospect for those working in this sector.
- There are significant gaps in the data on the uptake of family leave policies; these data are needed to evaluate their effectiveness in supporting the needs of families. There are also gaps in the data on parents' preferences in relation to the types and hours of ECEC. The planned new birth cohort studies in Ireland and the UK offer the possibility for systematic data collection on these important issues.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a key life stage and early childhood experiences are important, not only for children's current well-being; they also play a crucial role in children's development and in shaping their future lives. Children's brains develop rapidly in this period, during which they develop their cognitive, social and emotional skills (Waldfogel, 2006).

At the launch of the Irish Government's Shared Island Initiative in October 2020, the Taoiseach Micheál Martin, TD, outlined that one of the core aims was to 'deepen cooperation in education' and provide a strong evidence base for inclusive dialogue and collaboration. Early childhood education and care is a crucial area in educational development. This study will provide new insights into the main policy challenges around early years provision in Northern Ireland and Ireland, providing a useful evidence base for policy development in an area that has been subject to a good deal of reform in recent years.

Both jurisdictions have placed increasing importance on providing high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and ensuring equity of access, including for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs. Government strategies have viewed ECEC as meeting multiple objectives, including promoting child development, supporting parents and addressing educational and broader social inequality. In Ireland, First 5, the national strategy for babies, young children and their families, which runs from 2019 to 2028 (Government of Ireland, 2019), includes among its objectives: to 'balance working and caring'; to provide 'affordable, high-quality Early Learning and Care'; and to provide information, services and supports for parents. Indeed, as noted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021a), in the past ten years there has been considerable policy development and increased spending in Ireland in the area of ECEC. In Northern Ireland, policy developments are guided by the ten-year strategy, Delivering Social Change Through Childcare 2015–2025. The strategy has two broad aims, one developmental – 'preparing [children] for lifelong wellbeing and achievement' – and the other to enable parental employment. The Fair Start Action Plan, published in June 2021, seeks to tackle educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. It prioritises policy and investment in the nought-to-six age group, framing such a focus as enhancing school readiness among young children. There is currently a major review of childcare policy underway in Northern Ireland (Purdy and McClelland, 2022), which means it is an opportune time to compare the two jurisdictions.

The research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows.

- How does access to ECEC differ between the two jurisdictions?
- What supports are available for parents to balance work and care in Ireland and Northern Ireland?
- How does participation in ECEC among children from different family backgrounds (social class, parental education, family structure etc.) compare in Ireland and Northern Ireland?
- What is the scale of social inequality in child outcomes (cognitive and non-cognitive) among preschool children in the two jurisdictions? And what factors might account for any differences found?

It is worth noting that a broader consideration of child poverty is beyond the scope of the current study, especially as the two tax welfare systems are quite different. Nevertheless, household income is considered among the factors accounting for different patterns of ECEC participation and both financial strain and household income are considered in the analysis of child outcomes. The benefits paid to families to support them with childcare costs are considered below, though cash benefits such as Child Benefit are not included in the discussion. We return to the issue of child poverty in the conclusion.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine provision, uptake and child outcomes within the early years sector in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It relies upon a quantitative analysis of existing data sources as well as in-depth interviews and an expert consultation from both jurisdictions. We also undertook a review of policy documents and published research on the two systems.

1.2.1 Quantitative methodology and data sources

Our analysis uses multiple existing data sources to create an overview of the early years sectors in Ireland and Northern Ireland. These data sources include the EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), the Family Resources Survey (FRS), the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study.

In Chapter 2, we examine participation in ECEC and maternal employment rates, using EU-SILC for Ireland and the FRS for Northern Ireland, as these provide the most up-to-date information on the type of non-parental care that families used for children. The sample sizes are relatively small; therefore, we pool data for the latest waves of data. In the case of the FRS, we pool data for two waves: 2018–2019 and 2019–2020. We use the three most recent waves of the SILC: 2019, 2020 and 2021. Through logistic regression modelling, our analysis explores how participation in ECEC and hours of care may differ by family background and

sociodemographic factors in both jurisdictions. LFS data are used to compare patterns of maternal employment.

In Chapter 3, we examine child outcomes, including vocabulary scores, teacher assessed ability and socio-emotional difficulties. Further to this, we model how these outcomes may be affected by family background and sociodemographics, as well as participation in ECEC. This analysis draws on GUI for Ireland and the MCS for Northern Ireland. While the children and their families were surveyed at the same age, the MCS began in 2001 while the GUI survey began in 2008. There is a high degree of harmonisation between the two studies, with many of the same outcome measures fielded in both. Table 1.2 sets out the data sources and key outcome measures used to support the analysis presented in Chapters 2 and 3.

TABLE 1.1 DATA SOURCES USED IN THE ANALYSIS

Variables of Interest	Jurisdiction(s)	Survey and year	Sample	Chapter
Childcare type	NI	Family Resources Survey, 2018, 2019	Children aged 0-4 years	Chapter 2
Childcare type	IE	SILC, 2019, 2020, 2021	Children aged 0-4 years	Chapter 2
Maternal employment rates	IE and NI	Labour Force Survey, 2019	Women aged 20-64 years	Chapter 2
BAS – Vocabulary test score	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 3 years, and 5 years (in 2006)	Chapter 3
BAS – Vocabulary test score	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 3 years, and 5 years (in 2013), from Cohort '08	Chapter 3
Teacher-assessed skills	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Teacher-assessed skills	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Parental reading	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 3 years, and aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Parental reading	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 3 years, and aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Linking sounds and letters, teacher reported	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Linking sounds and letters, teacher reported	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland* (IE)	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Reading skills, teacher reported	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Reading skills, teacher reported	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Number skills, teacher reported	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Number skills, teacher reported	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Dispositions and attitude	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Dispositions and attitudes	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	NI	Millennium Cohort Study	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	IE	*Growing Up in Ireland*	Children aged 5 years	Chapter 3

Notes: NI=Northern Ireland; IE=Ireland. SILC= Survey of Income and Living Conditions.

1.2.2 Qualitative methodology

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the qualitative component of our research. A range of stakeholders from the ECEC sector were invited to participate in a series of research interviews. This included individuals involved in policymaking, oversight, practitioner support and development, curricular development, advocacy, and academia. Seventeen interviews were conducted with 19 stakeholders from both jurisdictions. Two interviews were carried out with two representatives of the same organisation. Eleven participants were from Ireland, and eight participants were from Northern Ireland. The interviews were semi-structured in format; core topics addressed concerned: key policy developments; funding and provision; quality; participation; leave policies; outcomes; and opportunities for cross-jurisdiction collaboration. Questions were modified to participants' specialist area within the field of ECEC. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average length of interviews was approximately 56 minutes. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes arising within the data (Brooks et al., 2015).

A wider stakeholder consultation event was also held online in July 2022. The event was attended by 36 stakeholders and allowed us to consult with a wider group of policymakers, providers, parent representatives and academics involved in research and training of ECEC professionals. Early-stage findings from the quantitative and qualitative components of this research were presented. This provided the opportunity to gather constructive feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, to ensure that results were accurately interpreted, and to ensure key issues within the sector were acknowledged and represented. Attendees were divided into five smaller groups for discussion and their feedback was presented by rapporteurs. With permission, this feedback was recorded and analysed alongside the data collected through interview transcripts and is also incorporated in the findings presented in Chapter 4.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF REPORT

In the remainder of this chapter, we draw on policy documents and research literature to describe the systems of ECEC and family leave policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The discussion focuses on key aspects of the ECEC system: access and cost; quality; and targeted supports for disadvantaged groups.

Chapter 2 investigates patterns of participation in ECEC in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It compares the main type of childcare used (centre-based, childminder, family/friends) and hours of care across the two jurisdictions. The chapter also compares maternal employment rates. Chapter 3 compares social inequalities in cognitive outcomes among preschool children. Chapter 4 draws on interviews and consultation with stakeholders to identify similarities and differences in the

challenges and priorities for policy development. Chapter 5 identifies opportunities for policy learning, policy lessons for reducing inequality in children's outcomes in the early years, and highlights opportunities for collaboration in the area of ECEC across the island.

1.4 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEMS IN IRELAND NORTH AND SOUTH

There is a broad body of research on the benefits of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children's social and cognitive development (Sylva et al., 2010; Melhuish et al., 2006; Bonetti and Blanden, 2020). The benefits of high quality ECEC are particularly evident for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ruhm and Waldfogel, 2012; Blossfeld et al., 2017). Childcare provision also enables parental employment, which in turn raises income and reduces child poverty (Waldfogel, 2006; Cattan et al., 2022). Lack of access to affordable ECEC has a particularly detrimental effect on the mother's ability to participate in employment, especially within low-income households (Russell et al., 2018; Akgunduz and Plantenga, 2018).

ECEC is essential for child development, learning and well-being. High quality ECEC can influence later outcomes in life, including in terms of school performance, labour market participation and physical and mental health (OECD, 2021a). In comparative terms, the level of expenditure on ECEC in Ireland and the UK lags behind the average for the EU27 (OECD, 2021b).[1] The average spend per child in the EU was $5,500 USD adjusted for purchasing power parity, while the figure was $3,200 for Ireland and $3,600 in the UK (no separate data are available for Northern Ireland).[2] This places Ireland fifth lowest among EU countries (and the UK ninth lowest). The most recent figures refer to 2017 and therefore do not take account of changes across countries since then.

In Ireland, ECEC policy is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), working in collaboration with the Department of Education. DCEDIY are responsible for governance and quality, regulation and monitoring, funding and workforce development in ECEC settings (other than primary schools). They are also responsible for First 5, the national strategy for babies, young children and their families. The Department of Education collaborates with DCEDIY in the areas of quality, workforce development and curriculum, as well as disability. The Department of Education is responsible

1 See https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_1_Public_spending_on_childcare_and_early_education.pdf; updated September 2021 and downloaded 29 November 2022.

2 The public expenditure figures include all public spending on formal day-care services and pre-primary ECEC services (e.g., preschools, kindergartens, etc.) for children aged 0-5 years. They do not include spending on primary schools for children in this age group.

for 40 Early Start preschools,[3] education-focused ECEC inspections and curriculum development (OECD, 2021a).

In Northern Ireland, ECEC policy is also shared between two departments. While the main policy responsibility for childcare provision, and the development of a new childcare strategy, rests with the Department of Education, the Northern Ireland Department of Health has policy responsibility for childcare regulation in private and voluntary settings. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland is required to maintain a register of approved childcare providers (both group settings and childminders) and have them inspected at least on an annual basis. They produce minimum standards, which are used by Health and Social Care Trust Early Years Teams for the purpose of registration and inspection of childcare settings.

This section first considers children's entitlements to care and education, affordability and access (Section 1.4.1), then quality of care (Section 1.4.2) and targeted interventions for children in need of extra support for their development (Section 1.4.3).

1.4.1 ECEC: Entitlements, access and affordability

Table 1.1 presents a summary of ECEC provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland at the time of writing for children from birth to age six. One key point is the considerable expansion of universal free preschool provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland over the last decade, albeit mostly at low hours per week. In Ireland, children aged 3-5 years are entitled to two years of ECEC for 15 hours per week in term time under the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE).[4] In Northern Ireland, children aged 3-4 years are entitled to one year of ECEC for 12.5 hours per week in term time.[5]

In other parts of the UK, the provision of free childcare has been considerably expanded in the past five years, though on a targeted basis: in September 2017, provision of childcare was extended to 30 hours per week for all 3 and 4 year olds in working households in England; Scotland and Wales are in the process of introducing similar policies (Stewart and Reader, 2020). It should be noted that the universal provision of 15 hours applies to other non-employed families. It is only in

[3] Early Start is a small scheme that is offered to children in the year preceding school entry in disadvantaged areas in Ireland. It is a one-year scheme available in select schools and funded by the Department of Education. The aims of the scheme are to enhance development and prevent school failure, and to counteract potential social disadvantage. Children cannot be enrolled in both Early Start and the ECCE scheme at the same time.

[4] Depending on month of birth and age of school start, children aged between 2 years, 8 months, and 5 years, 5 months can participate.

[5] A new pilot programme is expanding provision to 22.5 hours in certain areas.

Northern Ireland, of all the UK regions, that the hours of free preschool provision entitlement have not been formally extended to any group of children.

In 2021–2022, the majority (68 per cent) of funded preschool education places in Northern Ireland were provided in state nursery schools or in primary schools with nursery units (NISRA, 2022).[6] Many children in this sector attend for 4.5 hours per day (22.5 hours per week) depending on local available provision. The remaining 32 per cent of places are provided in voluntary and private preschool education settings: these places are part-time (12.5 hours per week), though in some settings parents can pay for extra hours. While the formal entitlement to preschool provision is only 12.5 hours per week in Northern Ireland, the Department of Education recently reported that '40% of children receive 22.5 hours of preschool per week and the remaining 60% receive at least 12.5 hours per week'.[7] In the same communication, the Minister for Education stated their intention to increase preschool hours to 22.5 hours for all children in Northern Ireland, though no timeline has been outlined.

In contrast to Northern Ireland, and many other OECD countries, almost all preschool provision in Ireland is either in the private or community sector, but funded by the State (OECD, 2021a).[8] In the 2020/2021 school year, 74 per cent of services were in the private, for-profit sector and 26 per cent in the community/voluntary sector (Pobal, 2022).

6 The employing authority for nursery schools is either the Education Authority or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

7 See https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/mcilveen-announces-move-towards-225-hours-funded-pre-school-all-children.

8 The exception is the very small-scale Early Start programme described in footnote 3, which takes place in primary school classrooms.

TABLE 1.2 SUMMARY OF ECEC PROVISION, NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND (EXCLUDES INFORMAL CARE BY FRIENDS/FAMILY)

Age of child	Centre-based education and care settings		Childminders	
	Northern Ireland	Ireland	Northern Ireland	Ireland
Infants 0-1 years#	Private/community (PVI)	Private/community	Regulated (see details in text).	Private childminders – very few regulated, and entitled to subsidies. Typically do not provide state preschool scheme (see text).
2 years	Private/community crèches*	Private/community (some aged 2 in preschool).		
3 years	Free preschool 2.5 hours entitlement per day in term time (1 yr).** Majority in nursery schools/classes in schools, remainder in private/community settings (any extra hours paid by parent).	Free preschool, 3 hours per day in term time for 2 yrs. All in private/ community (extra hours, often in same setting, paid by parent).***	In principle can provide preschool (though rare).	
4 years	Some preschool, though until September 2022, school compulsory from September after the child turns 4 (Year 1) (5 hrs) (private/community afterschool).	Preschool/some children in school (4.5 hours).**** (Private/community afterschool)	Some provide after-school care.	Some provide after-school care.
5 years	School year 2 (5 hours)	Preschool/school (4.5 hours)		
6 years	School year 3 (6 hours)	School (4.5, some 5.5 hours per day)		

Note: #Extensive provision of family leave in this age bracket, see Section 1.5. *There is a two-year-old programme for children facing disadvantage, Sure Start (details in Section 1.4.2.3 below). **While the entitlement is 2.5 hours per day, 40 per cent of children in Northern Ireland receive 4.5 hours of preschool; see text for further discussion. ***Early Start is a small preschool project, which runs in 40 primary schools, that a small number of children attend in place of the free preschool year (see discussion in text). ***School starting age varies in Ireland, though the proportion of four year olds in primary school has fallen from 47 per cent in 2001 to 17 per cent in 2021 (Department of Education, 2022). PVI = Private, voluntary or independent settings.

In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, participation in the free preschool entitlement for the year prior to primary school, while not compulsory, is almost universal. Combining estimates from the school census in Northern Ireland with the recent population census (April 2021), an estimated 94 per cent of three year olds in Northern Ireland participated in the free preschool year.[9] In Ireland, it is estimated that 94-95 per cent of the cohort participated in the year preceding primary school (2018/2019).[10] Participation among ethnic minority children was somewhat lower in Ireland; 92 per cent of both Asian and Black children

9 NISRA (2022) report that 21,499 three year olds participated in preschool in the school year 2021/2022, and the Northern Ireland population census (April 2021) recorded 22,942 three year olds usually resident in Northern Ireland; see https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/census-2021-main-statistics-demography-tables-age-and-sex.

10 Information provided by DCEDIY based on the Primary Online Database (POD) for 2018/2019 school year. McGinnity et al. (2015) also found in the GUI '08 cohort that reasons parents gave for their child not participating in ECCE in 2011/2012, shortly after the scheme was launched, were that they were participating in an other scheme at the time or that their centre did not run the scheme or that the child had additional special educational needs.

participated in ECCE in the year before they started school. Participation rates in ECCE are significantly lower for Irish Traveller children (77 per cent) and Roma children (73 per cent).[11] Pobal (2022) note that the uptake rates are lower for the earlier year of preschool entitlement.

In both jurisdictions, children start school early, at least by European standards: as Table 1.1 shows, many four year olds in Northern Ireland are in primary school.[12] This is true in Ireland too, though recently school starting age has risen, partly in response to better provision of free preschool education, though the trend predates the ECCE scheme (Department of Education, 2022).[13] OECD (2021a) figures show enrolment of three to five year olds in early childhood education and care (ISCED Level 0) or primary education (ISCED Level 1) in both UK and Ireland in 2019 was almost 100 per cent, placing them among the leading countries for enrolment in this age group. In contrast, participation in formal (centre-based) childcare for those aged nought to two in Ireland is below the EU27 average: 23 per cent compared to 32 per cent in 2020 (Eurostat).[14] The most recent comparable UK figures relate to 2018 when the figure stood at 39 per cent.

For working parents, these hours of sessional preschool do not facilitate employment and, aside from Sure Start in Northern Ireland, there is no entitlement to free childcare for most children under three. In both jurisdictions, there is a strong reliance on private sector provision, both for the delivery of ECEC for children under three years and for three year olds outside the limited hours of preschool provision. That said, recent reforms in Ireland, in particular the National Childcare Scheme, have introduced a considerable level of income-related subsidies to parents, particularly those on low incomes (see below).

In addition to childcare centres, childminders represent an important source of ECEC, both for under threes and for additional hours around preschool provision in Ireland. McGinnity et al. (2015) found for example that 12 per cent of three-year-old children in Ireland were looked after by a childminder or nanny.[15] Yet in Ireland, childminders are almost completely unregulated. Very few of them are registered, and thus inspected and entitled to subsidies.[16] The new National Action Plan for Childminding (DCEDIY, 2021) aims to address this, but the registration phase for all

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11 Information provided by DCEDIY, based on the Primary Online Database (POD) for 2018/2019 school year. Darmody et al. (2022), using data from GUI'08 cohort, found that migrant-origin children were less likely to have attended ECCE at age five, noting that this was a common pattern internationally.

12 Until September 2022, after the passing of new legislation, it was compulsory for children to start school the September after the child turns four; see https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/topics/curriculum-and-learning/school-starting-age.

13 Analysis of the GUI 08 Cohort found that delaying school start was more common among higher-income families (GUI Study Team, 2013).

14 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/product/page/ILC_CAINDFORMAL, accessed 29 November 2022.

15 Using GUI '08 cohort data, based on main form of non-parental childcare reported by parents. Children in this cohort were exactly three years old, so this was before their free preschool entitlement at that time.

16 In 2020, the *National Action Plan for Childminding* estimates that there were 15,000 childminders caring for children in the childminder's home, of whom 77 were registered with TUSLA (the Child and Family Agency) (DCEDIY, 2021).

childminders has yet to be implemented. Childminders are less common in the UK than in Ireland (Privalko et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2014). In Northern Ireland, most childminders who care for children in their home are registered, regulated and considered by policymakers as an important component of the childcare system (Department of Health, 2018). Childminders are included in the early years standards and need up-to-date paediatric first aid training as part of their registration.

The financial supports available to help parents with the cost of childcare differ between the two jurisdictions. In Northern Ireland, payments are made through the tax and benefit system, directly to parents, if they apply. The tax-free childcare scheme, introduced in 2017, is for all working parents using registered childcare but not in receipt of other benefits. For every £8 paid into an online account, the Government makes a £2 top-up payment, so it is effectively a 20 per cent subsidy of childcare costs for children from birth to 11 years.[17] A recurring issue since this scheme's introduction is a low level of take-up. The UK Parliament Treasury Committee identified poor awareness, technical difficulties, complicated eligibility criteria and inadequate guidance as contributing factors (Treasury Committee, 2018). Latest figures suggest some increase in uptake in Northern Ireland but many families are still not claiming the benefit.[18]

More generous support is available through the benefit system for low-income families. Under Universal Credit,[19] 85 per cent of eligible childcare costs can be claimed, up to a total subsidy of £646 a month for one child, or £1,108 for two or more. This is a more generous subsidy than the scheme it replaced, Working Tax Credit, which is currently being phased out – though the maximum subsidy has remained fixed even as prices rise.[20]

In Ireland, the National Childcare Scheme was introduced in 2019 with the aim of streamlining existing schemes and increasing support for parents.[21] The NCS provides universal and targeted subsidies for families depending on parental income and other circumstances (such as parental employment/education); see Doorley et al., 2021, for estimates of the value of the subsidy for a range of families in different situations. The subsidy is paid for hours in addition to the ECCE programme and is given to providers, who in turn reduce fees for parents.

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17 The top-up payment is up to a maximum of £2,000 per child per year: for children with disabilities, the age range is 0-16 and the maximum top-up £4,000. Both parents need to be working and families cease to be eligible if one parent earns more than £100,000 per year. This scheme replaced the Early Start childcare vouchers scheme.

18 See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tax-free-childcare-statistics-march-2022/tax-free-childcare-statistics-commentary-march-2022.

19 Universal credit is paid to those on low incomes or out of work. See https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/universal-credit for further details.

20 Under Working Tax Credit, 70 per cent of costs could be claimed. Universal credit cannot be claimed at the same time as tax-free childcare or working tax credit.

21 Some existing targeted schemes are still operational but are very small and in the process of being phased out (Pobal, 2022). For further details see https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/.

Participation in the scheme is open to all registered providers, and therefore excludes the vast majority of the childminding sector, who are not regulated.

Even with these financial supports, the reliance on private provision means that outside the preschool entitlement, the cost of non-parental childcare is high in both Ireland and Northern Ireland.[22] The OECD (2021a) estimates childcare costs for parents of a two year old and a three year old in full-time daycare, for comparative purposes. After taking into account any childcare subsidies or tax credits families may be eligible for, typical net childcare costs in the UK are around 29 per cent of average earnings in 2021 and 31 per cent of average earnings in Ireland for an equivalent couple.[23,24] This represents 22 per cent of family net income for these families in the UK and 22 per cent in Ireland. Due to government supports, the net costs for lone-parent families (and other low-income families) are much lower in both countries. For example, net childcare costs for a lone parent on average earnings now amounts to 3 per cent of the average wage in Ireland and 11 per cent in the UK. The OECD found that, following the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in Ireland, between 2019 and 2021, net childcare costs decreased by over 20 percentage points for a low-earning couple and close to 30 percentage points for a lone parent with two children in full-time care.[25]

Of course, in reality these families are somewhat atypical: many families use childcare for less than full-time hours, use unpaid childcare or no non-parental childcare at all, to save money (see Russell et al., 2018 for a discussion; also Employers for Childcare, 2022). There are also families who would like to access childcare for their children but are unable to do so. In 2017, 16 per cent of families with children under 12 years in Ireland reported unmet need for *formal* childcare, with higher rates of unmet need among lone parents, parents with disabilities and those in lower socio-economic groups (Privalko et al., 2019). In the UK, the rate was even higher at 21 per cent (ibid). In Northern Ireland, a 2021 survey based on a convenience sample found significant unmet need for childcare: 54 per cent of families reported difficulty accessing the formal childcare they needed. While affordability was the main barrier cited by parents, they also raised issues of accessibility and flexibility (Employers for Childcare, 2022).[26]

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22 See https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_4_Childcare_support.pdf.

23 Northern Ireland specific information is not available. Calculations assume that families claim their entitlement.

24 See https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF3_4_Childcare_support.pdf. Data reflect the costs of full-time care in a typical childcare centre for a two-earner two-child couple family, where both parents are in full-time employment and the children are aged two and three. Gross earnings for the two earners in the family are set equal to 100% of average earnings for the first earner, and 67% of average earnings for the second earner. 'Full-time' care is defined as care for at least 40 hours per week. See the OECD Tax and Benefit Systems website (http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/benefits-and-wages.htm) for more detail on the methods and assumptions used and information on the policies modelled for each country. Latest figures for different family types are available at https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NCC.

25 Low earnings refer to the 20th percentile. There was little change for couples on median earnings. See OECD (2022). 'Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2021', https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/net-childcare-costs/indicator/english_e328a9ee.

26 Responses are based on over 1,580 responses from parents. Respondents were recruited on-line through social media.

Partly as a response to the challenges of regulating in a market model of childcare and to help address the issue of affordability, a new Core Funding model was introduced in Ireland in the summer of 2022. The model is designed to introduce both greater state investment and greater public management of ECEC provision. Core Funding is provided directly to providers, in addition to the NCS and ECCE scheme funding, and includes conditions in relation to fees, quality improvements and financial transparency, with the aim of improving affordability, quality, inclusion and sustainability.[27] Budget 2023 significantly increased entitlements in the universal element of the National Childcare Scheme (from 50c per hour subsidy to €1.40 per hour). [28]

1.4.2 Quality of ECEC

A body of research evidence has shown that to promote development, ECEC needs to be of high quality (Sylva et al., 2010; Melhuish et al. 2006; Bonetti and Blanden, 2020). Quality ECEC settings offer a stimulating, nurturing environment for young children to facilitate their development. Key agents for supporting quality are, of course, the staff who care for the children, and their skills and qualifications (OECD, 2018). Having standards and guidelines in place, which are then followed, is also important. This section discusses some of these guidelines and characteristics of childcare workers, particularly childcare qualifications, in both jurisdictions.

1.4.2.1 Staff–child ratios and staff qualifications

Both Ireland and Northern Ireland specify minimum staff-to-child ratios in childcare settings, which vary according to the age of the child.[29] In Northern Ireland, for children aged 0-2 years the ratio is 1:3, which means one carer for every three children in this age group. For children aged 2-3 years, the ratio is 1:4, and for children aged 3-12 years the ratio is 1:8 in private voluntary settings. The staff-to-child ratio is higher for children aged 3-4 years in nursery schools/classes in the statutory sector (1:13). Childminders in Northern Ireland need to comply with the specified maximum number of children who can be cared for as identified on their registration certificate. This number includes their own children under 12 years of age. The ratios are: 1:6 – six children under 12, of whom no more than 3 are under compulsory school age; in addition, normally no more than 1 child under a year old.

In Ireland, adult-to-child ratios differ for full-time and part-time services. For full-time services, the ratio for under ones is one adult to three children; for one-to-two year olds, it is one adult to five children, for two-to-three year olds it is one

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27 See https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/core-funding/ for further details.

28 The allocation for core funding in Budget 2023 was €259 million for Year 1 and €287 million for Year 2.

29 Regulations often typically specify the maximum number of children.

adult to six children and for three-to-six year olds, it is one adult to eight children. For part-time services such as the ECCE scheme and sessional preschool service (up to 3.5 hours), the ratio is one adult to 11 children (Tusla, 2018). Childminders can care for no more than five preschool children at any given time, including the childminder's own children. Only childminders caring for more than three preschool children or more than six children of any age (other than the childminders own children) are required to register with (notify) the authorities and, as discussed above, the vast majority of childminders are not registered or regulated. No financial subsidies are available for care by unregistered childminders.

In Northern Ireland, a number of commentators have highlighted a two-tier structure of service between the private/voluntary sector and statutory sector provision (Purdy and McClelland, 2022; Walsh, 2021; see also Gambaro et al., 2015 for the UK). Staff requirements, funding, pay and conditions vary across the private, voluntary/community and public sectors. For example, teachers in the statutory sector (nursery schools or classes) are required to possess a degree-level qualification with qualified teacher status, whereas in the voluntary and private sectors only the team leader is required to have a higher diploma Level 5 qualification (equivalent to Level 6 in Ireland), with a further half of the staff required to have a Level 2 childcare qualification (equivalent to GCSE).[30]

Earlier research followed a cohort of over 800 children in Northern Ireland, investigating the effects of preschool education and care on their development from age 3 to 8 (Melhuish et al., 2006). This study showed a clear link between qualifications/quality of service and child outcomes such as intellectual and social/behavioural development, with children benefitting more from nursery schools in the public sector (Melhuish et al., 2006).[31] Within Northern Ireland the persistent 'split system' of statutory (relatively well-paid) qualified early years teachers and less qualified voluntary/private sector childcare workers on poor pay undermines efforts to make the early years workforce fully integrated and professionalised (Georgeson et al, 2022). However, evidence suggests that quality has improved in the private, community and voluntary sector in recent years (ETI, 2018), and the Childcare Strategy currently under development may be able to facilitate quality improvement. A qualifications audit in the sector is also underway in Northern Ireland, a joint initiative between the Department of Education, the Department of Health and the childcare partnerships in Northern Ireland, which will help establish a baseline of qualifications from which to build. However, the

30 See https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/early-years-standards-full-version.pdf.

31 Quality of preschool provision was measured in this study in terms of structural (staff qualifications, adult–child ratios) and process characteristics. Process characteristics such as day-to-day functioning within settings (eg staff–child interaction, child–child interaction) were studied through observations in the settings and measured using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and the Caregiver Interaction Scale (see Melhuish et al., 2006, for further details).

continuing policy division between early years care settings pointed out by McMillan et al. (2012) persists in Northern Ireland.

In Ireland, a minimum qualification requirement to work with children in ECEC services (a major award in early years education at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications, a vocational qualification equivalent to Leaving Certificate level) was introduced in 2016.[32] In 2021, data from the sector profile indicated that 97 per cent of staff working with children had a Level 5 qualification or higher (Pobal, 2022). There has been significant staff qualification upgrading in recent years. For example, the proportion with Level 7 (Bachelor's degree or higher) in the sector has risen from 12 per cent in 2012 to 34 per cent in 2021 (Government of Ireland, 2021). Yet low pay and poor working conditions in the sector mean high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties (Moloney, 2015). High turnover impacts negatively on consistency of care for children and also presents challenges to employers and service managers. The Workforce Development Plan is designed to address some of these challenges with, among other things, a new mechanism established to allow negotiations on working conditions between employers and the workforce (Government of Ireland, 2021).[33]

1.4.2.2 Curriculum and quality assurance (inspection)

In Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced Aistear in 2009, an early years curriculum framework covering children from birth to six years of age. The framework spans both preschool and primary infant classes to ensure consistency of experience for children. Aistear has four themes – wellbeing, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking – and is innovative in being designed to cover the full range of settings, from the child's own home to preschool and primary school provision (NCCA, 2009a). The framework places a strong emphasis on the importance of play in children's learning and development (Kernan, 2007) as well on the quality of relationships and interactions with adults and other children, and the importance of a language-rich environment (NCCA, 2009a, 2009b). Aistear and Síolta (the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education)[34] are viewed as complementary, with Síolta covering all aspects of early years provision while Aistear focuses on early learning and development (NCCA, 2009c). There has not been a systematic evaluation to date of the implementation of Aistear, though inspection reports refer to the use of the framework by providers (see below). However, a number of small-scale studies provide useful insights, with one study pointing to the

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32 See www.qqi.ie for further details of the national framework of qualifications.

33 In mid-2021, a Joint Labour Committee for the sector was established to develop and propose requirements for pay and conditions. As an outcome from the Joint Labour Committee process, Employment Regulation Orders for Early Years Services came into force on 15 September 2022, for the first time setting minimum wages in the sector above the national minimum wage and also establishing a career path through requiring higher wages for those leading practice in each room and for managers, as well as for those with relevant degree-level qualifications.

34 See https://siolta.ie/.

continued dominance of didactic methods in early years (junior and senior infant) primary classrooms, with teachers pointing to large class sizes, among other factors, as constraints on implementing a play-based curriculum (Gray and Ryan, 2016). Another study (Fallon and O'Sullivan, 2015) highlights the expectations of parents as an additional barrier to adopting a play-based curriculum in infant classes (see also Sloan et al., 2022). At the time of writing, the NCCA is in the process of updating Aistear to reflect a changing context, including the increased diversity of Irish society, the changing profile of the early years workforce and the need to ensure continuity with changes in the primary curriculum (NCCA, 2021).

Early Years Education Inspections (EYEIs), conducted by Department of Education inspectors in settings that provide the ECCE programme, focus on the quality of educational experience and take account of whether the curriculum is informed by Aistear. A review of inspections conducted in the first year of EYEIs highlighted the need for greater emphasis on curriculum planning and assessment for learning (Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills, 2018). A separate strand of inspections is conducted by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate. These focus on compliance with regulations around management and staffing, premises and facilities, among other factors.

In Northern Ireland, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) produced updated curricular guidance for the preschool programme in 2018 (CCEA, 2018). This guidance applies (only) to the one-year Pre-School Education Programme (for three to four year olds)[35] and covers all settings where it is offered (statutory and voluntary). It covers six areas of learning: personal, social and emotional development; physical development and movement; language development; early mathematical experiences; the arts; and the world around us. The guidance is used by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in conducting their inspections of preschool programme providers. An overview of inspection findings indicated that outcomes for children were deemed outstanding or very good in the majority of settings, though nursery schools were much more positively rated than voluntary or private providers. The report pointed to an increase in adult-led activities at the expense of child-initiated play (ETI, 2018). During the pandemic, an ETI report (2021) highlighted good practice in the use of outdoor settings to facilitate learning but a greater need for staff training in this regard (see also Walsh, 2021). The ETI inspects Sure Start settings as well (see below), with reports pointing to examples of good practice in the promotion of children's speech, language and communication skills (ETI, 2019). As indicated above, research by Melhuish et al. (2006) highlighted the influence of high-quality preschool experiences on child outcomes in Northern Ireland, with cognitive development found to be enhanced among those who had attended nursery

[35] This contrasts not only with Aistear's coverage of the nought-to-six period but also with the Early Years Foundation Stage in England, which covers birth to five years, and the Early Years Framework in Scotland, which covers pre-birth to eight years.

schools/classes and social development more positive among those who had attended playgroups.

In Northern Ireland, the Foundation Stage curriculum covers four to six year old children and emphasises the centrality of play in children's learning (Walsh and Fallon, 2019). As in Ireland, however, research on actual practice highlights barriers to fully engaging in play-based learning and a mismatch with the standards-based agenda operating in the rest of the system (Walsh et al., 2010; Hunter and Walsh, 2014).

In parallel to the situation in Ireland, ETI inspects funded preschool settings while early years services within the five Trust areas in Northern Ireland inspect playgroups, childminders and crèches to ensure compliance with relevant legislation and standards. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA, 2015) highlighted the potential for these inspections to have a greater focus on the needs of the child and child outcomes. In both jurisdictions the issue of implementing the curricula and ensuring quality of care are challenges raised by stakeholders: this point is returned to in Chapter 4.

1.4.2.3 Targeted ECEC supports for disadvantaged groups

The two jurisdictions also differ in the extent to which they offer additional support to potentially disadvantaged children and which groups of children receive targeted support.

Since the early 2000s, Sure Start centres have been the central initiative aimed at providing support and services for parents of young children in Northern Ireland (Walsh, 2021). Focused on the 25 per cent most disadvantaged areas, Sure Start combines health advice and parenting support services with play and learning activities for children aged 0-4, and later more formal early education and childcare. Consistent with positive evaluations in the UK (see, for example, Sammons et al., 2015), evaluations of Sure Start in Northern Ireland have been positive (ETI, 2018). In the rest of the UK, Sure Start was extended much more widely under the Labour government, in an attempt to move away from the targeted model (Stewart, 2013), though in more recent years spending has been considerably reduced, with some centres closing down (Stewart and Reader, 2020). As Sure Start centres are only for children living in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland, early years provision and parenting supports are only offered in those disadvantaged areas. As Walsh (2021) points out, an issue of concern is the fact that those children living in poverty outside of the designated Sure Start areas in Northern Ireland are rendered ineligible for accessing these pivotal services. In 2020/2021 there were 38 centres, with over 1,700 children attending the developmental programme for 2 to 3 year olds. This represents approximately 4

per cent of the age cohort (based on Census 2021 data).[36] The closest equivalent in Ireland is Early Start, a one-year programme provided in schools serving more socio-economically disadvantaged populations, though this only covered 905 children in 2020/2021 and is focused specifically on the year preceding school.[37] This compares to almost 60,000 children who benefitted from the first year of the ECCE scheme in the same year (Pobal, 2022). In Ireland, there have been discussions of extending a model based on DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), which provides additional supports within areas of disadvantage, but further details are not available at the time of writing (Government of Ireland, 2019).[38]

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in Ireland to ensure the meaningful inclusion of children with disabilities/special educational needs in the ECCE programme, with a spectrum of supports ranging from universal to targeted. In a review of its first year of operation (DCEDIY, 2019), there was positive feedback from providers and parents, but respondents pointed to the need to expand supports beyond ECCE hours/weeks and highlighted the need for continuous professional development for staff. It is estimated that, in 2019, between 45 per cent and 80 per cent of children with a disability were receiving some level of support from AIM (Bergin et al., 2021). Possible expansion of AIM will be considered as part of the end-of-three-year evaluation of the First 5 strategy (Government of Ireland, 2019). There is no comparable model in Northern Ireland, but staff in nursery schools are expected to follow the same procedures regarding identifying and meeting children's special needs as for children of compulsory school-going age. There are also special needs teams within the regional offices of the Education Authority, whose role is to provide support to schools (including nursery schools/classes).

Early Years, the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland, is funded through the Department of Education to provide a bespoke service to Traveller children called Toy Box.[39] It is a programme that works from pre-birth with Traveller families, with the objective of supporting families through home visiting and home-based learning. No comparable scheme is available in Ireland and the OECD review (2021a) calls for additional training for ECEC staff in promoting the inclusion of Traveller and Roma children.

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36 See 'Sure Start Report Card 2020/21' (Department of Education, education-ni.gov.uk). According to Census Northern Ireland 2021, there were 45,883 children aged 2-3 years usually resident in Northern Ireland.

37 See https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-03-04/140/#:~:text=While%20the%20ECCE%20scheme%20is,there%20are%20905%20children%20enrolled. See Department of Education and Skills (2014) for an evaluation of this scheme. There is no current indication that the scheme will be expanded.

38 There are currently some targeted financial supports in Ireland, through the National Childcare Scheme, which includes provision for 'sponsored' (free) childcare for a number of designated disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.

39 See https://www.early-years.org/toybox-project.

1.5 (POLICY) SUPPORTS FOR PARENTS IN BALANCING CARE AND EMPLOYMENT AND PARENTING

Policies to assist parents to balance employment and care are important both for child outcomes and for gender equality. Moreover, fathers' sharing of childcare responsibilities has been associated with positive relationships with their children and child development, including school readiness (Cools et al., 2015; Smyth and Russell, 2021).

Statutory leave for parents, paid and unpaid, can influence the duration and extent of parental care in a child's early years, particularly in the first year of life. In Ireland and the UK, in common with many other affluent countries, parents are entitled to a range of different types of leave, which have developed over time and have different names, duration and compensation, and are available to mother, father or both parents. Entitlements in the UK and Ireland are summarised in Table A1.1 in the appendix; we use the term 'family leave' as a term that encompasses all of these leave types. Family leave policies were developed in the context of EU directives that required certain minimum entitlements. Nevertheless, there are many divergences, with the UK pursuing a policy that allows more sharing of paid leave between parents. In the UK, mothers are entitled to 39 weeks of paid maternity leave, and a further 13 weeks unpaid leave. Fathers are also entitled to two weeks paid paternity leave. Parents can share 37 weeks of paid leave in the first year of their child's life (Shared Parental Leave); any paid leave taken by the father is deducted from the paid maternity leave entitlement (39 weeks in total) (see Table A1.1).[40]

Figures reported through parliamentary questions in the UK reveal the numbers of individuals in receipt of claims for Shared Parental Pay.[41] These show that since 2018 only 2,600 to 5,500 individuals claimed shared parental per quarter.[42] In reporting these figures, MP Paul Scully notes that the take-up of Shared Parental Pay among men is very low, and estimated to be between 2 and 8 per cent (ibid). A detailed review of the Shared Parental Leave Scheme is currently underway by the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy in the UK.

In Ireland, paid maternity leave is available for 26 weeks, paid paternity leave for 2 weeks, and a recently introduced paid Parent's Leave is currently available for 5 weeks for both mothers and fathers, to be taken in the first 2 years of their child's life (see Table A1.1). The latter increased to 7 weeks for both mothers and fathers

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40 See https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay. Separate entitlements of unpaid parental leave are also available to mothers and fathers, which can be taken up to the age of 18 years (see Table A.1.1).

41 Figures are available at https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-02-01/146798.

42 These are the numbers of individuals in receipt of Shared Parental Pay as per that quarter regardless of when payment started. Therefore, some individuals will be counted in several quarters.

from July 2022. Mothers can also take 16 weeks of unpaid maternity leave, and both parents are entitled to unpaid parental leave.[43]

In both jurisdictions, most benefit payments associated with family leave are paid at a flat rate, rather than related to earnings. The exception is the first six weeks of maternity leave in the UK, which is paid at 90 per cent of previous earnings (Koslowski et al., 2022). This results in relatively low income replacement rates, which international research shows is related to lower take-up among fathers (Koslowski et al., 2021). In Ireland, over half (54 per cent) of those on maternity leave receive a top-up payment from their employer (CSO, 2020).

Recent evidence shows that under half of fathers in Ireland claimed their entitlement to paternity leave (Köppe, 2019). Updating these estimates shows the number of paternity leave claims as a proportion of births has increased over time to 49 per cent in 2021. This is still considerably lower than the proportion of maternity claims by birth. The gap between mothers and fathers will be even wider, as a higher proportion of fathers are employed and therefore eligible for the benefit. There are no official statistics on the take up of maternity, paternity or parental leave in the UK. Atkinson et al. (2021) note that the UK government does not routinely collect data on take-up of leave and that the most recent available data relate to 2009/2010. Analysis of the Growing Up in Scotland study found that, in 2011, 78 per cent of employed fathers had taken some form of leave around the birth of their child (Koslowski and Kadar-Satat, 2019). In 65 per cent of these cases, the type of leave taken was paternity leave. This suggests that just over 50 per cent of employed fathers took paternity leave. Among fathers who had taken any leave, 18 per cent had taken (unpaid) parental leave.

Statistics on parental leave uptake in Ireland by mothers or fathers are not routinely published. A recent CSO survey on personal and work–life balance in 2021 found that among adult employees living in households with 2 adults and dependent children, 5.7 per cent had taken parental leave in the 12 months prior to the survey. This compares to 14.9 per cent of employees in these households taking paid maternity leave.[44] These figures are not distinguished by gender or age of children. Older evidence from the GUI survey in 2008 shows that 12 per cent of fathers had taken unpaid parental leave by the time the child was nine months old (Smyth and Russell, 2021). The duration of parental leave taken was generally short, with half of fathers taking fewer than 8 days.[45] Among mothers, research based on women who had children under the age of three in 2009 found that only

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43 Parents in Ireland are entitled to 16 weeks of unpaid parental leave for each child to be taken before their 12th birthday. There are other provisions for improved parental leaves in the recently published Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill in Ireland, which will give effect to the EU Work Life Balance Directive.

44 See https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-pweilbmr/personalandwork-lifebalance2021-mainresults/leaveintheworkplace/, Table 2.3.

45 Fathers were not entitled to statutory paternity leave at the time of the child's birth (2008).

18 per cent had requested to take parental leave and take-up of unpaid leave was higher among women with employed partners, suggesting that household income influences uptake (Russell et al., 2011).

In contrast to unpaid leave, figures on the newly introduced Parents' Benefit (attached to paid Parents' Leave) are published for each quarter by the Department of Social Protection. These show that in the first full year of the policy (2021), 71 per cent of the claimants were female and 29 per cent were male (see Table 1.4). There are no figures on the proportion of eligible recipients that claim this benefit; however, combining births in 2020 and 2021, we can estimate that this amounts to 13 per cent of fathers and 33 per cent of mothers of children up to two years. As recipients may be double counted across quarters and not all parents are eligible to claim the benefit, this is only a rough estimate of take-up.

TABLE 1.3 MATERNITY AND PATERNITY BENEFIT CLAIMS, IRELAND

		2018	2019	2020	2021
Claims awarded	Maternity Benefit	44,372	44,354	41,987	45,938
	Paternity Benefit	25,358	28,153	24,884	28,832
Number of births	Births per year	61,016	59,796	55,959	58,443
	Maternity as % of births	72.7%	74.2%	75.0%	78.6%
	Paternity as % of births	41.6%	47.1%	44.5%	49.3%

Source: Department of Social Protection, 2021

TABLE 1.4 PARENTS' BENEFIT RECIPIENTS, IRELAND

	2020	2020	2021	2021
	N	%	N	%
Male	5,402	37%	15,363	29%
Female	9,332	63%	38,026	71%
All	14,734	100%	53,389	100%

Source: Department of Social Protection.[46]

[46] Figures available at https://data.gov.ie/dataset/quarterly-statistical-report-recipients-by-sex?package_type=dataset.

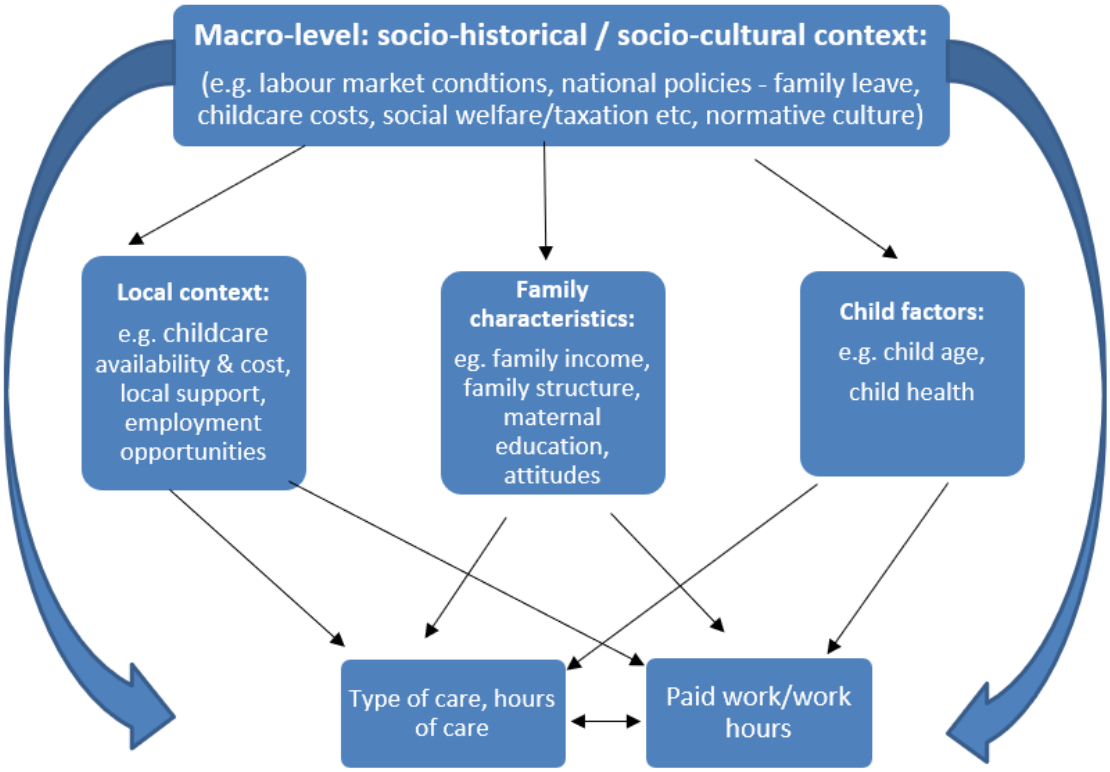
CHAPTER 2

Participation in ECEC and take up of parental supports

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, key differences and similarities in the systems of provision for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and parental supports were outlined. Here, we compare the patterns of participation in ECEC across the two jurisdictions. These patterns are associated with a variety of factors, including: family characteristics; parental employment; child characteristics; and social norms (see Figure 2.1 below). The national and local environmental contexts, which includes the availability and cost of different childcare options and employment opportunities, are important influences on care patterns and are likely to lead to comparative differences between societies.

FIGURE 2.1 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF CHILDCARE PARTICIPATION



Source: Adapted from Sylva et al. (2007).

The policy context will also influence the effect of other characteristics. In a market-based system, where ECEC can involve significant out-of-pocket costs to parents, family income is likely to have a greater impact on childcare choice than in a system where services are highly subsidised (Gambaro et al., 2015). Means-tested services and supports can also result in a pattern whereby participation in formal centre-based services by the lowest income quintile group is higher than

we might expect (McGinnity et al., 2015). Previous research has shown that family structure also influences patterns of ECEC use; for example, care by childminders in the family home are more common where there are multiple children (McGinnity et al., 2013).

The relationship between parental employment and ECEC is two-directional. The availability and cost of childcare will influence the extent of maternal employment in particular, while the level and hours of maternal and paternal employment will influence the demand for external care. Previous research has shown that, in spite of increasing leave entitlements for fathers, maternal employment is much more sensitive to the presence of children and use of childcare than paternal employment (Morrisey, 2017); therefore, we consider maternal employment rates in this chapter.

2.2 DATA SOURCES AND MEASUREMENT

For the comparative analysis of mother's employment, we use the European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2019, the last full year for which these data are available for the UK, including Northern Ireland. Earlier waves of this dataset are used for robustness checks.

Two different sources were used for the analysis of ECEC participation. For Northern Ireland, we use the Family Resources Survey (FRS), pooling data for the 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 waves in order to increase the number of cases for analysis. For Ireland we use the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC), pooling the three latest waves (2019, 2020 and 2021).

Although both surveys should produce the same target statistics for Eurostat, there is a divergence in the way the question on childcare is asked. Respondents in Northern Ireland are asked about childcare used during the previous seven days,[47] while those in Ireland are asked about their childcare arrangements in a usual week. This is likely to lead to an underestimate of participation in centre-based nursery/preschools in Northern Ireland if parents are surveyed outside term time. The SILC survey is asked all year round so parents in Ireland may also answer the question on usual care outside of term-time.

[47] The question reads: 'At any time during the seven days ending Sunday the [Date Sunday] did [Child's name] attend any of the places shown on this card?'

In both surveys, respondents could record multiple care types for the child and the hours spent in each. We identify main care based on the number of hours recorded.[48]

The descriptive results are weighted by child weights.[49] We limit the analysis to those aged nought to four years in both jurisdictions so that we are comparing the same cohort of children. The age of school start is generally later in Ireland than in Northern Ireland (see Chapter 1). To avoid attributing differences to childcare policy that are due to school attendance, we limit the comparison of ECEC participation and hours to children who have not yet started school.

2.3 MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT

Figure 2.1 compares the employment rates of women in Ireland and Northern Ireland by the age of the youngest child. Employment is counted as any hours of paid work in the week preceding the survey. Among women aged 20-64 years without children under 18, the employment rate is the same across both jurisdictions (70 per cent). Rates of employment among mothers of children under 5 are 69 per cent in Northern Ireland and 64 per cent in Ireland, though the gap is not statistically significant.[50] The gap is wider among women with school-aged children from 5-12 years, before converging again when children are aged 13-17 years.[51]

While women with children under 5 are more likely to be employed in Northern Ireland, they work shorter hours than those in Ireland (Figure 2.3): 44 per cent of this group work part-time in Northern Ireland compared to only 33 per cent in Ireland.[52] Much narrower differences in the rate of part-time work are found for other groups of women. The increase in part-time work among women with school-age children in Ireland may be driven by those who re-enter employment on a part-time basis when their child reaches school age or by a decrease in hours among women when their youngest child starts start school. These data are cross-sectional so we cannot distinguish these patterns.[53]

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48 Where equal hours were recorded, we gave precedence to centre-based care, then to childminders. This affects a very small number of cases.

49 Both the FRS and SILC provide individual weights for children to ensure that they are representative of the population in the relevant age group.

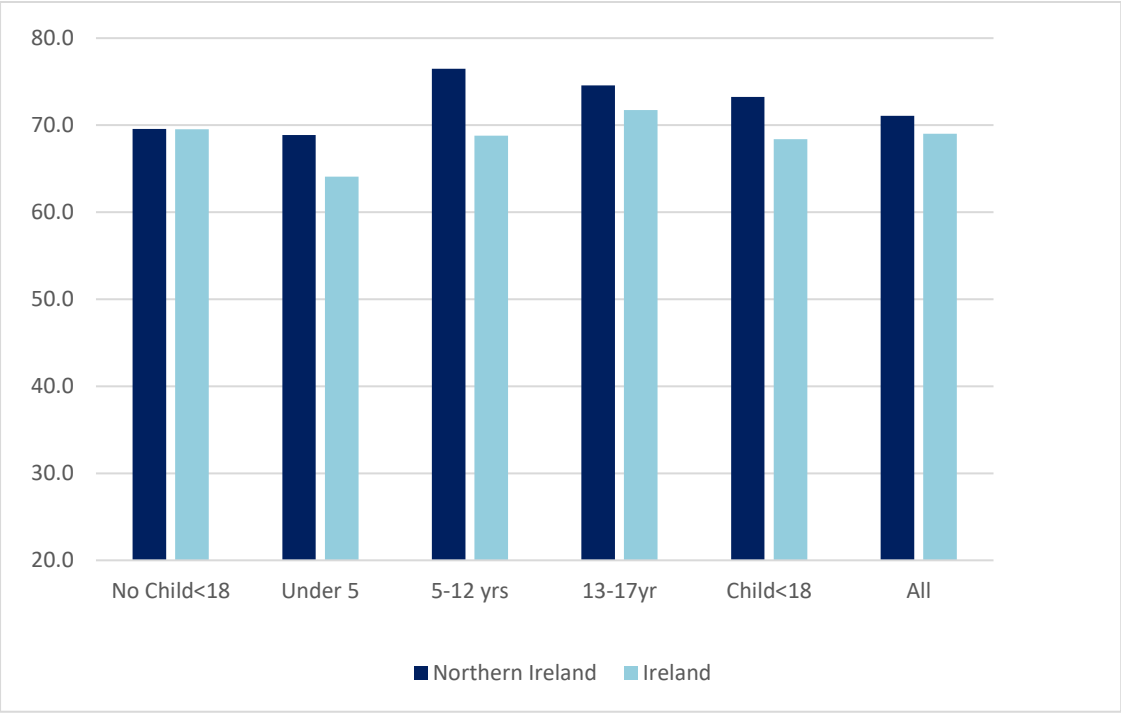
50 The compares to the EU28 average of 62 per cent among mothers with children under six years in the in the same year (Eurostat, European LFS).

51 A similar pattern of results is found if we pool years 2015 to 2019 as a robustness check, but in that case the difference between Ireland and Northern Ireland for those with children under five years is statistically significant.

52 'Part-time' is defined as less than 30 hours per week. This is the definition commonly used for cross-national research (van Bastelaer et al, 1997).

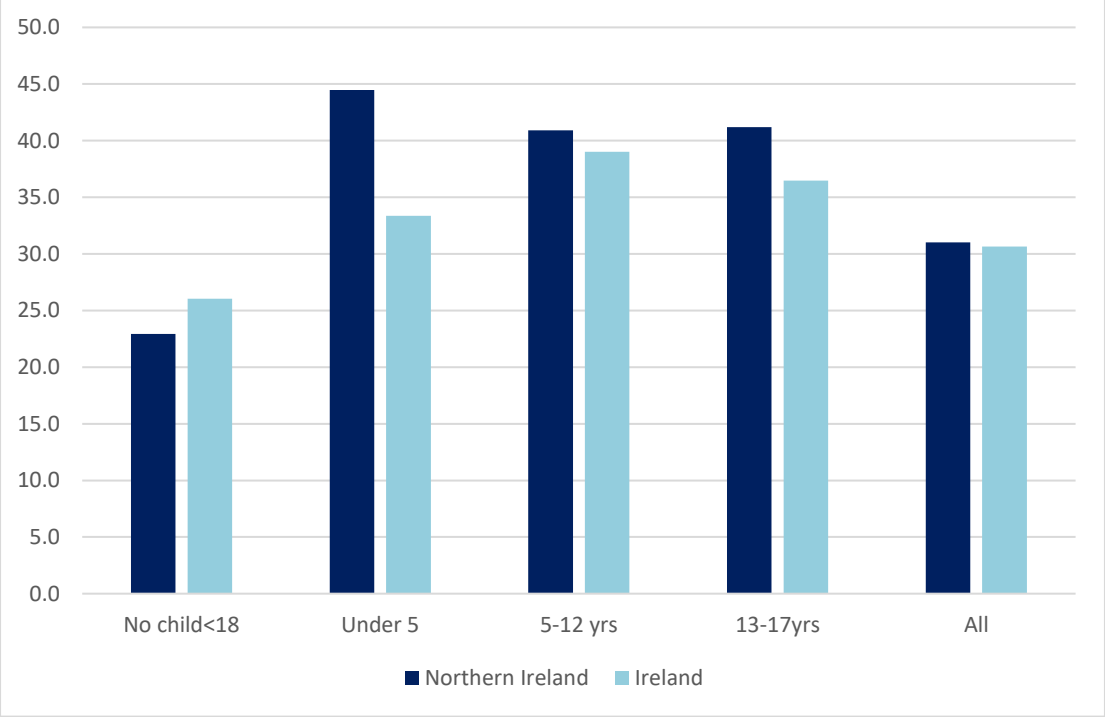
53 Those who take a longer period out of the labour market and have occupied a more traditional caring role are perhaps more likely to work part-time. Previous analysis of the GUI '08 cohort found that maternal employment during the period when the study child was aged three and five years old was highly fluid, with 26 per cent increasing their paid work hours and 22 per cent reducing them (Russell et al., 2018).

FIGURE 2.2 FEMALE EMPLOYMENT RATE BY AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD, WOMEN AGED 20-64 YEARS, 2019



Source: EU-LFS – Authors' analysis.
Note: Chi square analysis shows that the difference between Northern Ireland and Ireland for mothers of children aged 5-12 years is statistically significant, as is the difference for all mothers of children under 18 years.

FIGURE 2.3 EMPLOYED WOMEN WORKING PART-TIME (<30 HRS) BY AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD, 2019 (%)



Source: EU-LFS – Authors' analysis.
Note: Figures for those without children refer *to women aged 20-64 years. Chi square shows that the difference between mothers in Northern Ireland and Ireland with children under 5 is significant but other differences are not.*

2.3.1 Main childcare type

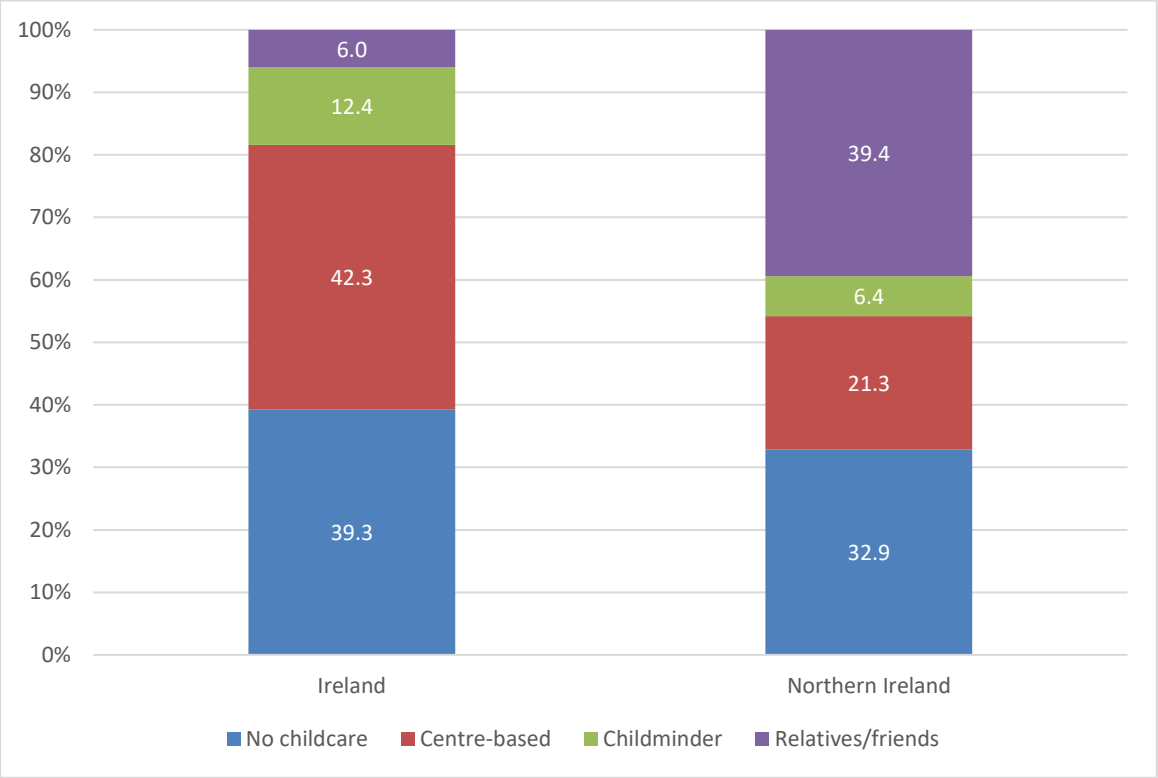
The main type of childcare attended differs across the two jurisdictions (Figure 2.3). In Northern Ireland, care by family/friends is the most common main care source while in Ireland it is centre-based care. The proportion of children aged 0-4 years cared for by their parents only is higher in Ireland (39 per cent) than in Northern Ireland (33 per cent). Centre-based care is the main care type for 42 per cent of children in Ireland while the figure for Northern Ireland is half that (21 per cent). The use of childminders as the main care type is more common in Ireland, at 12 per cent, while care by family and friends is much more common in Northern Ireland (39 per cent).[54]

The figures on centre-based care as the main care type appear low compared to the high proportion of children availing of the ECCE scheme in Ireland and the Preschool Education Programme in Northern Ireland discussed in the previous chapter. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, in Northern Ireland parents are asked about their childcare arrangements over the previous 7 days; therefore, if parents are interviewed outside of term-time, participation in preschool will not be recorded. Secondly, even if the children are availing of the free preschool provision, the hours are generally part-time (see Chapter 1), so additional hours spent with a childminder, or in the care of a relative or friend, may exceed centre-based hours as the main care. Thirdly, the surveys cover the period of the pandemic when childcare attendance was lower.

Childcare participation is considerably higher among children aged 3-4 years than 0-2 years in both jurisdictions and formal centre-based care is more common for the older group of children (Figure 2.5). Only 10 per cent of 0-2 year olds are in centre based care as their main care type in Northern Ireland compared to 22 per cent in Ireland.

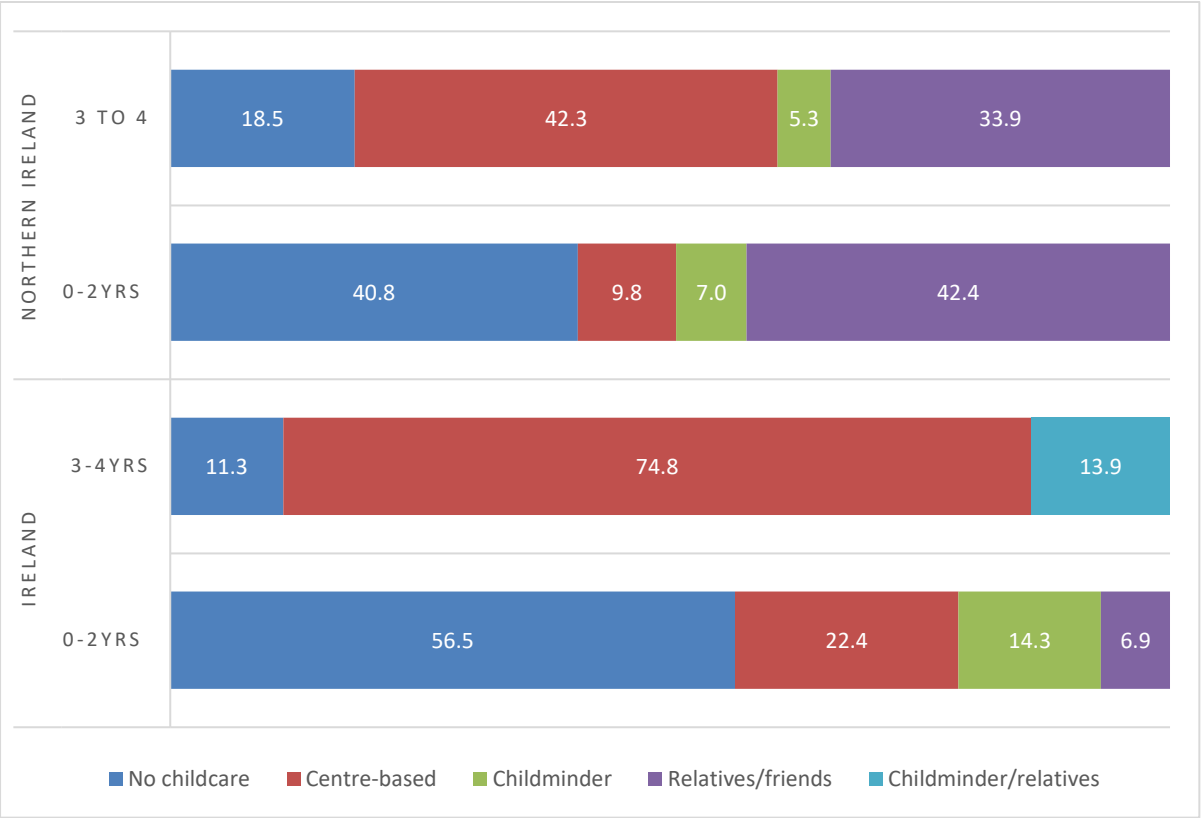
54 These patterns are consistent with those found by Privalko et al. (2019), for children under 12 years, using EU-SILC 2016. Across the UK as a whole, approximately 37 per cent of children under 12 were cared for by family/friends compared to 16 per cent in Ireland. Childminding was more common in Ireland (12 per cent) than the UK (7 per cent) as was formal care (centre-based); 19 and 15 per centre respectively. The rate of formal care was considerably lower in both countries compared to the social democratic countries (Sweden, Denmark and Finland) and the corporatist countries (Austria, Belgium and France).

FIGURE 2.4 MAIN CHILDCARE TYPE FOR CHILDREN 0-4 YEARS NOT AT SCHOOL NORTHERN IRELAND (2018-2021) AND IRELAND (2019-2021)



Source: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020 and 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Note: Centre-based includes preschool, crèches, nursery classes etc.

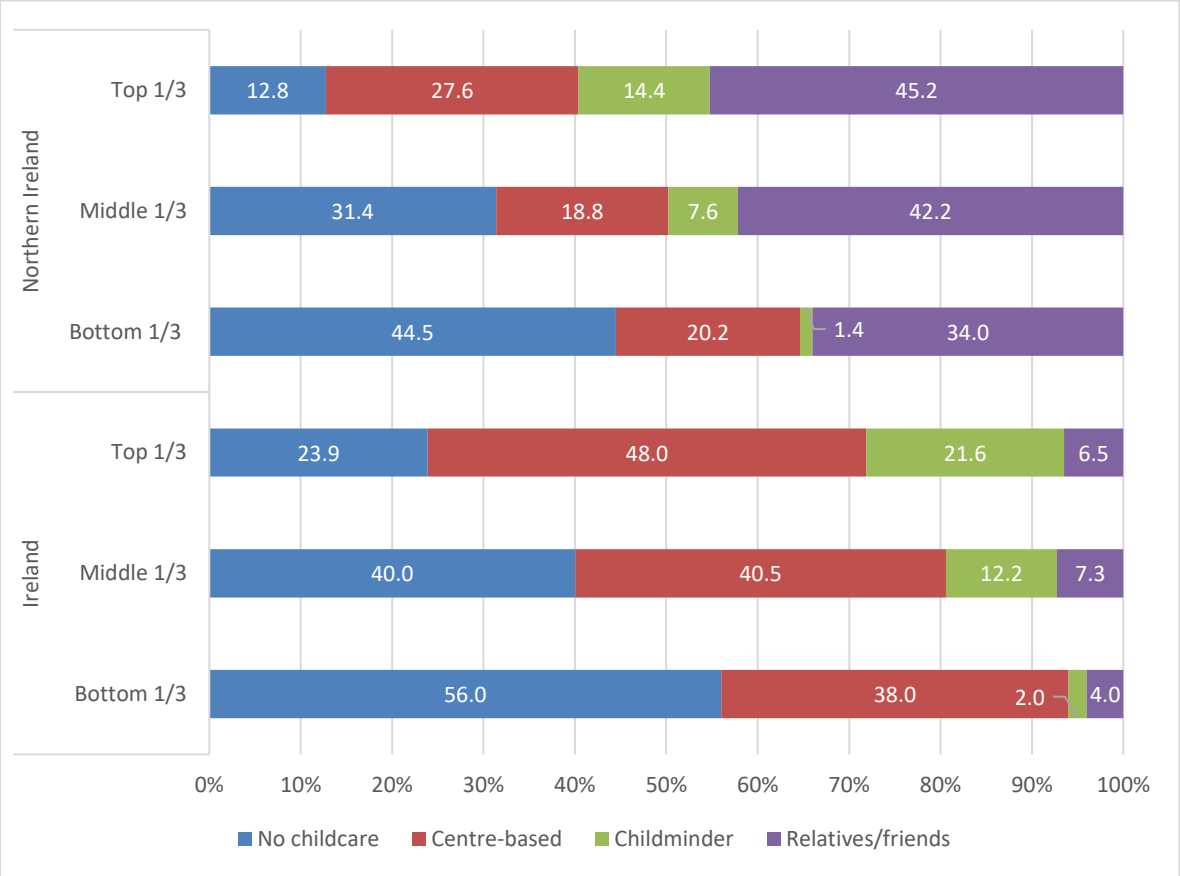
FIGURE 2.5 MAIN CHILDCARE TYPE FOR CHILDREN 0-2 AND 3-4 YEARS NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND



Source: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020 and 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Note: Excludes children that have already started school. In Ireland. the numbers for relatives/friends and childminders in the 3-4 age group do not pass the CSO threshold for reporting so these categories have been combined.

In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, patterns of main childcare type are associated with family income (Figure 2.6). In both cases families in the bottom third of the income distribution are much more likely to have no childcare: 56 per cent in Ireland and 46 per cent in Northern Ireland. Centre-based care increases with income in both cases, though the proportions in each income category are much higher in Ireland, reflecting the overall differences in care types. In both jurisdictions, the use of childminders is most common among the highest income group. Previous research in Ireland has found that the cost of childminders is higher than other care types and therefore may be less affordable for families in the middle and bottom income terciles (Russell et al., 2018). Levels of informal relative care is much higher in all income groups in Northern Ireland than in Ireland and is equally common among the top tercile and middle tercile. The relationship between care type and income will be partly shaped by employment patterns. Higher levels of paid work are associated both with greater income and greater needs for non-parental care. Therefore, we next use statistical models to test the separate effects of income and parental employment.

FIGURE 2.6 MAIN CHILDCARE TYPE FOR CHILDREN 0-4 YEARS BY INCOME TERCILE NORTHERN IRELAND (2018-2021) AND IRELAND (2019-2021)



Source: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020 and 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Note: Excludes children who have already started school.

In Table 2.1, we estimate a model of care type. We examine the likelihood of using centre-based care, childminders or family/friends as the main care source compared to no childcare.[55] As the graphs indicate, the likelihood of using centre-based care is much higher for older children than those aged nought to two years. The strength of this association is much greater in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. Even when we hold constant parental employment and child age, family income remains a predictor of centre-based care use. Those in the top third of the income distribution are more likely to use centre-based care, and the strength of the association is somewhat higher in Northern Ireland. Maternal paid work patterns play a greater role in Ireland, where those working full-time and part-time are more likely to be using centre-care relative to no childcare. In Northern Ireland, there is no association for full-time maternal employment and centre-based care when

[55] The figures are reported as relative risk ratios (RRR). That is the risk of being in centre-based care (or childminder or family/friend care) versus no childcare for the group in question compared to the reference group. Take the following example: in Group A, 40 per cent go to centre-based care and 20% have no childcare; in Group B, 20 per cent go attend centre-based care and 50 per cent have no childcare. The relative risk ratio is (40/20)/(20/50), which is five. RRRs with values less than one mean the group are less likely to attend centre-based care compared to the reference group.

income and other factors are controlled, but mothers working part-time are more likely to use centre-based care compared to mothers who are not employed.

The likelihood of using childminders as the main care source is even more strongly associated with family income than centre-based care in both jurisdictions. Income is a particularly strong predictor of using childminders in Northern Ireland, though it should be remembered that childminders account for a very small proportion of care there (six per cent).

Maternal employment is much more strongly associated with the likelihood of using childminders versus no childcare in Ireland, especially among women working full-time. Similarly, the relative likelihood of family/friend care versus no childcare is strongly associated with maternal employment in Ireland. Care by family and friends is associated with part-time work in Northern Ireland but not in Ireland. It appears centre-based care is less associated with maternal employment in Ireland as it is availed of by the majority of households with children aged 3-4 years (via the ECCE scheme) regardless of employment status.

In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, we find that lone parents are more likely to use family/childminders than are two-parent families. Previous research has shown that this form of care is often unpaid or paid at a lower rate (Russell et al., 2019) and therefore affordability may be one factor increasing use among lone parents.

TABLE 2.1 MULTINOMIAL MODEL OF MAIN CARE-TYPE – COMPARED TO NO CHILDCARE, CHILDREN 0-4 YEARS NOT AT SCHOOL (RRR)

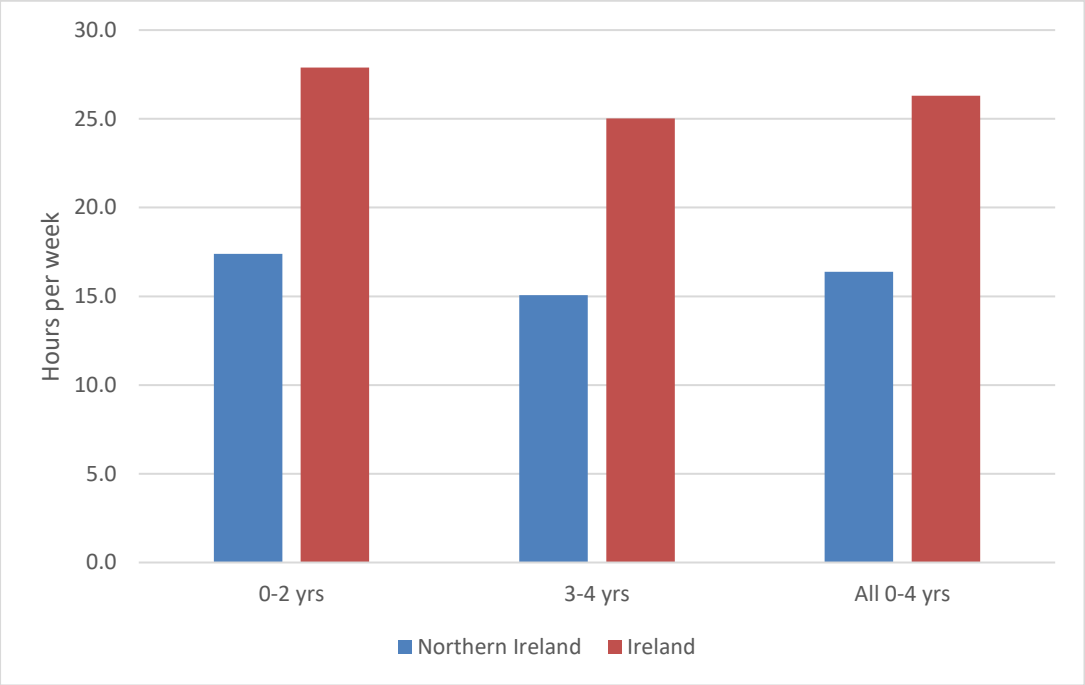
		Northern Ireland	Ireland
	Centre-based care		
Ref: child aged 0-2	Age 3-4 years	10.85***	28.91***
Ref: bottom tercile	Second income tercile	0.87	1.11
	Top income tercile	3.97**	2.70***
Ref: 2-parent, farther not employed	Lone parent	2.37	2.21
	Farther employed	2.1	0.67
	Missing father's employment	1	0.96
Ref: mother not emp.	Mother working full-time	1.34	3.30***
	Mother working part-time	2.47**	4.70***
Ref: 1 child	No. of dependent children in household	0.79	0.86
	Childminder		
Ref: child aged 0-2	Age 3-4 years	2.19	5.67***
Ref: bottom tercile	Second income tercile	4.91**	3.34**
	Top income tercile	18.91***	7.38***
Ref: 2-parent, farther not employed	Lone parent	0.22	3.03
	Father employed	0.33	0.28
	Missing father's employment	1	0.47
Ref: mother not emp.	Mother working full-time	6.66**	22.05***
	Mother working part-time	6.50*	17.11***
Ref: 1 child	No. of dependent children in household	1.1	1.04
	Family/friends		
Ref: child aged 0-2	Age 3-4 years	2.00**	5.15***
Ref: bottom tercile	Second income tercile	1.21	1.5
	Top income tercile	3.16**	2.27
Ref: 2-parent, partner not employed	Lone parent	4.31*	7.85***
	Working partner	3.15	2.84*
	Missing father's employment	1	0.83
Ref: mother not emp.	Mother working full-time	2.52**	20.22***
	Mother working part-time	4.28***	0.26
Ref: 1 child	No. of dependent children in household	0.88	0.55
	Observations	600	1,512
	Pseudo R-squared	0.144	0.248

Sources: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020 and 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Note: *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001.

2.3.2 Hours of childcare

In the following analysis, we compare the total hours of childcare used by families in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This is not limited to the main care source; where families use multiple forms of care we sum hours across all care types. Mean hours of care are substantially higher in Ireland, at 26 hours per week, than in Northern Ireland, at 16 hours (Figure 2.7), though it should be noted that hours of childcare may also be influenced by the timing on the interviews in Northern Ireland, as noted above. A similar gap of 10 hours is observed for children aged under 3 years and those age 3 to 4 years. In both settings, the average hours are slightly longer for the youngest age group.

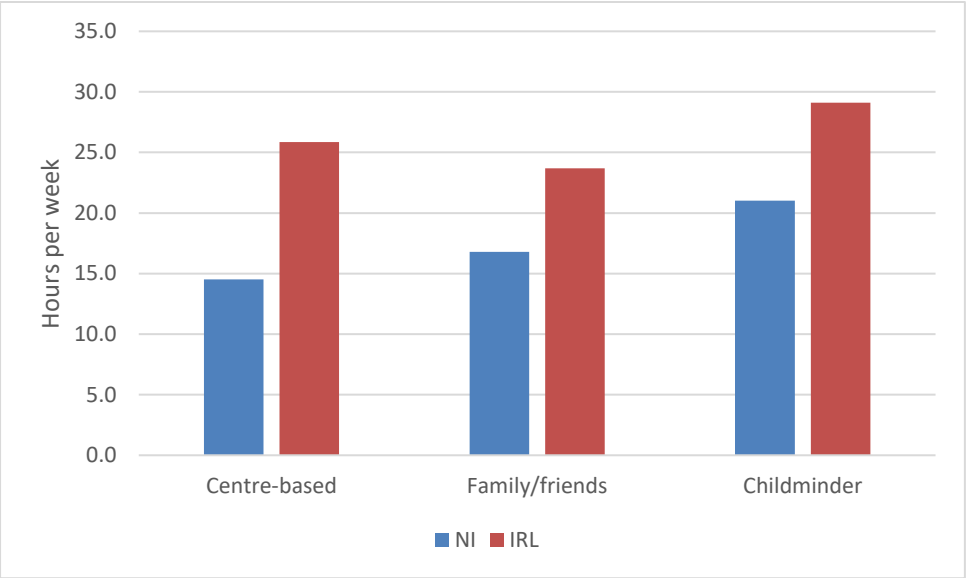
FIGURE 2.7 MEAN CARE HOURS PER WEEK BY AGE OF CHILD



Sources: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020, 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Notes: Excludes children that have already started school. Counts hours across all care types used for the child, not just main type.

Weekly hours also differ across care types (Figure 2.8). In Ireland, the longest hours are observed for those who use centred-based care as their main care source (29 hours per week) and are lowest among those cared for by family/friends (24 hours). In Northern Ireland, those whose main form of care is a childminder have the longest mean hours (21 hours) while those using centre-based care have the shortest (14.5 hours).

FIGURE 2.8 MEAN WEEKLY CARE HOURS BY MAIN CARE TYPE, CHILDREN AGED 0-4 YEARS



Sources: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020, 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Note: Excludes children that have already started school.

In Table 2.2, we explore the factors influencing the hours of care in Ireland and Northern Ireland. As the previous model explored the take-up of ECEC, here we focus on the hours among those using childcare: we exclude cases where there are zero childcare hours. Among those using non-parental care, the child's age does not influence hours. Being in the top third of the income distribution is associated with increased hours of care, even controlling for maternal working hours. The effect of income on hours appears stronger in Ireland. The number of maternal paid working hours is strongly associated with the number of care hours. In Ireland, mothers working full-time use 12.4 more hours of childcare per week than mothers who are not employed. In Northern Ireland, the difference is 8.4 hours. Part-time work is associated with a small but significant increase in childcare hours in both places. When other factors are taken into account, childcare type is not associated with hours of care. Whether the father is employed or not does not influence care hours; neither does household structure.

TABLE 2.2 OLS MODEL OF WEEKLY CARE HOURS FOR THOSE IN ANY NON-PARENTAL CARE, CHILDREN AGED 0-4 YEARS NOT IN SCHOOL

Reference		Northern Ireland	Ireland
		Hours per week	Hours per week
Child age 0-2 years	Age 3 to 4	-1.47	-0.30
Bottom 1/3 income	Second tercile	2.06	1.74
	Top tercile	4.52**	5.49***
Two-parents, father not employed	Lone parent	-2.00	1.05
	Farther employed	-3.58	-0.91
	Missing father's employment	0.00	5.47
Mother not employed	Mother working full-time	8.06***	12.41***
	Mother working part-time	3.11*	2.68*
1 child	No. of dependent children in household	-0.34	0.5
Family/friends	Centre-based	-0.80	3.22
	Childminder	1.36	1.82
	Constant	14.59***	12.21***
	Observations	400	917

Sources: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020 and 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Notes *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001; Dependent children: Ireland – children 0-19 years old. FRS Children <16 or aged 16-19 living with parents. Excludes children that have already started school. * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001.

Given the policy focus on centre-based ECEC in the final table we compare the factors influencing hours of centre-based care in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Given the smaller number of children in the Northern Ireland sample, it will be more difficult to observe significant differences. For Ireland, we see that centre-based care hours are influenced by income and maternal employment, as before, but also by the age of the child. The hours of centre-based care are, on average, lower for participating children aged 3-4 years than participating children aged 0-2 years. This is likely due to the significantly greater proportion of 3-4 year olds accessing centre-based care (see Figure 2.4), many of whom will be attending the part-time places provided under the free preschool schemes. In Ireland, the median number of hours in centre-based care for those aged 3-4 years is 15, which coincides with the free preschool year provision, while it is 27 hours for those aged 0-2 years.[56] No effect of child's age is observed in Northern Ireland but this may be due to small numbers.

[56] The mean centre care hours are 27.5 for the nought to two age group and 20.3 for the three to four age group.

TABLE 2.3 OLS REGRESSION MODEL OF CENTRE CARE HOURS (FOR THOSE ATTENDING CENTRE CARE)

Reference		Northern Ireland	Ireland
		Hours per week	Hours per week
Child aged 0-2 years	Age 3 to 4	-0.47	-4.73***
Bottom income tercile	Second tercile	-4.18	-0.38
	Top tercile	-2.93	4.91**
2-parent household, father not employed	Lone parent	-4.40	5.89
	Father employed	-6.60	1.70
	Missing father's employment	0.00	-1.29
Mother not employed	Mother working full-time	6.82**	6.76***
	Mother working part-time	3.45	-0.29
1 child	No. of dependent children in household	-0.63	0.20
	Constant	21.38***	20.03***
	Observations	126	703

Sources: Family Resource Survey (2018/2019 and 2020/2021) and SILC (2019, 2020 and 2021) – Authors' analysis.
Notes: Dependent children: Ireland – children 0-19 years old. FRS children <16 or aged 16-19 living with parents. Excludes children who have already started school. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter compares patterns of maternal employment and patterns of ECEC among preschool children aged under five in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The comparisons are limited by the need to use two data sources that are not fully harmonised and which are missing some important information.[57] Importantly, the reference period parents are asked about is the week prior to completion of the questionnaire in the case of Northern Ireland, whereas in Ireland they are asked about a typical week. With that caveat in mind, we find distinct differences in the types of main care across the two cases; centre-based care is more prevalent in Ireland as is care by childminders, while care by relatives and friends is much more common in Northern Ireland. These differences are also pronounced in the 0-2 age group, where the term-time issue should not affect responses.

The factors associated with care type (none; centre-based; other) are broadly similar in the two jurisdictions: child's age, maternal employment pattern and income. In both cases, use of centre-based care is higher among more affluent families, suggesting cost is a barrier to use. There is some evidence that family income is more influential for total hours of care in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, though the influence on care type is very similar. The use of childminders

[57] The FRS does collect information about urban/rural location and children's ethnicity and country of birth, but this information is not included in the dataset provided to the researchers.

is even more associated with higher income levels than is centre-based care. This may reflect the fact that, in Ireland at least, childminders charge fees similar to or above those of centre-based providers (Russell et al., 2019). Additionally, there are no government supports for childminder costs in Ireland, and while tax credits/subsides are available for this care type in Northern Ireland, it is unclear how common this is (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 4).

Maternal employment (full/part-time) has a stronger effect on care type in Ireland. This is also the case in the model of care hours. In Northern Ireland, while mothers of children under five years are more likely to be employed, they work significantly fewer hours than their counterparts in Ireland. This means that parents in Ireland are likely to require longer hours of childcare. Hours of employment also influence the type of non-parental care that is chosen. Care by family and friends may be a more affordable form of childcare but informal carers may be less willing or able to provide long hours of care.

The relationship between maternal employment and childcare runs in both directions so it is likely that the level of participation in employment is influenced by the availability and cost of different care options. Shorter hours of employment among mothers in Northern Ireland may reflect the relatively short hours of government-funded preschool or possible disincentives to increased hours in the system of subsidies/tax credits. In Ireland, the system appears to impose a starker choice between non-employment and full-time employment for mothers with preschool children. The nature of the available data means that we cannot unravel the causes and constraints behind these patterns, but further research, including on costs and mothers earnings, could shed further light on the role of institutional differences.

CHAPTER 3

Child outcomes among five year olds in Ireland and Northern Ireland

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) data and the Northern Ireland sample of the *Millennium Cohort Study* (MCS) to document child cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes around the time of the transition to primary school. There are a number of advantages in using these datasets to compare children's outcomes in the two jurisdictions (see Smyth and Duta, 2022): they are both based on representative samples of the respective national populations; they contain rich background information on families, including parental education and household income; and they use comparable measures of child cognitive outcomes at ages three and five and of teacher-assessed skills on school entry. A limitation relates to the different timing of the surveys: the MCS sample was surveyed at age five in 2006 while the GUI five year olds were surveyed in 2013. The Irish sample will therefore have experienced the effects of the Great Recession in their early years.[58] Furthermore, the Northern Ireland sample in MCS is much smaller than the GUI sample (831 compared with 7,331 at age five). This makes it more difficult to detect significant effects among the sample for Northern Ireland.

The cognitive outcomes examined include an objective measure of vocabulary based on the British Ability Scale (BAS) as well as teacher-assessed measures of children's skills and competencies. The non-cognitive outcome examined is the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) measure of total difficulties. Section 3.2 looks at whether potential differences in child outcomes arise in both jurisdictions while Section 3.3 looks at the relationship between experience of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and outcomes. Section 3.4 uses the frequency of parents reading to children as a proxy for the home learning environment while Section 3.5 assesses the extent to which early vocabulary development influences outcomes two years later. Section 3.6 examines the factors associated with socio-emotional difficulties.

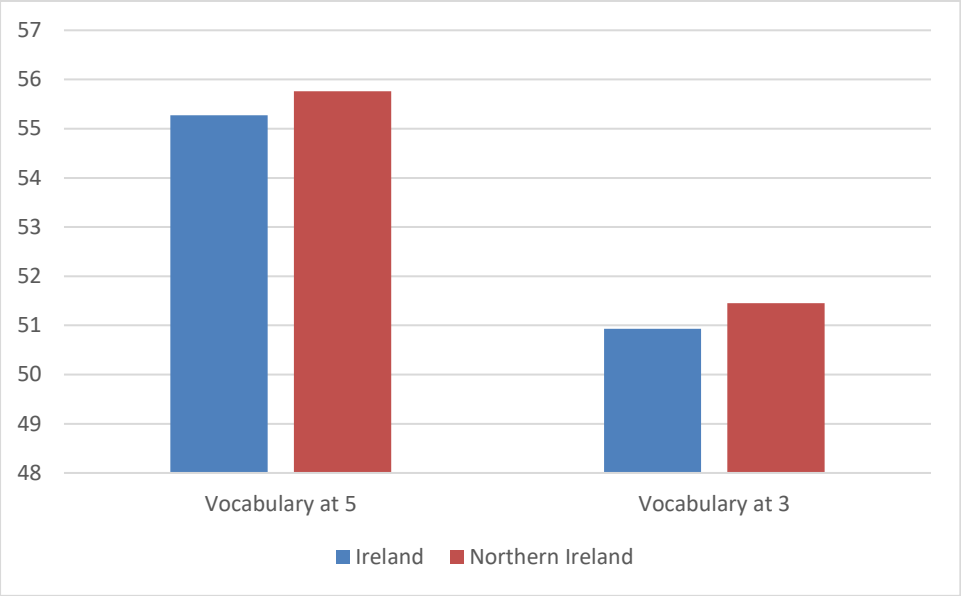
3.2 INEQUALITY IN CHILD COGNITIVE OUTCOMES

Both GUI and MCS surveys administered the BAS naming vocabulary test to children when they were three and five years of age. The test is designed to measure children's expressive English language vocabulary and is standardised

[58] However, research comparing Ireland and Scotland indicates that patterns of variation by family background in child outcomes in Ireland were robust to the inclusion of a variable measuring the perceived impact of the recession on the family (Smyth and Duta, 2022).

(into T-scores) to adjust for children's age (McCrory et al., 2013). Figure 3.1 shows that test scores are remarkably similar in the two jurisdictions.

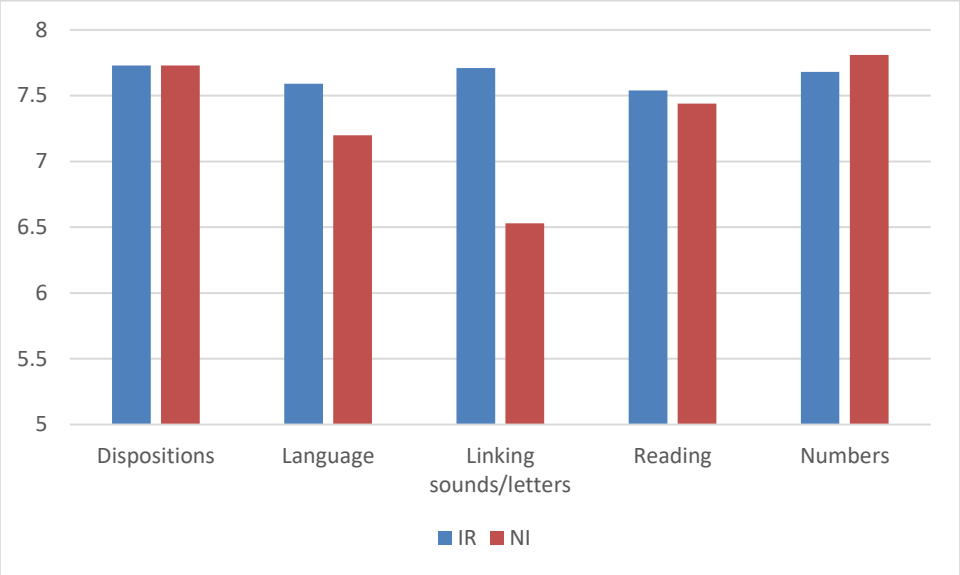
FIGURE 3.1 BAS VOCABULARY TEST SCORES AT AGES 3 AND 5 IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Sources: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.

In the MCS, administrative data from the Foundation Stage Profile were used in relation to children from England. These measures were replicated using a survey of teachers in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland (Hansen and Jones, 2008), and a subset of these measures was subsequently used in the GUI study. The measures used include the child's disposition and attitude to school (such as being interested and excited to learn), language for communication and thinking (such as talking and listening confidently), linking sounds and letters (including hearing and saying vowel sounds), reading (including understanding elements of a story) and numbers (including counting). The questions asked teachers whether or not the child had achieved specific competencies using a series of statements, scored from zero to nine. Figure 3.2 shows that average teacher ratings in relation to language and linking sounds and letters were significantly higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. In contrast, ratings of children's number skills were higher in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. There was no significant difference in teacher ratings of children's dispositions and attitudes to school, while reading ratings were marginally higher (but only at the ten per cent significance level) in Ireland. The remainder of this section looks at whether social inequality in these outcomes differs between the two jurisdictions.

FIGURE 3.2 TEACHER-ASSESSED SKILLS AMONG FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.

Figure 3.1 shows no difference in average vocabulary scores in Ireland and Northern Ireland. But is the extent to which these scores vary by individual and social background different in the two jurisdictions? In the analyses, maternal education has been recoded to be comparable across the two samples. The two samples had similar proportions of graduate mothers (28-29 per cent) but mothers in the Northern Ireland sample were much more likely to have lower secondary (or less) qualifications (46 per cent compared with 18 per cent).[59] Controls are also included for gender, household income (equivalised and divided into quintiles), housing tenure, family structure and whether the child has an illness or disability. Housing tenure can be taken as a proxy for low levels of family resources but can also reflect concentration of disadvantage at the local area level (see Laurence et al., forthcoming). The GUI questions on illness/disability appear comparable with MCS, which asks whether the child has 'any longstanding illness, disability or infirmity' while GUI asks whether the child has 'any longstanding illness, condition or disability'. Reported rates of illness/disability (at age three) were 13 per cent in Northern Ireland and 16 per cent in Ireland. In interpreting the findings that follow, it is worth noting that the Northern Ireland sample is much smaller than the GUI sample, so coefficients obtained for this cohort are less likely to be (highly) significant.

There are similarities and differences in patterns across the two settings (Table 3.1). Maternal education and housing tenure are significantly related to vocabulary at age five, while in Ireland income emerges as having a significant and relatively

[59] Previous research (Smyth et al., 2022) also found comparable levels of third-level graduates in Ireland and Northern Ireland but much higher levels of early-school leaving in Northern Ireland, for both the population as a whole and among 25-29 year olds.

large influence over and above these factors.[60] There are differences by child characteristics too, with gender differences found in Ireland but not in Northern Ireland, while vocabulary differences by disability/illness are evident in Northern Ireland but not Ireland.

TABLE 3.1 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND VOCABULARY TEST SCORES AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Constant	53.961	55.889
Female	1.182***	0.064
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	0.597	-0.078
Post-secondary	0.760	1.512
Degree	1.727***	3.208***
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	1.148*	-0.048
Third	1.732**	-0.712
Fourth	3.009***	0.830
Highest	3.086***	1.076
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	0.820	0.734
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	0.058	-2.045*
Social/private rented tenure	-4.625***	-3.954***
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
R^2	0.060	0.067
N	7,883	1,200

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below).

For the teacher-assessed measures, the distribution was positively skewed so scores are dichotomised, distinguishing between those who exceeded the expectations for their development stage (that is, those who were assigned the highest score of nine) and those who did not (see Smyth and Duta, 2022, for a similar approach comparing Ireland and Scotland).[61] Logistic regression models are used with the results presented as average marginal effects to allow for a direct comparison of effect sizes in the two jurisdictions.

60 In Northern Ireland, income levels are significantly related to vocabulary scores but not over and above the effects of maternal education and housing tenure.

61 It would have been possible to use ordinal logit models but this would estimate average marginal effects for each score from zero to nine, resulting in a large table that would not be user friendly.

Social differentiation in perceived attitudes to school is less marked than was the case for vocabulary (Table A3.1 in the appendix). Nonetheless, there is some evidence of school attitudes varying by social background, though the dimensions of family background that make a difference vary between the two systems. In Ireland, dispositions are more positive where mothers have post-secondary or graduate qualifications and less positive among those in rented accommodation (either private or social). In Northern Ireland, income emerges more strongly, with more positive attitudes found in the highest income groups. Poorer dispositions are found among children with disabilities in Ireland but not in Northern Ireland. In both settings, girls are assessed as having more positive attitudes, with a larger gender difference in Northern Ireland.

Gender differences are also evident, and more marked, in Northern Ireland in relation to (teacher-assessed) language for communication and thinking (Table A3.2). Social differentiation in Ireland appears more marked, with higher ratings where mothers have higher education and families have higher incomes and lower ratings among those in rented accommodation. In Northern Ireland, only the highest income quintile and those with upper secondary qualifications emerge as having significantly higher skills than other groups.

There is a clear gradient by maternal education in the ability to link sounds and letters in Ireland but not in Northern Ireland (Table A3.3). Income has a stronger influence in Northern Ireland, with those in rented accommodation in both settings having lower ratings. There is a gender difference in favour of girls in Ireland but no significant difference in Northern Ireland.

Reading skills (a measure that also includes broader familiarity with text) is shaped by maternal education and income in both settings, with a stronger relationship with income in Northern Ireland (Table A3.4). Housing tenure is only significant in Ireland but the size of the effect is similar in Northern Ireland, so may reflect the smaller sample size there. Again, gender is significant in Ireland, but there is a similar effect size in Northern Ireland.

There is little differentiation by individual or background characteristics in number skills in Northern Ireland, except for a gender difference in favour of girls (Table A3.5). In contrast, Irish teachers' ratings of number skills are higher for those from more highly educated and higher-income families and lower for the children of lone-parent families.

3.3 EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION AND CHILD COGNITIVE OUTCOMES

Chapter 2 documents differences between the two jurisdictions in the use of non-parental care and education in the early years. This section looks at whether the type of care used at nine months and three years is associated with child outcomes.

Because of high take-up of the free preschool programme in both jurisdictions (see Chapter 1), we focus on the period prior to eligibility. Types of care are grouped into three categories: care by a relative; care by a child-minder/non-relative; and centre-based care. For comparison purposes, the analyses focus on receipt of any care in these categories rather than the main care type. To take account of differences in flexibility regarding school start and in curriculum/teaching approaches, this section also compares children in the entry/reception class and those in the subsequent year of school, i.e. senior infants in Ireland and Year 1 in Northern Ireland. In the case of the vocabulary score (and the SDQ measure used in Section 3.6), the test was administered at the time of the survey of parents. In Ireland, 28 per cent of the children had not yet started school. The teacher survey was carried out in the following autumn when the children were either in junior or senior infants. In Northern Ireland, almost all of the children had started school by the time of the family survey.

The models presented in Tables A3.6 to A3.11 first look at the relationship between type of care at nine months (Model 1), before adding type of care at three years (Model 2); both sets of models control for the family background factors discussed in Section 3.2. What is notable across jurisdictions and outcomes is the lack of significant relationship between different types of early care and child cognitive outcomes. The differences that are evident are mainly found in language-related skills and are modest in size. In Ireland, receipt of relative care at nine months and receipt of relative care or childminder care at three years are associated with significantly higher vocabulary scores at five (Table A3.6). Centre-based care at nine months is associated with better reading skills at age five while centre-based care at three is related to higher ratings on language (Table A3.10 and Table A3.8). In Northern Ireland, vocabulary scores are higher among those in centre-based care at nine months and also higher among those in receipt of relative care at three years (Table A3.6). The effect of relative care at nine months is not significant in Northern Ireland but is on a par size-wise with that in Ireland, so may reflect smaller sample size.[62]

Further analysis was conducted to examine whether the effects of early care and education differed for girls and boys and those from different income levels (not shown here). Very few systematic patterns were evident. Relative care at nine months had a stronger effect on girls' vocabulary at age five than that of boys in Northern Ireland. Being cared for by a minder/non-relative at age three was linked to more positive dispositions to school at five years of age among higher-income groups and boys in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, minder care at age three was more positive for dispositions and language for girls and less positive for number skills at age five, which may be suggestive of greater gender stereotyping in these settings.

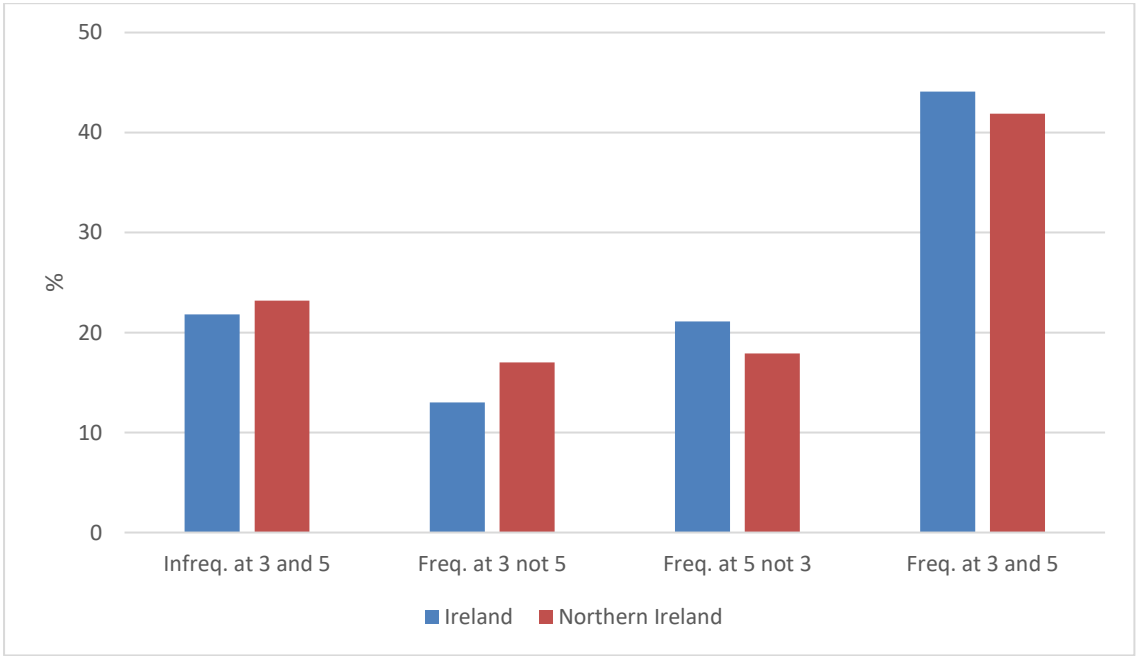
62 Analysing the MCS across the whole UK, Hansen and Hawkes (2009) find a significant positive effect of grandparent care on vocabulary at three years.

In contrast to the results for early care and education, clearer patterns were evident in looking at the influence of primary school stage. In Ireland, vocabulary, linking sounds and letters, and reading and number skills are all significantly lower among children in the entry/reception class than among those in the next class level. This pattern holds only for reading and number skills in Northern Ireland and the size of the effect for reading is much smaller. These findings may relate to differences in approaches to teaching and learning across class levels, with a shift away from play-based learning apparent between junior and senior infants in Ireland (see Smyth, 2018). In both settings, children in the entry/reception class are rated as having more positive attitudes/dispositions than the next class level by their teachers. This seems surprising but may reflect teachers making greater allowances to children during the settling-in process.

3.4 PARENTAL READING AND EARLY COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

This section looks at the frequency with which parents read to their children at ages three and five and the association with their cognitive development. Because reading behaviour at both time points is strongly related, a composite measure is used. Figure 3.3 shows broadly similar patterns of parental reading in both settings, though Ireland shows slightly higher prevalence of frequent (everyday) reading at both ages and a greater shift in less frequent to more frequent reading around the period of school start.

FIGURE 3.3 FREQUENCY OF PARENTS READING TO CHILDREN AT 3 AND 5 YEARS IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: 'Frequent' relates to reading to the child every day, with all other categories classified as 'infrequent'.

Not surprisingly, being read to frequently is associated with improved vocabulary development in both systems, with the highest scores found among those who are read to frequently at both three and five years (Table A3.12). For the teacher-rated skills (Tables A3.13 to A3.17), the relationship with frequency of parental reading tends to be much stronger in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. Parental reading to three year olds is strongly linked to vocabulary and language skills in Northern Ireland but not to the other teacher-assessed skills. The reasons for this difference are hard to determine given available information.

3.5 THE TIMING OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

As indicated in Figure 3.1, vocabulary skills were assessed at three years of age, as well as at five years. This section looks at whether social inequalities in outcomes at five years of age are captured by early vocabulary development. In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, vocabulary test scores at age three are significantly related to vocabulary scores and teacher-assessed skills two years later (Tables A3.18 to A3.22).

Inequalities in vocabulary scores at five are reduced in size and/or become non-significant when vocabulary at three is taken into account (Table 3.2). However, some direct effects are still evident in terms of having a graduate mother or being in rented accommodation in both jurisdictions, and in terms of income in Ireland. In other words, children with graduate mothers make more progress in their vocabulary development between three and five years than other children, while children in the rented sector make less progress. In Ireland, children from higher-income families make more vocabulary progress, even taking account of maternal education and housing tenure.

Similarly, differences in teacher-assessed skills tend to reduce in size and/or become non-significant when vocabulary at three is taken into account (Tables A3.18 to A3.22), but again direct effects are evident. Being in the top income group has a direct effect on language competencies in both settings while linking sounds and letters has lower ratings among those in rented accommodation.

TABLE 3.2 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS, VOCABULARY AT AGE 3 AND VOCABULARY TEST SCORES AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2 (controls for ECEC and reading)**	**Model 1**	**Model 2 (controls for ECEC and reading)**
Constant	53.961	33.503	55.889	35.829
Female	1.182***	-0.269	0.064	-1.253*
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	0.597	-0.010	-0.078	-0.929
Post-secondary	0.760	-0.295	1.512	1.137
Degree	1.727***	0.161	3.208***	1.178
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	1.148*	0.582	-0.048	-0.903
Third	1.732**	0.754	-0.712	-2.204
Fourth	3.009***	1.120*	0.830	-1.974
Highest	3.086***	1.116*	1.076	-2.189
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	0.820	0.466	0.734	-0.394
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	0.058	-0.107	-2.045*	-1.725
Social/private rented tenure	-4.625***	-2.659***	-3.954***	-2.585**
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Entry/reception class	-1.302***	-1.224***	-0.006	-0.725
Vocabulary test score at age 3		0.423***		0.407***
R^2	0.060	0.267	0.067	0.217
N	7,883	7,883	1,200	1,200

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05. ECCE=type of early childhood care and education.

3.6 NON-COGNITIVE OUTCOMES

This section uses the parent-reported Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) total difficulties score as a measure of non-cognitive development, with higher scores indicating greater socio-emotional difficulties. Analyses indicate significantly higher SDQ scores among five year olds in Ireland (7.4) than in Northern Ireland (6.8). It is not possible to unpack the reasons for this difference but it may be related to differences in the timing of the surveys and the negative impact of the recession on child wellbeing in Ireland (see Watson et al., 2014). In

both jurisdictions, difficulties are more prevalent among boys, those with disabilities/special educational needs, those whose mothers have lower levels of education and those living in rented accommodation (Table 3.3). Interestingly, the relationship between living in rented accommodation and socio-emotional difficulties is stronger in Northern Ireland. These social differences are largely mediated by earlier socio-emotional difficulties (at age three) but some direct effects remain; in Ireland, children with graduate mothers have a greater improvement in socio-emotional difficulties between three and five while in Northern Ireland there is a greater increase in socio-emotional difficulties among those living in rented housing (Table A3.2). Being in a lone-parent family is associated with greater difficulties in Ireland, with no significant difference by family structure found in Northern Ireland when lower levels of income and education among lone parents are taken into account. The only variation in relation to early care and education relates to higher scores among those who had been in centre-based care at age three in Ireland (Table A3.23). Being read to frequently is associated with lower levels of socio-emotional difficulties in both settings (Table A3.24). Socio-emotional difficulties are lower among those in the reception class in Northern Ireland than among the next class level but there is no obvious explanation for this difference.

TABLE 3.3 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND SDQ TOTAL DIFFICULTIES AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Constant	8.166	8.562
Female	-1.010***	-1.079***
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	-0.342	-0.978*
Post-secondary	-0.491***	-0.010
Degree	-1.366***	-1.535***
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	-0.134	-0.095
Third	-0.291	-0.868
Fourth	-0.292	-1.630**
Highest	-0.359	-1.109
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	2.001***	0.214
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	1.508***	1.020*
Social/private rented tenure	0.682***	1.588***
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
R^2	0.086	0.153
N	8,384	1,185

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below).

3.7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has drawn on data from *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) to compare cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes among five-year-old children in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Vocabulary tests scores are very similar in the two settings, while teacher ratings of language and linking sounds/letters skills are higher in Ireland and teacher ratings of number skills higher in Northern Ireland. It is difficult to unpack the reasons for this variation but they may relate to different approaches to the timing of teaching various skills. Socio-emotional difficulties are somewhat more prevalent among children in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, perhaps reflecting the timing of the surveys and the exposure of children in Ireland to the Great Recession in their early years.

In both systems, inequality by family background is evident in child cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, though different dimensions have different weightings depending on the outcome and setting. Overall, the analyses show that children

start primary school with different skills and capacities, differences that will likely impact on their subsequent educational development.

Differences in child outcomes by the type of care and education they received at nine months and three years of age are modest. This finding should be interpreted in the context of two key limitations. Firstly, the data collection predated more recent developments in the expansion of early years provision in Ireland. Secondly, neither dataset has information on the quality of early years care and education, a key factor highlighted by international research (see, for example, Hall et al., 2013). In contrast to formal care, the home learning environment, in terms of frequency of parents reading to children, shows a strong association with child cognitive and non-cognitive development.

Another key difference between the two jurisdictions relates, potentially, to the nature of the primary curriculum and pedagogy. Differences in outcomes between those in entry/reception and subsequent class groups appear stronger in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. This is consistent with evidence from teachers in Ireland of a step-change in teaching approaches between junior and senior infants, with less emphasis on a play-based approach (Smyth, 2018).

CHAPTER 4

Stakeholder perspectives

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a summary of stakeholder perspectives on early childhood education and care (ECEC) in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The objective of this qualitative strand of the research is to compare the two jurisdictions with respect to their strengths and weaknesses, successful initiatives and further opportunities for improvement. Additionally, we explore existing forms of contact across these two jurisdictions, highlighting the benefits of collaboration of this kind. The stakeholder base for this research is extremely varied. It comprises individuals working in policymaking, oversight, practitioner support and development, curricular development, advocacy and academia. We endeavour to capture the diversity of this stakeholder base through interviews with individuals from each of these specialisms. Therefore, this analysis brings together a variety of perspectives from both jurisdictions on the early years sector. By engaging with high-level stakeholders in this domain, top–down insight is gleaned into the contemporary challenges and developments within the early years sector in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Another advantage of concentrating on high-level individuals (such as the heads of organisations, functions or policy units) for participant recruitment is that such individuals are readily identifiable within this domain. Participants were also asked to suggest or refer other individuals or organisations within the sector for the research team to approach for participation, to ensure a broad stakeholder base was captured.

Our methodology is outlined in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.4.2). To briefly summarise, interviews were conducted with 19 participants in total – 11 from Ireland and 8 from Northern Ireland. Topics addressed within the interviews concerned key policy developments, funding and provision, quality, participation, leave policies, outcomes and opportunities for cross-jurisdiction collaboration. The interviews were semi-structured in format and tailored for relevance to the participant's area of expertise. In addition, an online consultation event was held to gather feedback on the preliminary quantitative and qualitative findings and to ensure key issues within the sector were acknowledged and represented. In total, the consultation was attended by 36 attendees.

Transcripts from the interviews and the consultation event were analysed for key themes through thematic analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). When carrying out analysis of this kind with high-level stakeholders, qualitative research can often encounter the issue of 'internal confidentiality', in that individuals within a particular group or social group may not be readily identifiable to an external audience but are easily identifiable among themselves (Tolich, 2004). In this instance, providing

further details of a participant's specific responsibilities or place within the field – such as policymaker or academic – may render them further identifiable. To protect participants' anonymity insofar as possible, within this analysis participant quotes are simply labelled as 'Stakeholder IE' for those from Ireland and 'Stakeholder NI' for those from Northern Ireland.

Within this chapter, Sections 4.2 to 4.8 concentrate on the key themes emerging from the interviews and the consultation event. Section 4.9 offers a summary of the findings. The key themes presented are:

- commonalities and differences between the two systems (Section 4.2);
- early years curriculum (Section 4.3);
- targeting and equality (Section 4.4);
- quality assurance (Section 4.5);
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Section 4.6);
- cross-jurisdiction collaboration (Section 4.7); and
- future policy developments (Section 4.8).

4.2 COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SYSTEMS

A number of commonalities emerged from stakeholders across the two settings, in particular: (i) the high take-up of existing provision; (ii) the issue of affordability; and (iii) flexibility of provision. These are explored within this section, followed by a discussion of contrasting differences between the two jurisdiction presented in Section 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Common themes

In both jurisdictions, reflecting administrative data (see Chapter 1), stakeholders reported high levels of take-up of existing funded provision, though some groups were seen as harder to reach in terms of participation (see Section 4.5). In Ireland, the expansion of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme was seen as 'a massive success [with] very strong participation rates' (Stakeholder, IE). Similarly, participants from Northern Ireland, also referenced having 'a very high uptake' (Stakeholder, NI).

However, not surprisingly given relatively high costs in both jurisdictions (see Chapter 1), affordability was raised as an issue in relation to additional hours above existing provision as well as for younger children. Costs were seen as a particular barrier for low-income and/or larger families, with a consequent impact on developmental outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds:

> *Childcare is becoming increasingly unaffordable, which is further trapping those people within poverty, and we do know that poverty*

> *and socioeconomic status is one of the biggest predictors of outcomes for young children.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *I don't think cost should be a barrier to people on lower incomes who want to avail of childcare, quality childcare services at all.* (Stakeholder, IE)

Another stakeholder highlighted the existence of subsidies for childcare in Northern Ireland, but noted the tapering of such supports at relatively low levels of income:

> *In some groups, there is a lot of financial support. You know, for some people on certain levels of Universal Credit, they can get 80 per cent of their childcare costs paid. So at the lowest end for want of a better word, you know, a lot of your childcare costs can be paid. The difficulty is I think as you move up that scale and drop off the Universal Credit supports, you then just enter the sort of HMRC tax-free childcare support which is 20 per cent towards your costs. And … that remains the same almost for a very, very wide range of income thresholds.* (Stakeholder, NI)

This stakeholder also pointed to potential lack of take-up of some financial supports among families and some providers not being registered to enable parents to avail of tax supports.

In Ireland, recent developments regarding the National Childcare Scheme were seen as combining progressive and universal elements:

> *I think 38 per cent of families had more than half of their childcare costs covered through the NCS. So it's a very progressive kind of scheme really targeting those who need the … most. But there's a universal element as well*. (Stakeholder, IE)

The move towards a core funding model was seen as 'starting to go to move into a space of regulating fees' (Stakeholder, IE), thus addressing issues of affordability.

In both settings, stakeholders pointed to issues around the availability of ECEC places, though challenges of availability differed in the two jurisdictions. In Ireland, issues of availability were seen as centring in urban areas. In contrast, issues of availability in Northern Ireland were reported as more likely to affect rural areas, in that 'if you're in a larger town or a city, there's more provision available naturally' (Stakeholder, NI):

> *We know that some parents are experiencing challenges accessing places, particularly, you know, for baby places or you know places for*

> *children under three. In urban areas like Dublin there are particular challenges in getting a place.* (Stakeholder, IE)

> *Our statutory provision is mostly within the urbanised areas. And in fact, you know, the vast majority of our nursery schools are within Belfast and Derry.* [So parents in rural areas are] *very reliant on the quality of their local playgroup. Because that really is the only one that has an option for them to be able to send their children to.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Challenges were also highlighted in terms of finding places for younger children; that is, those not entitled to an ECCE or preschool programme place. Here, participants highlighted that 'some parents are experiencing challenges accessing places, particularly, you know, for baby places or, you know, places for children under three' (Stakeholder, IE). Changes to leave policies have been somewhat beneficial in this respect, but high demand still exists. One participant stated:

> *With the extension of parents' leave in the first year of life, … the demand for places for under ones is kind of diminishing and the pressure points now to seems to be a kind of emerging at one to two.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The issue of flexibility for parents working non-standard hours was also raised as an issue for provision:

> *Most settings are open from morning to evening. If you need something in the evening time after that, you don't get it.* (Stakeholder, IE)

> *There's obviously people who work, you know, shift or you know other kind of patterns of work that you know the early learning and childcare services, you know, the hours maybe don't accommodate them.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The provision of 'part-time' places was also seen as having an impact on parents, in terms of their ability to take up paid employment while children were in ECEC settings, and in relation to the child being required to shift from one setting to another over the course of the day:

> *A child has to make those horizontal transitions in any given day, which, really to me, does not support the needs of the child by any means, nor the families and we really need to have provision whereby, you know, the children are supported. … There's evidence to suggest that those transitions can be really challenging for a child.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *If you're needing full-time daycare and the daycare that you're using isn't a preschool programme provider, you're typically having to move your child between two settings during the course of the day.* (Stakeholder, NI)

4.2.2 Diverging experiences

Within this section, we discuss the main differences between the two jurisdictions. A key difference highlighted by stakeholders relates to the pace and nature of recent reforms. Northern Ireland is in the process of developing a childcare strategy and is also undergoing an independent review of its entire education system, which includes early years in its terms of reference. Some stakeholders in Northern Ireland indicated that policy change had been slower than they might have liked. The uncertain political situation posed a significant barrier to reform, in that 'nothing has moved forward because we don't have a functioning executive at the minute to sign off on any funding' (Stakeholder, NI). Similarly, other participants from Northern Ireland noted the following:

> *There's been a bit of a limbo where early years has been concerned, but thankfully there they seem to be prioritising it now and hopefully then that will lead to a greater emphasis on it in terms of policy in the next number of years.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *There's been the Learning to Learn framework, which really never took legs. … And then it all sort of – because of our political situation up here in the North – … just fell to the wayside in that sense. That would have been around 2013. So there was a, a big gap between it and then sort of … the children and young people strategy which is to come out this year … So there's been very little. Yes, there's been bits and pieces in between but nothing, you know, that was significant in any shape or form*. (Stakeholder, NI)

Further to this, some Northern Ireland stakeholders indicated that that jurisdiction had fallen behind the rest of the UK in terms of expansion of provision:

> *It's worth putting it within the UK context in terms of developments elsewhere. So in Northern Ireland … the main provision around childcare and early education is the free hours offer, which is 12.5 hours in term time … and since then, very little has been done in terms of expanding that programme. … Where in England we've seen successive expansions of those three hours and over time. So now you've got 30 hours for working families with 3 and 4 year olds, 15 hours for other 3 and 4 year olds, 15 hours for 2 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Scotland a massive expansion of free hours.* (Stakeholder, NI)

In Ireland, by contrast, there have been a number of recent policy changes, including: the expansion of the ECCE programme to two years; new developments in the funding model with the National Childcare Scheme; and the introduction of the Core Funding model to improve affordability and quality through better pay and conditions for the early years workforce, and to support the employment of graduate staff (see Chapter 1 and Section 4.5 for more details).[63] Plans are also in train to have a new statutory body, Childcare Ireland, to oversee the sector.

In both systems, parents of young children avail of a combination of unpaid relative care (usually grandparents), paid childminders and centre-based care (see Chapter 2). However, there are differences between the systems in the nature of provision, funding, and regulation across the different components:

> *My perspective would be that here in Northern Ireland we have more community and voluntary provision than you have in the Republic. You seem to have more of a reliance on private provision in the Republic. Our private provision here in Northern Ireland, I would say, are mainly small family-based businesses.* (Stakeholder, NI)

A significant difference concerns the childminding aspect of the sector. In Ireland, childminders are not yet subject to regulation and inspection in the same way as early years centres. However, it is understood that although work is currently underway to move in this direction, as per the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028). In comparison, in Northern Ireland, the vast majority of childminders are centrally registered and subject to regulatory oversight:

> *All of their* [Northern Ireland] *childminders and registered, they're all registered in the North. You know, so it can happen and it can happen very close by to us.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The interviews with stakeholders also highlighted differences in the approach to providing additional support for specific groups, an issue that is discussed in Section 4.5. Differences between the systems in the timing of primary school start also have consequences for levels of participation in early years provision (see Chapter 1). Few of the stakeholders directly raised the issue of school starting age but many discussed the need to ensure a continuity of experience between early years provision and primary education, an issue that is discussed further in the following section.

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63 At time of the interviews, the Core Funding model was not yet implemented, but the stakeholders were aware of its main tenets.

4.3 EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM

Chapter 1 highlighted differences between Ireland and Northern Ireland in the scope of early years curriculum provision; the Aistear framework spans birth to six years while the preschool curricular guidance in Northern Ireland covers the preschool education programme; that is, three to four year olds. This section covers stakeholder perspectives on these curricula, concentrating on (i) opportunities for development, (ii) emphasis on the transition to primary school and (iii) curriculum implementation.

4.3.1 Opportunities for development

Overall, stakeholders in both settings were positive about the frameworks in place. In Northern Ireland, the preschool curricular guidance in place for three to four years olds was viewed positively for being 'very play-based' (Stakeholder, NI) and as a 'positive set of documentation to guide practitioners' that is pedagogically sound (Stakeholder Consultation). Similarly, in Ireland, participants recognised the Aistear framework as being 'a very strong and a very high-quality framework, I think, even internationally' (Stakeholder, IE).

At the time of writing, the Aistear framework is being updated to 'refresh and revise the content and the purpose' (Stakeholder, IE). This updating is seen as necessary, given broader social change in Ireland, as well as significant policy development in the early years sector. One participant summarised the plans for revision, stating:

> *We're looking at a much more diverse population of children ... The other part of that context is the way in which … the policy context has changed considerably as well. So we have, you know, big picture and issues such as the introduction of the ECCE programme … it was scaled up in that period. And we now know that virtually all children in that age group are participating in the programme. So those are just sort of the high level reasons. And it boils down to significant policy change, significant change in life as children experience it.* (Stakeholder, IE)

A further motivation of revising Aistear relates to the need to ensure greater continuity between early years experiences and primary education:

> *Almost all children are participating in free preschool education and then progressing into primary schools, so there's a greater understanding of the need for that continuity between the curricular framework and the primary curriculum.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The preschool guidance in Northern Ireland had similarly been refreshed in 2018 'to align more with foundation stage' (Stakeholder, NI). A number of opportunities for further development of the curricula were highlighted. In Northern Ireland, this

centred on more scope to develop early mathematical language and to incorporate rhyme, song and music to a greater extent. In Ireland, one stakeholder pointed to the persistence of a narrower view of school readiness:

> *There's still a tendency for school readiness to be understood by the early education sector as being able to count to 10. Knowing your letters, knowing your numbers … There's a lot of capacity building to be done in that sector around the early education side*. (Stakeholder, IE)

In addition, providers did not necessarily avail of the expansion of the ECCE programme to two years as an opportunity to provide a progression in learning for children:

> *What we are seeing is that sometimes the same programme is offered to children* [in] *the second year as it was in the first year. So there's no understanding that they need to have a progression to support those children to develop their learning … What's missing is that ability to be professionally reflective about the education impact of those experiences on children and, for example, plan for progression and learning*. (Stakeholder, IE)

Some stakeholders in Northern Ireland raised the need for curricular guidance for younger children (under threes), given the importance of this developmental stage in children's lives:

> *I think there has to be a much greater focus on improved outcomes for children and … a much greater focus upon the birth to three phase. We know from all of the research … that, you know, the greatest period of brain development is in birth to three. It's the most critical stage in the child's life. And it's still the area where there's least investment in, in terms of all aspects of children's development.* (Stakeholder, NI)

This issue has been raised in policy circles recently. For example, one participant mentioned reference to a programme of this kind in the Fair Start report; '*a Fair Start has talked about a universal programme for two-year-olds*' (Stakeholder, NI):

> *Mention was made then of the fact that the two-year-old programme was inherent within the Sure Start provision but naturally the weakness there was then that it wasn't universally accessible.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

There is another a programme for two year olds developed by the Early Years organisation but the prevalence of its use is unclear:

> *Early Years, the organisation, provides a two-year-old programme. And there's training that sometimes goes out where the two-year-old programme is concerned. But as to how many avail of that and how many actually get have access to it, I'm not sure. But it's not across the board by any means.* (Stakeholder, NI)

4.3.2 Emphasis on transition

Ensuring smooth continuity between the preschool and primary school stages was a point of consensus among stakeholders in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, who emphasised the need for greater attention to be paid to the transition to primary education. A key issue related to the need for greater continuity in curriculum and learning experiences over the transition from early years settings to primary school:

> *On paper it looks really good. And there's no doubt about that. We have moved forward and we have a good foundation stage curriculum in place for our four to six year olds in Northern Ireland. That is very much a playful learning focused, but it's back to the translation into practice and … some of our settings, still we have too formal an approach happening.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *Children leave early learning and childcare – very small ratios 1 to 11 children, play-based, whole child-led curriculum, quite a lot of freedoms, and then they start school and it could be 1 to 29 children in the classroom. It's not play based necessarily. And there was a different pedagogical approach. So I mean, that is quite a challenge for children. It's quite a difference.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The exchange of information between preschools and schools was seen as a crucial element in enhancing continuity of learning. However, while both jurisdictions have developed transfer templates to be used to transmit information, it was felt that there was a lack of communication on the kinds of learning the child had experienced as well as on the presence of particular needs, or that 'the quality of the transition information' (Stakeholder, NI) renders it uninformative:

> *We still find that there is very little sharing of information across the two contexts, and there is very little sort of understanding or even a desire to understand the curriculum and/or learning experiences in their broad general terms that children have had before they arrive into the infant classes in primary schools.* (Stakeholder, IE)

4.3.3 Curricular implementation

In both settings, there has been a lack of systematic research to date on curriculum implementation in early years settings (see Chapter 1). As a result, information on

curriculum implementation is mainly derived from inspections. The role of inspection in relation to quality of curriculum implementation will be further examined in Section 4.5.1. What was highlighted in the stakeholder interviews was that initial and continuous professional development is essential for effective curriculum implementation. Yet, challenges were evident, particularly in upskilling existing staff as well as differences across sectors in staff qualifications:

> *There is always the challenge that one* [nursery school] *is run by qualified teachers and the other* [voluntary/private]*, we still have a range of qualifications there*. (Stakeholder, NI)

> *Providers, practitioners, … they feel that there has been no rollout of a national programme* [in relation to Aistear], *that it's been hit and miss and that they've been lucky if there's the local organisation. Who delivers it for them? I think there's still a lot of work to be done in that regard … The fact that the contract for ECCE includes a clause that says you must deliver a programme that is in line with the principles of Aistear. You know, that had that really kickstarted engagement with Aistear, but … it was kind of, you know, people had to do it on their own.* (Stakeholder, IE)

> *The challenge is how to upskill the current workforce who will not participate in those* [new] *degree programmes with those skills.* (Stakeholder, IE)

4.4 TARGETING AND EQUALITY

Our interviews with stakeholders focused on the perceived equality of participation across children from a number of different vulnerable groups. These included: children from less advantaged families; children with special educational needs; and children from migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. Stakeholders reflected on the policies in place to ensure targeted supports for these groups, the strengths and limitations of these measures, as well as ongoing challenges in ensuring equality of provision.

4.4.1 Children from less advantaged backgrounds

For families from less advantaged backgrounds in Northern Ireland, there are several policy measures in place to assist with accessing early years education and care. Stakeholders informed us that providers must give first preference for preschool places to children from socially disadvantaged areas, and that this is determined on the basis of the receipt of universal credit. In addition to this, the Sure Start programme provides a suite of early education, family support and health services to children from disadvantaged areas who are aged from nought to four years of age. It also encourages a high level of parental involvement, the

development of the home learning environment, as well as emphasising the engagement of fathers. Sure Start was very positively regarded among our stakeholders both in Northern Ireland and in Ireland. The programme has also received international recognition. Sure Start is viewed as very beneficial in terms of preparing preschool children for the transition to primary school.

However, a significant drawback of Sure Start is that eligibility for access is determined by where the child lives, and socioeconomic disadvantage is not always geographically clustered. This means that families in socioeconomic hardship who are living in neighbourhoods outside the designated areas are unable to avail of Sure Start, creating what participants referred to as a 'postcode lottery'. On this, participants explained:

> *while some people who don't need it live in that area and can avail of it, equally so there's some parents who probably could do with the support and unfortunately don't live within that postcode.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Participants from Northern Ireland also made reference to the availability of the Pathway Fund, operated by the Department of Education there. Settings which cater for children aged nought to four years can apply for additional funding to enable them to implement projects and programmes to assist and improve the development of children who have been identified as being at risk of not reaching their full potential. Unlike Sure Start, eligibility for the Pathway Fund is not determined by areas of disadvantage. Instead, where early years providers believe there is a risk that children within their setting are at risk of not reaching their full potential within the school system, they can make an application for a project based on a self-identified need identified within their setting. Thus, the projects and programmes funded can be tailored to the specific needs of the children in a particular setting, and it is another avenue by which children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be supported. An example of a previous project granted by the Pathway Fund was the rollout of the WellComm speech and language toolkits[64] to a provider who identified speech and language difficulties among their children. A participant from the Stakeholder Consultation commented:

> *in Northern Ireland one of our successes is also the Pathway Fund, which I think broadens the whole discussion about disadvantage just being something that's area specific. But actually looking at targeting adversity and disadvantage in almost taking it away from just being a geographic thing.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

64 See https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/assessments/products/wellcomm/.

In Ireland, as previously discussed, affordability of childcare is a major concern. The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) assists families by subsidising the costs of childcare through either a universal subsidy, which is not means tested, or through an income-assessed subsidy. The latter ensures that 'the greatest level of subsidy is given to families with the greatest level of need' (Stakeholder, IE). This goes some way to assisting families with issues of affordability. The means-tested aspect of the scheme covers children aged between 0 and 15 years. Since August 2022, the universal aspect of the scheme has been extended from its initial eligibility for children under 3 years, to children up to 15 years of age.

At present, however, there is no direct comparison in Ireland to the wraparound supports offered by the Sure Start programme. Many participants made reference to the commitment under the First 5 strategy to establish a model for the early years sector that is comparable to the DEIS model used in primary and secondary level education.[65] Such a model is intended to provide both universal and targeted supports for children from disadvantaged areas. A preliminary step is the need to 'decide and design what the allocation model might be for those services' (Stakeholder, IE) and to establish the data that would facilitate the identification of those in need of support. The supports that would be offered under the DEIS-type model are not yet determined, but several possibilities are under consideration. On this, one participant stated:

> *we've seen elsewhere that reduced ratios is a very strong way in which children with additional needs can be supported. … Clearly, parenting support, parental engagement, preschool home liaison – all of those things are really important. And they are the kind of things now we're going to be looking at in the context of that DEIS type model.* (Stakeholder, IE)

Additionally, stakeholders in Ireland recognised that learning could be gleaned from the implementation of the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland and the UK with respect to further developing the DEIS-type model, particularly where it concerned the integration and rollout of support services:

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65 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) is a programme for educational inclusion. Schools are assigned to DEIS bands based on the location of the school and its level of concentrated educational disadvantage. Primary and secondary schools included in the DEIS programme receive targeted resources and supports to address educational disadvantage, including: additional classroom teaching posts; home–school–community liaisons; additional funding; access to the School Completion Programme; and Visiting Teachers Service for Travellers. More information is available at: https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/the_irish_education_system/measures_to_address_educational_disadvantage.html#l736dc.

> *We identified the Sure Start 'legacy' in the North as something that is really to be looked at and to be valued and to be taken forward, with its focus on parental involvement, on early intervention, on integrated services*. (Stakeholder Consultation)

4.4.2 Children from migrant and minority backgrounds

In the case of children and families from migrant and minority backgrounds, policy and programmes supports appeared to be less well established than for other disadvantaged groups, in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. A basic concern for migrant families relates to ensuring awareness of available entitlements, supports and services. For example, one participant from Ireland highlighted that, for parents from migrant backgrounds, awareness regarding leave policies may be underdeveloped, and more could be done with respect to making people from a migrant background aware of their entitlements. They commented, 'the biggest challenge would be ensuring that people are aware of their entitlements because they differ from country to country. The systems operate very differently'. In relation to access and participation in early years provision, stakeholders generally felt that children from migrant backgrounds demonstrate good levels of participation in the early years sector. In particular, children from migrant families were often well represented in participation of the ECCE programme, and this high level of participation was attributed to the universal provision of this programme:

> [I]*t's certainly seen as a rite of passage and that it's something that all three year olds do. I think that that message is known and understood very clearly by most people that live in the country.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The overall participation rates in preschool programmes are very high in both jurisdictions. For example, in Ireland, among entrants to junior infants classes in mainstream national schools, 94.4 per cent had been enrolled in a childcare setting, pre-primary education, Early Start, or junior school prior to commencing national school.[66] However, participants noted that the overall participation figures can mask lower participation rates occurring within some societal groups. In particular, stakeholders acknowledge that there is lower participation among children from Traveller and Roma backgrounds. In Ireland, DCEDIY figures indicate that 94.7 per cent of children from a White/White Irish background had been in a childcare setting (setting, pre-primary education, Early Start, or junior school) prior to starting national school. Participation in these settings prior to national school was also high among children from Asian/Asian Irish backgrounds (92.2 per cent), Black/Black Irish backgrounds (91.6 per cent), and Other/Mixed background (91.3 per cent) – although all slightly lower than for White/White Irish children. By

66 Figures obtained through correspondence with DCEDIY, drawn from the Primary Pupil Online Database. Data provided are labelled as provisional figures.

comparison, engagement in a prior setting was just 72.9 per cent among children of a Roma background and 76.9 per cent for children with an Irish Traveller background.[67] As one participant explained:

> *by and large, of the population on average it's 95, 96 per cent come from preschool setting. But when you break that down by ethnicity, you'll see that you know, participation rates among Traveller children or among Roma children, or among other ethnic groups, that are much lower than the population on average. So we know that the participation rates are not kind of universally high.* (Stakeholder, IE)

In Northern Ireland, the Toybox programme was viewed as a good initiative for the purposes of encouraging participation and improving long-term outcomes for Traveller children. The Toybox programme is a 'a bespoke service to Traveller children' (Stakeholder, NI). The programme is funded by the Department of Education and involves play-focused home visits and family support with the objective of supporting the transition to early years education. No comparable bespoke programme for Traveller and Roma children was referenced by stakeholders in Ireland.

Importantly, children from a migrant background do not comprise a uniform group. It was acknowledged that some migrant children may be very high achievers in early education, but this high level of achievement was often linked to 'their family background and why they come here' (Stakeholder, NI). Participants also recognised that some children from migrant backgrounds could face additional challenges in early years settings with respect to having English as a second language and achieving a sense of belonging. Yet it was clear that specific supports for migrant children are less well established. In Ireland, participants made reference to the equality, diversity and inclusion training for staff as part of the universal supports within the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) as one potential support for children from a migrant background. This pillar centres on 'building a culture of embracing diversity and inclusion' (Stakeholder, IE) within settings. But as another participant explained, the model offers 'a lever for a wider inclusion agenda' (Stakeholder, IE) that has not yet been fully capitalised on. However, as it is part of the AIM, it is not necessarily applied in all settings – only where AIM is in use, and only for the age groups for which AIM caters. In Northern Ireland, participants referred to links between early years providers and the Centre for Cultural Services, which plays a role in providing translation services for early years settings.

In terms of wider social integration for children and families from a migrant background, some participants recognised the potential for the early years sector

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67 As above.

to go beyond childcare and early years education, emphasising a broader role for such services within the community in terms of contributing to social cohesion. One participant commented:

> [T]*here's the issue of social cohesion and integrating families into communities and, you know, what does that look like? You know, like, even for families who come, who are indigenous to Ireland, for some families going to preschool is the first time that they have access to their wider community in a different way. In terms of parents, in terms of services and things like that, and it can be a very lonely place for people, you know, in terms of access and support. So we would see early childhood services as hubs for family supports.* (Stakeholder, IE)

4.4.3 Children with special educational needs

Children with special educational needs are a key group of interest in terms of equality of provision. In Ireland, the AIM model was highly regarded by participants. AIM provides both universal and targeted supports for children with a disability. Universal supports centre on enabling providers to create a more inclusive preschool environment. The Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years Care (LINC) Level 6 course is a specialised qualification offered by Mary Immaculate College and funded by DCEDIY. This training course equips staff to implement AIM and to ensure that all children can fully participate in early years learning. According to one of our participants, LINC inclusion coordinators are now present in 'over 60 per cent of settings' (Stakeholder, IE). Targeted supports may be offered in the form of specialist advice, equipment, minor building alterations, therapeutic interventions and additional assistance.

A key strength of AIM is that children do not require a formal medical diagnosis in order to be eligible for targeted supports. However, a significant limitation is that it is only available through the ECCE programme at present. This means its supports are only available in settings for a limited period per day, during ECCE hours. By extension, it is only available for children above three years of age, and so younger children with special educational needs cannot avail of the supports provided under AIM. One participant explained how this can affect equality of provision for younger children with special education needs:

> [I]*t's only available for preschool and you can't get it for the nought to threes. And we are finding that settings with nought to three are finding it difficult to support children with additional needs and what happens is then we find they're getting excluded or moved on to another service.* (Stakeholder, IE)

There is no equivalent of the AIM model in the early years sector in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, a major concern expressed among stakeholders there is the

growing number of children in early years settings with special educational needs. A positive aspect of the early years system in Northern Ireland is that settings can access funding to immediately seek out the hire of an additional adult, even where an educational statement for the child is not in place. This was seen as a strength in that it meant settings could respond to a child's needs with greater immediacy and was described as 'one of the bits where the bureaucracy doesn't get in the way' (Stakeholder, NI). Despite this, participants in Northern Ireland recognised that additional resourcing with respect to provision that meets special educational needs could be improved upon. For example, one participant stated:

> *I don't think* [the need for additional resourcing] *is adequately recognised currently in the system. Like particularly for the, like the non-statutory providers get a standard rate of pay for every child that they're taking. And there's no nuancing of that or weighting of that to reflect the complexity of the issues that they may be have to deal with.* (Stakeholder, NI)

In both jurisdictions, stakeholders acknowledged that the delivery of quality care and education to children with special educational needs relies on staff being equipped with the requisite skillset. In Northern Ireland, there was a call for further training supports for early years providers; in Ireland, there was recognition of the limitations of what the AIM's LINC coordinators and settings could provide, particularly where needs are more complex. For example:

> [E]*arly years teachers would find that area really challenging. And again it comes back to the qualifications of the workforce. You know, in some cases, how can they be expected to do – identify whether this child needs support and needs additional help on whatever.* […] *So I do think that all that goes back to our early years workforce, or we can get our early years workforce upskilled and then they would be able to naturally then identify those issues much earlier and know of the services that are available to provide that support.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> [I]*n terms of the AIM model, there is varying levels that you can come on to the model, from very mild forms of additional needs right up to Level 7, which is high level of additional needs. And that is cleared for within the AIM model. I do know that some services have struggled with that in terms of, if it doesn't, if the setting doesn't really suit the child, round that high level need* (Stakeholder, IE)

4.5 QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality in early years settings is linked to improved outcomes for children (OECD, 2015; Sylva et al., 2011). Quality assurance measures are important for the purposes of ascertaining that a good standard of provision is offered in ECEC, and

addressing and promoting improvements in settings that may have fallen below standard. In 2014, the European Commission Working Group on ECEC (2014) developed a quality framework for early years settings, identifying five areas by which quality in settings could be assessed: monitoring and evaluation; access; the workforce; the curriculum; and governance. Since 2019, this framework has been formally recognised as a recommendation put forth by the Council of the European Union, EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2019). In this section, we focus on three aspects that contribute to quality within the early years sector: inspection, quality support measures, and staff training and qualifications.

4.5.1 Inspection

In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, inspection of early years settings is carried out by two bodies. In Ireland, inspection is conducted by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate and the Department of Education; in Northern Ireland, inspection is conducted by the Education Training Inspectorate as well as the Department of Health. In Ireland, the work of Tusla and the Department of Health concentrates on compliance with regulations, the appropriateness of premises, child safety, governance of the setting, and ensuring that the health and welfare of the children is upheld. Generally, 'a very high compliance rate' with Tusla standards is maintained (Stakeholder, IE). Research by Rouine et al. (2022) examined incidents of non-compliance identified during the Tusla inspection process and results of the follow-up inspection process. Among a random sample of 500 inspection reports that identified non-compliance in 2017, 83 per cent of settings had resolved the issues raised by the time of follow-up inspection. Based on these findings, Rouine et al. (2022) argue that inspection has a demonstrable effect on promoting improvements within settings:

> *Where DE* [Department of Education] *is funding a place, the setting must use the guidance and the settings then are inspected.* (Stakeholder, NI)

In Ireland, the systems that oversee the registration and regulation of childminders are not as well established as they are in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the vast majority of childminders are registered and are required to adhere to minimum standards, which have been in place since 2012.[68] All childminders are subject to inspection by social workers within the Health and Social Care Trusts once per year. By comparison, in Ireland, only a very small proportion of childminders operating in Ireland are currently registered with Tusla, and therefore obliged to undergo inspections at the registered site of the childminder. Proposals

[68] Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12, available at: https://hscboard.hscni.net/download/PUBLICATIONS/CHILDCARE/Childminding_Standards_Implementation_Guidance.pdf.

for increased regulation of childminding in Ireland have considered a move towards the increased registration of childminders. As one participant remarked, this proposal would also require that Tusla 'staff up' in order to be sufficiently resourced to meet increased oversight responsibilities (Stakeholder, IE). Under the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028, the proposals for increased regulation of childminders would serve to:

> *bring them into the loop of regulatory supports and state support. So a whole kind of range of things going on there. And as well as kind of improving quality, you know, regulating childminders improves access, it improves affordability because parents who use that form of childminding will then have access to the National Childcare Scheme as well, on the affordability side.* (Stakeholder, IE)

In contrast, the education-focused strand of inspections concentrates on the setting as a learning environment, adherence to relevant curricula and learning outcomes for children. For example, the stakeholders below elaborated on the work of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (Northern Ireland) and the Department of Education (Ireland) and how they contribute to monitoring the quality of provision:

> [We] *look at outcomes for learners and how you know how well they're meeting the needs of the children. And that's done on every inspection. So we will have evaluated sort of outcomes for learners. And where we find that, that there is, within those settings, where we find that the children are lacking in something, it might be their early mathematical languages underdeveloped, you know, those are the sort of things that we will leave behind with the setting to work on.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *They are usually very safe spaces. They are very well … resourced in general, they have good outdoor environments. They have very, very highly committed personnel working with the children. Very highly committed educators.* (Stakeholder, IE)

The results of education-focused inspections were generally seen as positive, with the majority of providers offering a positive learning experience for children:

> *We're sitting at about 80 per cent of our preschools which are delivering good or better and then 20 per cent that we have to go back for a follow up inspection to.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *By and large, we are happy that the settings are providing an adequate experience for children.* (Stakeholder, IE)

Under the First 5 strategy, the Irish Government has committed to developing a robust inspection and quality framework for the early years sector (Government of Ireland, 2019). Further to this, the OECD (2021a) has recommended that: (i) both inspectorates should draw from a common framework; (ii) inspection should be more inclusive of the voices of parents and children; and (iii) the quality assurance system should allow more room for self-evaluation from providers. Importantly, while inspection and other quality assurance processes such as self-evaluations are beneficial, they also impose a burden on resources that needs to be accounted for. For example, at the Stakeholder Consultation, we received feedback from participants that:

> *both sides of the border were heavily regulated in terms social services, the Trust, DE* [Department of Education]*, ETI, the Charity Commission, and in terms of Pobal. And that it was such pressure on early childhood people to be HR people, to be admin people, to be monitors, and that the model of provision has changed so much that, that, you know, it's a very heavy burden on the sector.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

4.5.2 Quality support

In both jurisdictions, the availability of quality support was identified as a positive feature of ECEC. In Ireland, the support of early years specialists is made available through the national initiative, Better Start National Early Years Quality Development. Better Start provides professional development, mentoring and coaching to all early learning and care settings, with the aim of promoting quality within the sector and improving outcomes for children. Better Start early years specialists will work with practitioners to assess settings under the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide and to identify appropriate opportunities for development within the setting. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, quality support is offered through the Early Years organisation, as well as through independent early years specialist networks (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2014). One participant explained the role of Early Years, stating that it is involved in:

> *delivering a specialist service that really walks the walk with those settings and looks at the needs as they change every couple of years. You know, in terms of leadership support, in terms of practice support, in terms of access to research and learning, coaching and mentoring*. (Stakeholder, NI)

However, there can be differential uptake regarding quality support measures. This was particularly highlighted in the Irish context; participants mentioned that some settings may be reticent to take up available quality support. Additionally, participants mentioned that, unlike in Northern Ireland, the individual Early Years

specialist assigned to a particular setting may change over time, resulting in a loss of continuity:

> [I]*t's the services who are really interested in terms of delivery or whatever who will come forward and seek the supports.* (Stakeholder, IE)

> [I]*n terms of support for early years, every setting in Northern Ireland has an assigned mentor, whereas in the Republic of Ireland not everybody has an assigned mentor that's assigned continually to their setting.* (Stakeholder, IE)

> [J]*ust to add to that, and, not everybody in the Republic would want one – that's been a historical development within Northern Ireland. That's when the preschool expansion programme was brought in and services in order to* [get] *access to funding had to follow the Department of Education's Early Years curriculum. Services automatically had had to have an Early Years specialist working with them. That hasn't happened in the Republic. And while there are some who would welcome it, there are some who would feel, 'We don't want anybody like that crossing our door. We don't need it. We have … I have an early years degree myself as a manager of a setting or an owner manager or my staff have early years degrees.' So that acceptance of the need to have an earlier specialist or mentor we don't have in … Ireland as such.* (Stakeholder, IE)

4.5.3 Staff training and qualifications

In both jurisdictions, the topic of staff training and qualifications emerged as a significant theme. In Ireland, the recent DCEDIY plan, Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022–2028, sets out a strategy for establishing a graduate-led workforce for the early years sector (Government of Ireland, 2021). The workforce plan recognises that a skilled, professional and qualified workforce is essential for delivering high quality in the early years sector. The plan aims to have 50 per cent of the workforce comprised of graduates by 2028. In part, *Nurturing Skills* has been viewed as an effort to achieve greater retention of staff within the sector. One participant described the tenets of *Nurturing Skills*:

> [T]*here's a whole suite of things in there around, you know, raising the profile of careers, around establishing career pathways, around improving the quality of degrees, and also engagement and CPD. …* [W]*e had an interim target of 30 per cent by 2022 and we've already exceeded that. So, like, the numbers of people who have, who've gone on to kind of third level and who get a degree in early learning and*

> *childcare has massively increased. And we know that that's going to increase the quality or improve the quality experience for children.* (Stakeholder, IE)

Further to this, the new Core Funding model put in place in September 2022 introduces greater conditionality to public money that is invested in early years settings. The Core Funding model is linked to an employment regulation order (ERO) submitted through the Joint Labour Committee,[69] which was regarded as 'the first step towards better pay and conditions' (Stakeholder, IE) within the sector. The ERO establishes minimum rates of remuneration, and links different roles and qualification levels within the sector to higher rates of pay. As one of the stakeholders explained:

> [Core Funding] *is giving priority to, is to address the perennial challenge of low pay and conditions among the workforce. Knowing that – that is absolutely linked to the quality of children's experiences. So a very large share of that Core Funding allocation is going towards supporting the development of an employment regulation order through a Joint Labour Committee. … And Core Funding is all around supporting that*. (Stakeholder, IE)

One past initiative to promote recognition of qualifications in early years settings was rolled out as part of the ECCE programme, in which settings were eligible for a higher capitation rate if they employed graduates, thereby incentivising the recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff. This initiative been moved from the ECCE programme into the Core Funding model and widened in scope. Previously, additional funding for graduate workers was limited to room leaders or lead educators in ECCE programmes. Under Code Funding, this will be extended to room leaders / lead educators working with preschool children (0-6 years). Per the ERO, service providers will now be required to pay higher minimum rates of pay to room leaders / lead educators who are trained to graduate level. However, the increased emphasis on levels of qualification presents a major shift for the sector. Accordingly, there is a need to ensure good engagement with workers within the sector, to provide clear pathways for upskilling, and to promote the Core Funding model as a lever for quality within the sector. For example, participants from Ireland noted:

> *I think the initial professional education will not from now on be a big important part, but the challenge is how to upskill the current workforce who will not participate in those degree programmes with those skills. And that's going to depend on CPD. And now I know* [the]

[69] See: https://www.labourcourt.ie/en/industrial-relations/employment-regulation-orders/early-years-service-draft-employment-regulation-order/s-i-no-457-of-2022.pdf.

> *Department of Children are looking at a significant CPD programme as part of the workforce development plan that was published in the Nurturing Skills document, and it will certainly be needed. If we want to ensure that the current workforce gains the skills they need to deliver on that education remit.* (Stakeholder, IE)

> [I]*t has the potential, not unlike the National Childcare Scheme, to be flexed for new priorities. So the Department could decide next year that, you know, it wants services to, I don't know, offer parenting classes for parents – for example, for example. Or, you know, to open a room to make speech and language therapy, you know, Tusla suddenly has 15 new speech and language therapists, and it wants to work in early years. … So it's, it has the potential to be just brilliant, you know? So getting people to see its value and to win them, as opposed to them feeling that they have no choice. Because right now they feel they have no choice and that's never good, you know?* (Stakeholder, IE)

Similarly, among stakeholders from Northern Ireland, discussion centred on the importance of qualifications among early years workers – a topic that was considered 'very much coming to the fore' (Stakeholder, NI). In Northern Ireland, nursery settings are led by a degree-qualified teacher. Since the publication of the 2018 iteration of the minimum standards, leaders in private and voluntary settings must hold Level 5 qualifications, and room supervisors and team leaders must be qualified to Level 3.[70] For example, speaking on the private and voluntary sector, one participant stated:

> [W]*e still have a range of qualifications there. They're supposed to be at least Level 5. We have a number doing really well who are degree led now and some of them even masters level, where they've done the early childhood degree in Stranmillis or through the Open University or whatever. But the, there are still a small number who maybe are only Level 3 because when the requirement came in to be Level 5, it was only for new level 5 posts. If you were currently in a leadership post and you were Level 3 and you didn't move from that post, you could actually still … There was no, you know, that it wasn't a requirement that you had to be Level 5.* (Stakeholder, NI)

That there is a 'split system' (Stakeholder, NI) also creates a large disparity in pay between the two types of settings. Nursery teachers working in a statutory setting

[70] Levels refer to the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) scale in Northern Ireland.

receive a higher salary than those working in a private setting. As one participant explained:

> [O]*ur statutory nursery schools being taught by teachers who are receiving a teacher's salary and then in the voluntary private sector, … some of whom have an early childhood studies degree and, but at the same time, there's still quite a number of them that, a, may be on NVQ Level 2 and NVQ Level 3s and that type of thing, are not receiving anywhere near the same salary as what a teacher is receiving. So that equality across the board isn't there. And I do feel that we need to get that right in some shape or form to make things better in the early years in the first instance.* (Stakeholder, NI)

In comparison with Ireland, developments were less advanced in Northern Ireland regarding this growing emphasis on staff qualifications. However, it appeared that this is a goal envisaged for the early years sector in Northern Ireland, as indicated by the comments from stakeholders below:

> *We're just working at the minute on a qualifications audit … a joint initiative with the Department of Health and the Department of Education and the Childcare Partnerships here. Where we're going to undertake a census of qualifications in childcare and develop some workforce planning as a result of that. So again, that has the potential to be a really good development.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> [I]*t's not just about being teacher-led, it's about being led with specialism in early years and within, with all that knowledge and expertise around early years development and cognitive development and how that needs to be translated into the early years learning context. …* [H]*aving said that, I think we would, we'd certainly do want to be professionalising the workforce and moving in a direction that has, is, moving towards that.* (Stakeholder, NI)

4.6 THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Both settings saw widespread temporary closures of early years settings during the pandemic, creating significant challenges to the viability of the (non-statutory) sector, a situation which led to a large increase in government funding over the period. Such funding was intended to allow for providers to reopen and to operate with 'pod' structures to maximise safety:

> *It was all about supporting settings that were incurring additional costs as a result of the pandemic. So it was then looking at – what are those additional costs in terms of costs for actually applying additional COVID regulations?* (Stakeholder, NI)

The stakeholders interviewed saw the pandemic as leading to a greater recognition of the importance of the sector for society as a whole. There was recognition too of the importance of the work that providers did during the period of closures to support children and families.

> *I think the pandemic has … demonstrated how critical this sector is for society, for the economy, for workers, for children. And … it's an absolutely essential part of the infrastructure. And, you know, when service is closed and in 2020, fully closed, I mean we saw the impacts that had on families, on children themselves.* (Stakeholder, IE)

Some stakeholders reported that pandemic closures exacerbated the situation of high levels of staff turnover in the sector:

> *We've had quite a number of people leave the voluntary private sector for* [primary] *education. … We have had loss and we've had a lot of people who have just maybe said, right, the time has come for me to retire.* (Stakeholder, NI)

However, others indicated a largely unchanged situation, with pandemic supports allowing centres to retain staff, and permanent closures no worse than in years prior to the pandemic:

> *I think that the general view was that it wasn't probably a whole lot worse than any normal year in terms of closures.* (Stakeholder, IE)

In keeping with emerging research findings on the impact of the pandemic for children developmentally (see, for example, Pascal et al., 2020; Deoni et al., 2021), stakeholders highlighted the negative effect of closures and social distancing on child outcomes:

> *We do have children … with substantial developmental delays and particularly in language and communication, socialization, etc.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *Both infant teachers and early years educators were reporting that children's reticence to engage in collaborative play was very evident. They were finding it much more difficult to engage in peer play.* (Stakeholder, IE)

At the same time, stakeholders highlighted some positive results, especially the greater awareness of the importance of outdoor play:

> *I do think some good has come out of it as well, in the sense that outdoor play is very much [being] encouraged and nurtured in our*

> *early years settings and primary schools. As a result, they're now seeing the value of getting children outdoors. …* [C]*hildren tend to be much more motivated and engaged in learning when outdoors as well. So there's a real shift in that direction.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *And we've seen some really creative and innovative approaches to outdoor learning and a recognition that, you know, children really respond extremely positively to being in the outdoor environments.* (Stakeholder, IE)

4.7 CROSS-JURISDICTION COLLABORATION

Many participants highlighted existing forms of collaboration and engagement across the two jurisdictions. These collaborations were described as being both formal and informal in nature and coming in many guises, such as regular cross-jurisdiction meetings, knowledge-sharing activities and collaborative projects, as well as ad hoc informal communication. These initiatives reflect the fact that opportunities for such collaboration or cooperation tend to occur within specific pockets of the sector, rather than across the early years sector as a whole.

For example, those involved in policymaking made reference to their involvement in the British–Irish Council's early years education sub-group.[71] The British–Irish Council comprises representatives of the governments of Ireland, the UK, Northern Ireland (the Northern Ireland Executive), Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey. The purpose of the British–Irish Council is to promote practical relationships among the member administrations to work together on issues of common interest. It allows for consultation, information sharing, and establishing partnerships. Among our stakeholders, the British–Irish Council was acknowledged as a good avenue for knowledge-building as well as networking and for being a 'well-established structure' (Stakeholder, IE). In addition to this formal relationship, participants involved in policymaking also spoke of using regular informal contact with counterparts in the other jurisdiction for the purposes of information sharing, as the need to do so may arise. A recurring example of this concerned the implementation of COVID-19 measures and supports for the early years sectors. On this form of ad hoc communication, one participant stated:

> *the intensity of kind of engagement is on an as needed basis. So there was quite intensive engagement over COVID. And when we are developing particular policies or responding to specific issues … our starting point is to look to other jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland, to see how they respond to particular issues or how we fare*

[71] More information on the British–Irish Council's early years subgroup is available here: https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/areas-work/early-years.

> *against them and how we can learn from different jurisdictions.* (Stakeholder, IE)

Stakeholders involved in inspection for the early years sector referred to the use of regular meetings among management across both jurisdictions to stay informed of policy developments occurring in both Northern Ireland and Ireland. In addition, they described the use of shadowing practices, in which members of the inspectorates observe inspection as conducted by their counterparts in the other jurisdiction. This activity was regarded as particularly beneficial in that it allowed for 'professional exchange' (Stakeholder, NI), offering practical insight into both the conduct of inspection processes as well as an up-close understanding of the operation of the sector in the other jurisdiction. For example, another participant commented:

> *It's very beneficial for us to go down and see and see what's happening and get that picture down there. And I think they always found it very beneficial coming up, seeing the quality and what we did within our preschools as well.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Another form of collaboration concerned the use of cross-border projects. Projects – whether academic, practitioner knowledge-sharing, or established through the Peace Programme – offered a means of cooperation, networking and, perhaps most significantly, knowledge building. Examples cited included the Sharing from the Start programme,[72] early years provider projects, and research projects funded under the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCOTENS) network,[73] including research funded under the Shared Island Initiative. For example, speaking on a cross-border collaborative project involving early years providers, one stakeholder remarked on the practical learning gleaned from the project as a result of drawing on the 'best' of both jurisdictions, stating:

> *when the settings come into any of the cross-border projects, they're getting good information, they're getting good training and they're getting good support and that has lifted their level of quality in different areas in their settings.* (Stakeholder, IE)

A few challenges with respect to cross-border collaboration were cited by our stakeholders. Some participants highlighted that a lack of knowledge regarding policy or the nature of provision in the other jurisdiction could hinder collaboration. However, this would appear to be only an initial obstacle for

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72 Sharing from the Start is a project that aims to support community cohesion, inclusion, diversity and improved educational outcomes for the early years sector. It is implemented through cross-border partnerships in preschool settings within the border counties of Northern Ireland and Ireland. The project is funded through the PEACE IV Programme overseen by the EU's Special EU Programmes Body.

73 SCOTENS is a network of university departments, colleges, curriculum councils, trade unions and education centres based in Northern Ireland and Ireland. SCOTENS offers a network to enable the discussion of issues of common interest, an annual conference, teacher exchange programmes, and also offers a funding programme for research initiatives.

collaboration and one that is easily resolved; participants with frequent experience of cross-border collaboration were very well informed of early years developments in both jurisdictions. On a practical level, one participant pointed out that collaborations of any kind – while providing benefits that are very worthwhile – are time intensive and require adequate resourcing. They emphasised that 'all cooperation and partnership needs to be resourced' (Stakeholder, NI).

Overall, the sentiment regarding collaboration and cooperation was largely positive. Participants noted that factors such as the close proximity of the two jurisdictions, the shared language, and common socioeconomic challenges readily enabled and facilitated the ability to collaborate. It was recognised that these collaborations, whether formal or informal, yielded significant benefits and that efforts should be made to 'maximise any opportunities to learn from each other' (Stakeholder, IE). With this said, it is notable from our interviews with stakeholders that the establishment of these avenues for cross-border collaboration is largely confined to specific stakeholder groups within the early years sector – policymakers, inspectorates, practitioners and academics. For this reason it may be worth considering the establishment of additional forums that would bring together stakeholders from a variety of different areas. This would enable not only cross-border knowledge sharing and networking, but also the inclusion of a broader range of perspectives within the sector.

4.8 FUTURE POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

As well as reflecting on the operation of current early years policy, stakeholders discussed priorities for the future of the early years sector, particularly within the consultation session. Much of the discussion centred on bringing to fruition developments already in train, particularly the new childcare strategy in Northern Ireland and the Core Funding model in Ireland, as well as ongoing work on improving quality in both jurisdictions.

Overall, the 'significant and increasing state commitment and on both sides of the border' (Stakeholder Consultation) was viewed as welcome and necessary. Generally, there was a feeling that recent developments have been positive: 'we are tracking, we think, in the right direction' (Stakeholder Consultation), but that 'outstanding policy commitments' (Stakeholder Consultation) and challenges remain. For example, difficulties were envisaged around the full implementation of the Core Funding model in Ireland:

> *Getting Core Funding over the line isn't just about getting people to sign the contract for Core Funding. … There's a sophisticated communications plan needed to win hearts and minds*. (Stakeholder, IE)

In Northern Ireland, in particular, moving towards more standardised provision in terms of hours was seen as posing difficulties in terms of maintaining existing levels of capacity:

> *The capacity issues of standardising are, you know, very significant because, when you think of it, at the moment 60 per cent of all children are getting that shorter and 12-and-a-half-hour offer. And in many of those cases, you know, it's being offered by a private community or voluntary sector group, and they're doing a session in the morning and a session in the afternoon. And we're relying on both of those sessions to be able to ensure that every child has a place. So if we move to saying everybody's gonna get the 22 and a half hours, you'll only be able to do one of those in a day, so you knock out a chunk of your provision. So this would have to be done in a very controlled and incremental way, absolutely using all of those different providers.* (Stakeholder, NI)

More broadly, political uncertainty in Northern Ireland was seen as creating significant challenges in bringing about reform in the sector:

> *Reform … takes a long time. It takes sustained investment, sustained change. … Really effective reform takes working in partnership closely with the sector and with other stakeholders as well. … It's quite difficult to do that and it takes time. It takes money and it takes kind of consistent political backing as well over that period of time.* (Stakeholder, NI)

A recurring theme was the scale of funding required to address the issues of affordability and to secure the resources needed for high-quality ECEC.

> *The welcome commitment to increased funding is still not enough compared to when look we at the OECD environments, for instance.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

> *There's been fragmented and sporadic spurts of development and on both sides of the border. We're behind the curve in terms of investment.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

However, no clear consensus emerged about the appropriate balance of state and private funding and the mix needed between statutory and non-statutory providers.

The stakeholders interviewed were very positive about developments around improving standards in the sector but did highlight the need to ensure a balance

between regulation or oversight and the potential administrative burden on providers, especially small providers:

> *Both sides of the border were heavily regulated in terms … and it was such pressure on early childhood people to be HR people, to be admin people, to be monitors, and that the model of provision has changed so much that that, you know, it's a very heavy burden on the sector. And in terms of looking at that model we think that that needs a look at in terms of the model that needs that type of support or what type of model it should be in terms of forward.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

> *There was a discussion about real experience on the ground at the moment in terms of services, of the country losing services due to things like burnout over-burdenment with bureaucracy, … people sort of leaving the sector. And connected to that, a risk that we discussed that is not quite materialised at the moment, but that I at least predict is going to come … a much stronger proportion of services being provided by for-profit corporate services.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

Many stakeholders highlighted the need for more integrated services, pointing to Sure Start as a model of good practice:

> *It would not just be necessary to look at the type of services we might imagine locally but to make sure that this integrated infrastructure that is possible within First 5 is replicated at systems level that the sort of the various government agencies policy silos, professional silos are actually resourced, qualified, and enabled to work in an integrated way to support the provision of integrated services. And we can learn here from the experiences of successful Sure Start experiences in the north and across the UK actually*. (Stakeholder Consultation)

A related issue was the perceived need to provide extra supports and resources for children living in more socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, regardless of geographic location:

> *We talked at length around the multiple layers there are to disadvantage and that support systems need to be embedded across all settings and sectors and not just spatially targeted.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

A number of stakeholders raised more fundamental questions about the role and purpose of early years provision and highlighted the need to articulate a clear vision for the sector:

> *We talked about conceptualisation of the heart of early childhood care and education and what was it for. Was it for … affordability for parents? Or was it a particular right in its own? And should that be the beginning point of our conversation and dialogue around the purpose of early childhood?* (Stakeholder Consultation)

> *What is our vision? Is it childcare? Is it child's rights? Is it, you know, education? What is it that we're truly about? And I think we need we need some more debate on that.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

While the composition of the stakeholder group meant that the focus was on early years provision rather than broader parental supports, it was felt that an integrated approach was needed linking provision for children with parental leave and entitlements:

> *We also talked about priorities around parallel trains of policy. And I think someone mentioned, you know, family and parental policies, and parental leave, and a suite of policies that really support those who are planning a family. So that they're not just making decisions based on an economic situation but they're making child-centred decisions.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

> *We know what's good for the first year of our children's lives. Like how are we going to resource it and prioritise that, so that people aren't making those decisions necessarily always economically.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

Finally, an additional point raised by the stakeholders concerned the importance of improving data collection and monitoring research in the early years sector. This was regarded as essential for identifying gaps in provision and participation, as well as enabling future planning:

> *There is a lack of integrated data and the integrated data monitoring system. We still simply don't have enough meaningful information about where the resources are going, where the children are, and how we can address sort of demographic changes looking forward, the forward planning.* (Stakeholder Consultation)

4.9 SUMMARY

In summary, our analysis of stakeholder perspectives revealed many commonalities in terms of the strengths and challenges faced by the early years sectors and families of young children that cut across both jurisdictions. Issues of affordability, flexibility, and pay and conditions for early years workers permeated both systems. The early years curricula provided in both sectors were both viewed

favourably. However, in Northern Ireland, there are calls for more curricular guidance for the under threes. In addition, for both jurisdictions, there is a need to ensure greater continuity between the early years' experience and the transition to primary school. Here, greater emphasis on the exchange of information between early years settings and schools was regarded as a helpful step.

In terms of equality of participation, both jurisdictions demonstrate very high rates of participation. However, greater efforts are needed to support children from vulnerable groups. For example, the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland was commended by stakeholders from both jurisdictions for providing wraparound integrated supports for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, stakeholders acknowledged that it must go beyond a model of provision that is largely based on geospatial identification of disadvantaged families. In Ireland, where there is no Sure Start equivalent in operation, stakeholders welcomed the idea of a similar initiative or the development of a DEIS-type model for children from low socioeconomic families. Supports for children from a migrant background appear to be less well developed in both jurisdictions, although challenges were recognised by stakeholders in terms of inclusivity and social integration. For children from minority backgrounds – specifically Traveller and Roma backgrounds – greater efforts are needed to encourage participation and ensure inclusivity. In Northern Ireland, the Toybox programme was well regarded for this purpose. Regarding children with special educational needs, AIM in Ireland was well regarded. However, stakeholders identified its limited hours of provision and the fact that it is unavailable to children under three as weaknesses that could be addressed.

Past research has emphasised the importance of quality in early years settings in order to ensure good outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2011). Our findings from stakeholders indicate that inspection has generally found good levels of compliance in early years settings. With this said, the very low levels of registration among childminders in Ireland is an area to be considered; though it is noted that work is underway to extend regulation and supports to encompass childminders under the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028. The availability of quality supports and mentoring was regarded as a positive in both jurisdictions, although more could be done to encourage uptake and build relationships with settings in Ireland. On this, we note that it will be a condition of providers in receipt of Core Funding to develop a quality action plan. Finally, highly skilled and qualified staff were viewed as essential in the provision of a high-quality early years experience. In Northern Ireland, discussions around this topic are gaining more traction. In Ireland, the introduction of the Core Funding / ERO higher capitation rates (implemented in September 2022, after our stakeholder interviews) were perceived as a positive step towards ensuring better pay and conditions for staff that better reflect their qualifications.

Through stakeholder accounts, we identified many existing forms of cross-border collaboration, including meetings with counterparts, cooperative projects, knowledge-sharing activities and informal communication channels. Overall, collaboration outlets were viewed as mutually beneficial and worthwhile. However, it is noted that, in some cases, such activities need to be resourced and funded in order to continue.

In terms of future developments, the childcare strategy in Northern Ireland and the Core Funding model in Ireland represent two significant policy developments. Our stakeholders noted that future policy developments need to examine the scale of funding and public investment that is allocated to the early years sector, citing the critical window of development for children of this age and the wider societal benefits that the early years sector provides.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and implications for policy

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This report draws on survey and administrative data as well as in-depth interviews with key policy stakeholders to document the nature of early years provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It explores the usage of different forms of early care and education (ECEC) from infancy to the preschool stage and the extent to which this varies across different groups of families. A key focus is on the challenges relating to early years provision and wider supports for parents. This chapter outlines the main findings of the study and discusses the implications for policy development in the two jurisdictions.

5.2 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The report highlights both commonalities and differences in the nature of ECEC in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Both systems have a preschool programme that is highly regarded by stakeholders and that has a high level of take-up.

Parents use a variety of childcare arrangements, including family members, paid childminders and centre-based care. Centre-based care is more common for children aged three to four years than for those aged nought to two, which likely reflects both state support of preschool provision for children aged three to four, for one year in Northern Ireland and two years in Ireland, and parental preference, though it is not possible to determine these factors with the current data.

Centre-based care emerges as more prevalent in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. Because of the relatively high costs of paid-for provision in both jurisdictions by European standards, usage of centre-based care is more prevalent among higher-income families. Childminding is also associated with high family income and is much more common in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that government supports are available in the latter context. Parents in Northern Ireland are much more reliant on family and friends for care. We also find that lone parents are more reliant on care by family members than other families.

The type of main care and the hours of care used are strongly associated with maternal employment patterns, and it is likely that these relationships run in both directions. We find that while employment levels are higher among mothers of young children in Northern Ireland, hours of work are longer among mothers in Ireland. These employment patterns influence the demand for childcare (type and hours) and in turn are likely to be shaped by the availability and cost of childcare options. Demand for childcare will also be influenced by the availability of family

leave. While reducing demand for childcare for children aged under one year, family leave is likely to increase demand for childcare in the longer term, as it allows more women to remain in the labour market.

Mean weekly hours of childcare are significantly longer in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland, and maternal employment is more strongly associated with childcare type in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. It appears that mothers in Ireland face a starker choice between full-time employment or non-employment, while in Northern Ireland mothers are more concentrated in part-time work, which fits around available support from family/friends or government supported preschool hours. These patterns may also reflect variation in labour demand across the two settings. The current data do not allow us to disentangle the role of preferences and constraints in these patterns, but given the cultural and geographical proximity of the two contexts it seems likely that institutional differences play an important role in these cross-border differences.

Socio-economic inequalities in children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills are visible among children at the start of their school careers in both settings. Evidence from the two relevant cohort studies – *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) in Ireland and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) in Northern Ireland – show that these inequalities by income quintile and maternal education level are present in vocabulary scores, in teachers' ratings of children's language, reading, number skills and in disposition. There is no systematic difference in the size of the effects between Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, socioeconomic background appears to play a greater role in teacher-rated number skills in Ireland. Housing tenure is associated with most cognitive outcomes in both jurisdictions, though the gap between children living in social rented or private rented housing and those in owner occupied housing is somewhat larger in Ireland. The relationship between renting housing and greater socio-emotional difficulties is stronger in Northern Ireland.

Participation in childcare at nine months and three years (before enrolment in state supported preschool) is found to have a relatively small positive association with cognitive and socio-emotional skills observed at age five. In Ireland, participating in centre-based care at nine months is associated with a small increase in teacher-rated reading skills at age five, and centre-based care participation at age three is associated with a small increase in teacher-rated language at five years. No significant effects are found in Northern Ireland, though the sample size is smaller. The home learning environment, specifically reading with children, has a stronger positive association with vocabulary and language outcomes. The effects sizes are similar in both contexts but are only significant in Ireland.

The social inequalities in cognitive outcomes at age five are largely predicted by such outcomes at age three in both contexts, suggesting that interventions and supports before age three are important for mitigating later inequality. Even controlling for earlier vocabulary scores, children with graduate mothers are found to make more vocabulary progress between three and five years in Ireland, while children in rented accommodation make less progress in both Northern Ireland and Ireland, meaning inequalities are widening at this stage. There are also widening gaps between those in the top income groups and other children, in terms of teacher-rated language competencies, and by housing tenure for linking sounds and letters.

Stakeholder consultations and interviews explore the processes behind the patterns of inequalities in participation and outcomes, and the different policy responses. Affordability emerges as a key policy concern in both settings, although the systems have differed in their response, with supports in Northern Ireland operating through the tax and benefits systems, while Ireland has both targeted and universal payments along with a new model of funding designed to freeze provider fee levels.

Reform of the sector has been dominant on the policy agenda, with a number of developments in Ireland including the expansion of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, a new funding model, and a focus on quality assurance; while Northern Ireland is embarking on a new childcare strategy within the context of a wider review of the education system, with stakeholders highlighting the impact of broader political uncertainty on the pace of change. Both systems face challenges around low pay levels among sector staff, resulting in high turnover, which in turn impacts on continuity of experience for children. The new employment regulation orders introduced in Ireland in 2022 have increased the minimum payments for staff in the sector; however, the minimum rates are still under the Living Wage for early years educators and younger staff.[74] The two systems have also seen a push to upgrade the qualifications of new staff, though stakeholders highlight the importance of, and challenges in, offering continuous professional development for existing staff.

While there are high levels of take-up of the respective preschool programmes, stakeholders report lower participation rates among some groups, including those living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller and Roma children, and children with disabilities/special needs. Much greater variation is found in the care experiences of younger children, with children from more disadvantaged groups more likely to be looked after by their parents or other family members. In both systems, children

[74] For details, see https://www.workplacerelations.ie/en/what_you_should_know/hours-and-wages/employment%20regulation%20orders/early-learning-and-childcare-sector/. The Living Wage for 2022–2023 is €13.85 per hour; see https://www.livingwage.ie/download/pdf/living_wage_2022-23_final.pdf.

from different social backgrounds enter primary education with different skills and competencies. This inequality has been the focus of targeted provision in both settings, though provision has been aimed at different groups. In Northern Ireland, Sure Start provides ECEC for children (and support for parents) in areas with a concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged households. In addition, the Toybox programme provides supports for Traveller children and families. No comparable provision is available in Ireland (except for some community-based programmes in specific areas and the very small-scale Early Start programme), though there have been proposals to provide additional supports in disadvantaged areas, along the lines of the Delivery of Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme (Government of Ireland, 2019). In Ireland, AIM has provided additional supports to ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities in the ECCE programme. No comparable model is available in Northern Ireland, though the regional special needs teams of the Educational Authority provide supports to preschools as well as schools.

Demand for ECEC reflects, at least in part, broader provision to help parents care for their children. The total amount of paid and unpaid leave available to mothers is very similar across the two systems, and they also share the feature that any benefits linked to family leave are paid at a flat rate and are not linked to previous earnings. The two systems vary in that Northern Ireland allows for more sharing of paid leave between parents, which would potentially provide fathers with greater access to paid leave. However, there is a lack of comparable data to analyse the implications for parents and children across the two systems. Evidence for Ireland suggests a relatively low take-up of relevant leave among fathers, while across the UK as a whole, the take-up of shared parental leave options is low.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR DATA COLLECTION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are challenges in conducting a systematic comparison of early years provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Administrative data are often collected for specific purposes and the kinds of information available may differ across different types of ECEC. Surveys such as the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) and the Family Resources Survey (FRS) often adopt different definitions and the relatively small number of families with preschool-age children in the samples mean that we had to pool data across years in which important policy developments were taking place. The data also lack important information on parental preferences for different types of childcare and hours of paid work. Analysis of the costs of childcare and the incentives and disincentives created by the systems of financial support was beyond the scope of this study but variation in two adjacent systems provides the opportunity for further research on these effects.

There are very significant gaps in both settings in what we know about the broader context in which ECEC usage takes place, particularly around the take-up of parental leave across different families (and at different stages of the life course), and the take up of paternity leave among new fathers. The new birth cohort study in Ireland and, hopefully, in the UK on foot of the early life feasibility study offer the opportunity to collect systematic information on the take-up of different forms of leave provision and its consequences for children and their parents. An integrated all-Ireland survey on key aspects of social and economic life would also be invaluable in addressing the many data gaps identified in this and other research in the Shared Island Unit programme.

The interconnected decision-making process around parental employment and ECEC usage reflects broader socio-economic conditions, with family and child poverty representing an important backdrop in identifying priorities for early years provision. Future research could usefully look at the way in which recent changes in income supports in the two jurisdictions (such as universal credits in Northern Ireland and changes in lone-parent payments in Ireland) shape the life chances of young children.

5.4 NORTH–SOUTH COLLABORATION

As with the educational system as a whole (see Smyth et al., 2022), there is considerable variation in the extent of collaboration between relevant stakeholders in Ireland and Northern Ireland. There are some strong examples of good practice, with a long track record of cooperation between the inspectorates in both settings. The British–Irish Council's early years subgroup was also seen as an important vehicle for the exchange of information and experiences, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when stakeholders sought to find innovative solutions to support the early years sector. Aside from these examples, there was little evidence of systematic contact and collaboration. The stakeholders interviewed and those who attended the consultation session were generally positive about the potential for further collaboration in the future, but at times were cautious about how to glean lessons for their own system from quite a different one.

While formal collaborations were uncommon, informal collaboration was highly valued and participants emphasised the importance of channels and fora for those working in the sector to discuss issues; this could include consultations and joint events with opportunities for informal discussions. Importantly, while collaboration of this kind was viewed as beneficial for mutual learning and knowledge exchange, resourcing is essential to ensure that stakeholders can participate.

5.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The findings of this study provide an opportunity to reflect both on common issues facing policymakers and the specific circumstances in each setting. A large body of international research has highlighted the importance of investment in high-quality early years provision in order to enhance the developmental outcomes of young children (Ruhm and Waldfogel, 2012; Blossfeld et al., 2017; Heckman, 2011). Data from the stakeholder interviews show the importance now placed by policy on this phase of children's lives. There has been considerable momentum in Ireland around the expansion of the ECCE programme, new funding initiatives and the upgrading of staff qualifications. Northern Ireland is currently developing a new childcare strategy, with a renewed impetus given by the Fair Start report's emphasis on the importance of early years provision in tackling long-term educational inequality. However, at least in part, political uncertainty has meant that Northern Ireland has lagged behind the rest of the UK in the expansion of hours in preschool programmes. This underscores the importance of developing and implementing a new childcare strategy as a priority for future generations in Northern Ireland.

There has been considerable success in the upgrading of qualifications in Ireland. The policies behind this upgrading, including additional financial incentives to providers, may provide useful evidence for the current audit of qualifications being undertaken in Northern Ireland. However, without improvement in pay and conditions, higher staff qualifications are likely to lead to increased problems of retention. Policy efforts to address low pay are therefore of increasing urgency. An employment regulation order to establish minimum pay levels came into force in September 2022 in Ireland but there is concern among some stakeholders that this will not go far enough in supporting a high quality, graduate-led system of ECEC, and there have been calls for the more radical solution of bringing childcare workers into the public sector and aligning pay and conditions with teachers (Early Childhood Ireland, 2021).

Both systems are shaped by the historical legacy of supply, with different combinations of voluntary/community, private and statutory providers. In Northern Ireland, in particular, this has resulted in varying qualifications, staff ratios and even hours of provision across different settings offering the preschool programme, which creates challenges around standardising the hours of provision in the future while maintaining existing capacity. The sessional nature of the preschool programme in Ireland and Northern Ireland means that children (as well as parents in full-time employment) may experience a number of transitions over the course of the day, an issue that has not been systematically examined in research to date.

A major difference between the two jurisdictions relates to the registration of childminders. In Northern Ireland, the majority of childminders are registered and

therefore subject to the minimum standards as well as inspection from social workers from the Department of Health. In Ireland, early developments are underway to progress towards registration. This would mean that childminders would be encompassed in the provision of state supports and regulatory supports. This offers great potential in terms of providing affordability for parents as well as quality assurance. At present, registration among childminders in Ireland is very low and there is a risk that additional regulation would cause some childminders to leave the market. Our interviews with stakeholders indicate that policy in this area needs to promote the benefits that registration can offer childminders (for example, the assurance of a safe working environment, protection from personal liability and training opportunities, etc.) to encourage uptake.

The different approaches to supporting potentially at-risk groups of young children offers the scope for policy learning between jurisdictions. The fact that young children start school with different skills depending on their backgrounds bolsters the case for additional supports for disadvantaged groups, through more intensive resources, provision for children younger than those eligible for the preschool/ECCE programmes and/or through longer hours. While there appears to be value in targeting those in disadvantaged areas (as in Sure Start or the proposed DEIS-type model), it is important to note the limitations of targeting support by area, and that a significant proportion of disadvantaged families are living outside such areas; families who could also benefit from additional support. Longer hours could also potentially facilitate access to employment, particularly among lone mothers, thus helping to reduce levels of child poverty and deprivation. The AIM model for inclusion is well regarded by practitioners and stakeholders and a similar model could be considered for implementation in Northern Ireland. However, it would be important to explore whether some children, especially those with more complex needs, would benefit from provision at a much younger age.

The stakeholders interviewed repeatedly highlighted the scale of investment needed to deliver high-quality, accessible and inclusive early years provision. Investment in ECEC in Ireland has increased markedly in recent years, though changes in the levels of investment in Northern Ireland are less clear. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both systems stepped in to support the sector to remain viable. However, in both systems the level of expenditure per child is lower than the EU average and significantly below the highest spending countries. With both Ireland and Northern Ireland facing spiralling inflation and a cost-of-living crisis, it is important that the commitment to early childhood education and care is maintained given other economic pressures. Out-of-pocket costs of childcare still represent a significant proportion of families' disposable income and efforts to limit these costs will be increasingly important given falls in real income.

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APPENDIX 1

Type of leave by jurisdiction

TABLE A.1.1 TYPE OF LEAVE BY JURISDICTION

Type of leave	UK, including Northern Ireland			Ireland		
	Duration	**Who for?**	**Payment?**	**Duration**	**Who for?**	**Payment?**
Maternity leave OR [Shared parental leave]*	39 weeks (now transferable between parents as shared parental leave)	Mother or father	Yes, if conditions met, flat rate**	26 weeks	Mother	Flat rate**, if conditions met
Maternity leave/Shared parental (unpaid)	13 weeks	Mother or father	None	16 weeks	Mother	No, unpaid
Paternity leave	2 weeks	Father	Yes, if conditions met, flat rate	2 weeks	Father	Yes, if conditions met
Parent's leave#	N/A			5 weeks per parent#	Mother and father	Yes
Parental leave	18 weeks per parent	Mother and father	No	26 weeks per parent (until child is 12)	Mother and father	No, unpaid

Notes: *In the UK, parents now have the option to share the paid leave in the first years of their child's life, in which case it is called Shared Parental Leave/Pay. If the leave is not shared, it is called Materniity Leave/Benefit). **Some employers top up Maternity Benefit in both Ireland and the UK. #To be increased to seven weeks per parent from July 2022.

APPENDIX 2

Additional tables relating to Chapter 3

TABLE A3.1 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN DISPOSITIONS/ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Female	0.340***	0.998***
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	0.093	0.105
Post-secondary	0.210*	0.220
Degree	0.300**	0.112
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	-0.048	0.149
Third	0.167	0.395
Fourth	0.202	0.445
Highest	0.204	0.799*
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	-0.139	-0.156
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	-0.189*	0.115
Social/private rented tenure	-0.184*	-0.261
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below). Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.2 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN LANGUAGE FOR COMMUNICATION AND THINKING AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Female	0.431***	0.809***
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	0.134	0.592*
Post-secondary	0.275**	0.678
Degree	0.377***	0.163
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	0.136	-0.001
Third	0.286**	0.200
Fourth	0.418***	0.586
Highest	0.401***	0.751*
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	-0.187	-0.049
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	-0.094	-0.429
Social/private rented tenure	-0.364***	-0.135
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below). Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.3 LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN LINKING SOUNDS AND LETTERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Female	0.346***	0.165
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	0.357**	-0.091
Post-secondary	0.458***	0.478
Degree	0.744***	0.339
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	0.036	0.450
Third	0.136	0.256
Fourth	0.291*	0.680
Highest	0.207	1.041*
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	-0.196	0.389
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	-0.017	0.225
Social/private rented tenure	-0.344***	-0.691*
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below). Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.4 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN READING AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Female	0.251***	0.276
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	0.229*	0.368
Post-secondary	0.273	0.237
Degree	0.559***	0.620**
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	0.088	0.774*
Third	0.201	0.425
Fourth	0.253*	0.832*
Highest	0.250*	1.160**
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	-0.206	0.219
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	0.130	-0.260
Social/private rented tenure	-0.361***	-0.404
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below). Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.5 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN NUMBERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Female	-0.094	0.497***
(Ref. Male)		
Parental education		
Upper secondary	0.261*	-0.054
Post-secondary	0.236*	0.780*
Degree	0.514***	0.395
(Ref. Lower secondary)		
Income quintile		
Second	0.150	0.560
Third	0.314**	0.582
Fourth	0.284*	0.602
Highest	0.431***	0.429
(Ref. Lowest)		
Lone-parent family	-0.256*	0.180
(Ref. Two-parent family)		
Disability/illness	0.096	-0.176
Social/private rented tenure	-0.109	-0.136
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. This model also controls for entry/reception class (results discussed below). Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.6 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS AND VOCABULARY TEST SCORES AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	0.772*	0.314	0.901	-0.266
Any care by childminder	-0.360	-0.667	-0.623	-0.989
Any centre-based care	0.008	0.215	2.824*	1.215
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		1.509***		2.361*
Any care by childminder		1.248***		1.229
Any centre-based care		-0.137		2.569
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
_Preschool[1]/reception class	-1.307***		-0.271	
(Ref: Junior Infants/year 1)				
R^2	0.061	0.063	0.073	0.083
N	7,883	7,883	1,200	1,200

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background. In GUI, when the vocabulary tests were carried out at the time of the parent's interview, at this point 72 per cent of the children had started school.

TABLE A3.7 LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS, AND ATTITUDES/DISPOSITIONS AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	0.011	-0.032	-0.098	0.050
Any care by childminder	0.122	0.151	0.159	-0.374
Any centre-based care	0.074	0.113	-0.343	-0.052
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		0.134		-0.263
Any care by childminder		-0.065		0.600
Any centre-based care		-0.073		-0.388
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
Entry/reception class		0.272***		0.683***
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
N	7,361	7,361	835	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background. In Ireland, the teacher survey was carried out in September, when the study children were either in junior infants or senior infants. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.8 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS AND LANGUAGE AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	0.065	0.032	0.052	0.138
Any care by childminder	0.117	0.130	0.347	-0.138
Any centre-based care	0.107	0.051	-0.008	0.030
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		0.103		-0.137
Any care by childminder		0.002		0.576
Any centre-based care		0.145*		-0.039
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
Entry/reception class		0.134*		0.450**
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
N	7,361	7,361	835	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.9 LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS AND LINKING SOUNDS AND LETTERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	0.157*	0.152	-0.223	-0.219
Any care by childminder	0.043	0.064	-0.145	-0.040
Any centre-based care	0.015	0.006	0.411	0.344
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		0.010		-0.015
Any care by childminder		-0.059		-0.136
Any centre-based care		0.019		0.071
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
Entry/reception class		-1.800***		-0.208
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
N	7,361	7,361	835	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.10 LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS AND READING SKILLS AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	0.087	0.054	-0.059	-0.059
Any care by childminder	0.093	0.111	-0.027	0.040
Any centre-based care	0.206*	0.240*	0.250	0.283
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		0.102		-0.003
Any care by childminder		-0.042		-0.086
Any centre-based care		-0.061		-0.048
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
Entry/reception class		-2.171***		-0.428*
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
N	7,361	7,361	835	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.11 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS AND NUMBERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	-0.001	-0.011	-0.029	-0.182
Any care by childminder	0.047	0.012	0.141	0.086
Any centre-based care	0.126	0.085	0.185	0.210
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		0.040		0.316
Any care by childminder		0.131		0.183
Any centre-based care		0.111		0.054
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
Entry/reception class		-1.629***		-0.993***
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
N	7,361	7,361	835	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.12 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING READ TO AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND VOCABULARY TEST SCORES AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	2.407***	2.770**
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	1.239***	1.845
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	3.053***	3.778***
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
R2	0.074	0.100
N	7,883	1,200

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.13 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING READ TO AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND DISPOSITIONS/ATTITUDES AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	0.210*	0.207
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	0.134	-0.015
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	0.146	0.022
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.14 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING READ TO AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND LANGUAGE AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	0.317***	0.529*
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	0.150	0.195
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	0.347***	0.234
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.15 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING READ TO AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND LINKING SOUNDS AND LETTERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	0.236*	0.281
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	0.188	-0.118
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	0.334***	0.011
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.16 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING READ TO AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND READING AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	0.376***	0.398
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	0.279**	0.216
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	0.407***	0.027
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.17 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND NUMBERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	0.435***	0.171
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	0.023	-0.063
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	0.239**	-0.123
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
N	7,361	835

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.18 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS, PRIOR VOCABULARY AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN DISPOSITIONS/ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Female	0.340***	0.280***	0.998***	0.918***
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	0.093	0.075	0.105	0.112
Post-secondary	0.210*	0.170	0.220	0.234
Degree	0.300**	0.239*	0.112	0.028
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	-0.048	-0.066	0.149	0.169
Third	0.167	0.122	0.395	0.404
Fourth	0.202	0.126	0.445	0.529
Highest	0.204	0.119	0.799*	0.831*
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	-0.139	-0.152	-0.156	-0.142
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	-0.189*	-0.192*	0.115	-0.061
Social/private rented tenure	-0.184*	-0.101	-0.261	-0.226
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Entry/reception class	0.275***	0.279***	0.670***	0.654***
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
Vocabulary at 3		0.017***		0.033***
N	7,361		835	

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.19 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIOR VOCABULARY AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN LANGUAGE AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Female	0.431***	0.342***	0.809***	0.718***
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	0.134	0.096	0.592*	0.609*
Post-secondary	0.275**	0.192	0.678	0.677
Degree	0.377***	0.233*	0.163	0.045
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	0.136	0.105	-0.001	-0.038
Third	0.286**	0.203	0.200	0.090
Fourth	0.418***	0.270*	0.586	0.479
Highest	0.401***	0.205	0.751*	0.545
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	-0.187	-0.235*	-0.049	-0.009
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	-0.094	-0.116	-0.429	-0.393
Social/private rented tenure	-0.364***	-0.251**	-0.135	-0.042
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Entry/reception class	0.120	0.143*	0.452**	0.420**
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
Vocabulary at age 3		0.026***		0.030***
N	7,361		835	

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.20 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIOR VOCABULARY AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN LINKING SOUNDS AND LETTERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Female	0.346***	0.249***	0.165	0.063
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	0.357**	0.661**	-0.091	-0.077
Post-secondary	0.458***	0.392***	0.478	0.527
Degree	0.744***	0.642***	0.339	0.210
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	0.036	0.005	0.450	0.467
Third	0.136	0.055	0.256	0.281
Fourth	0.291*	0.151	0.680	0.829
Highest	0.207	0.052	1.041*	0.980*
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	-0.196	-0.244*	0.389	0.546
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	-0.017	-0.030	0.225	0.225
Social/private rented tenure	-0.344***	-0.228*	-0.691*	-0.647*
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Entry/reception class	-1.799***	-1.836***	-0.190	-0.251
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
Vocabulary at age 3		0.028***		0.038***
N	7,361		835	

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.21 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIOR VOCABULARY EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN READING AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Female	0.251***	0.163**	0.276	0.214
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	0.229*	0.198	0.368	0.377
Post-secondary	0.273	0.199	0.237	0.245
Degree	0.559***	0.442***	0.620**	0.571*
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	0.088	0.060	0.774*	0.767*
Third	0.201	0.116	0.425	0.422
Fourth	0.253*	0.101	0.832*	0.834*
Highest	0.250*	0.075	1.160**	1.087*
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	-0.206	-0.243*	0.219	0.282
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	0.130	0.111	-0.260	-0.244
Social/private rented tenure	-0.361***	-0.255**	-0.404	-0.358
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Entry/reception class	-2.161***	-2.197***	-0.425*	-0.454**
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
Vocabulary at 3		0.024***		0.022**
N	7,361		835	

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.22 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIOR VOCABULARY AND EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS IN NUMBERS AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Female	-0.094	-0.166**	0.497***	0.432**
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	0.261*	0.226	-0.054	-0.045
Post-secondary	0.236*	0.167	0.780*	0.815*
Degree	0.514***	0.398**	0.395	0.298
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	0.150	0.119	0.560	0.505
Third	0.314**	0.249*	0.582	0.505
Fourth	0.284*	0.171	0.602	0.497
Highest	0.431***	0.281*	0.429	0.242
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	-0.256*	-0.274*	0.180	0.205
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	0.096	0.066	-0.176	-0.144
Social/private rented tenure	-0.109	-0.030	-0.136	-0.041
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Entry/reception class	-1.626***	-1.636***	-0.993***	-1.036***
(Ref: Senior infants/Year1)				
Vocabulary at 3		0.017***		0.029***
N	7,361		835	

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Notes: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Average marginal effects.

TABLE A3.23 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECEC AT 9 MONTHS AND 3 YEARS AND SDQ TOTAL DIFFICULTIES AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
9 months				
Any relative care	0.003	0.105	0.606*	0.748*
Any care by childminder	-0.079	-0.133	-0.115	0.282
Any centre-based care	0.375	0.137	-0.285	-0.309
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
3 years				
Any relative care		-0.301		-0.312
Any care by childminder		0.167		-0.637
Any centre-based care		0.500***		-0.093
(Ref.: Parental care only)				
Preschool/reception class		0.003		-0.992***
(ref: Junior Infants/Year1)				
R^2	0.087	0.089	0.157	0.159
N	7,883	7,883	1,185	1,185

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background.

TABLE A3.24 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BEING READ TO AT 3 AND 5 YEARS AND SDQ TOTAL DIFFICULTIES AT AGE 5

	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Reads to frequently at age 3 but not age 5	-0.270	-1.359**
Reads to frequently at age 5 but not age 3	-0.759***	-0.272
Reads to frequently at both ages 3 and 5	-0.932***	-1.384***
(Ref.: Read to infrequently at ages 3 and 5)		
R^2	0.095	0.175
N	8,384	1,185

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05. Controls for individual and family background and ECEC.

TABLE A3.25 REGRESSION MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS, PRIOR SDQ AND SDQ TOTAL DIFFICULTIES AT AGE 5

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Constant	8.166	3.426	8.562	4.236
Female	-1.010***	-0.596***	-1.079***	-0.458
(Ref. Male)				
Parental education				
Upper secondary	-0.342	0.078	-0.978*	-0.472
Post-secondary	-0.491***	-0.062	-0.010	0.142
Degree	-1.366***	-0.423*	-1.535***	-0.371
(Ref. Lower secondary)				
Income quintile				
Second	-0.134	-0.128	-0.095	0.001
Third	-0.291	-0.343	-0.868	-0.728
Fourth	-0.292	-0.235	-1.630**	-1.189*
Highest	-0.359	-0.303	-1.109	-0.545
(Ref. Lowest)				
Lone-parent family	2.001***	1.307***	0.214	0.045
(Ref. Two-parent family)				
Disability/illness	1.508***	0.767***	1.020*	0.485
Social/private rented tenure	0.682***	0.042	1.588***	0.824*
(Ref. Own with/without mortgage)				
Preschool/reception class	-0.024	-0.146	-1.119***	-0.791***
(Ref: Junior Infants/Year 1)				
SDQ total difficulties at 3		0.564***		0.466***
R^2	0.086	0.350	0.153	0.390
N	8,384	8,384	1,185	1,185

Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '08 Cohort; Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Northern Ireland sample.
Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05.

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