

## **Q&A on the Affordable Childcare Scheme**

### **1. What is the Affordable Childcare Scheme?**

The Affordable Childcare Scheme is a new national scheme of financial support for parents towards the cost of their childcare. It will replace the existing targeted childcare subsidisation schemes with a single, streamlined and more user-friendly scheme.

The new scheme will provide a system from which both universal and targeted subsidies can be provided towards the cost of childcare. In the case of targeted subsidies, these will be payable for children from 6 months of age up to 15 years of age. The level of subsidy will depend on the investment available and on a family's income (see question 6 below).

The Affordable Childcare Scheme enables a universal subsidy to be payable for children between the ages of 6 and 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the free pre-school programme if later) who are availing of childcare by a Tusla registered childcare service. The universal subsidy will not be means-tested and will be available for families at any income level.

The Affordable Childcare Scheme will also create a flexible platform for future investment in childcare funding supports, allowing subsidies to be expanded to more children and families over time.

### **2. How much childcare funding will this new Affordable Childcare Scheme provide when it is developed?**

€19m has been approved for the introduction of the Affordable Childcare Scheme for 2017. This will be added to the funding for the existing targeted schemes to give the overall budget for the new scheme. For future years, the thresholds and level of subsidy will depend on the investment available and will dictate the level of subsidisation paid to families. See questions below for further detail and 2017 case studies.

### **3. When will the new scheme begin?**

It is intended that the new scheme will be available from September 2017. The exact launch date is yet to be determined.

### **4. What existing schemes will the Affordable Childcare Scheme replace?**

The new scheme will replace four targeted childcare schemes:

- Community Childcare Subvention (CCS and CCSP).
- Childcare Education and Training Support Programme (CETS).
- After-School Child Care Programme (ASCC).
- Community Employment Childcare Programme (CEC).

### **5. Will the new Affordable Childcare Scheme replace ECCE also?**

No. The ECCE free pre-school will remain in place. The new Affordable Childcare Scheme is intended to provide 'wraparound' care for pre-school and school-age children. For the first time, it will therefore be possible for a child in the ECCE scheme also to benefit from a subsidy for additional childcare use.

**6. How will I know if I am eligible for the Affordable Childcare Scheme and what level of subsidy might I receive?**

The universal element of the Scheme will be available to all families with children between the age of 6 months and 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the free pre-school programme if later than 36 months), who are attending a registered childcare provider (see question 13 below for information on registered childcare providers).

Eligibility for targeted childcare subsidies will be based on **net** parental income. A new IT system will enable parents simply to enter their PPS number and be told what they are eligible for.

For parents with **net** incomes up to €22,700 per annum, the maximum rate of childcare subsidy will be payable (see maximum subsidy rates set out in table 1 below).

The rate of subsidy will taper downwards as net income rises, with no means-tested / income related subsidy payable when **net** income reaches €47,500. The income thresholds increase where there is more than one child in a family, so a family with two children under 15 years of age would have a maximum net income threshold of €51,300 and a family with three children under 15 years would have a maximum **net** income threshold of €55,100.

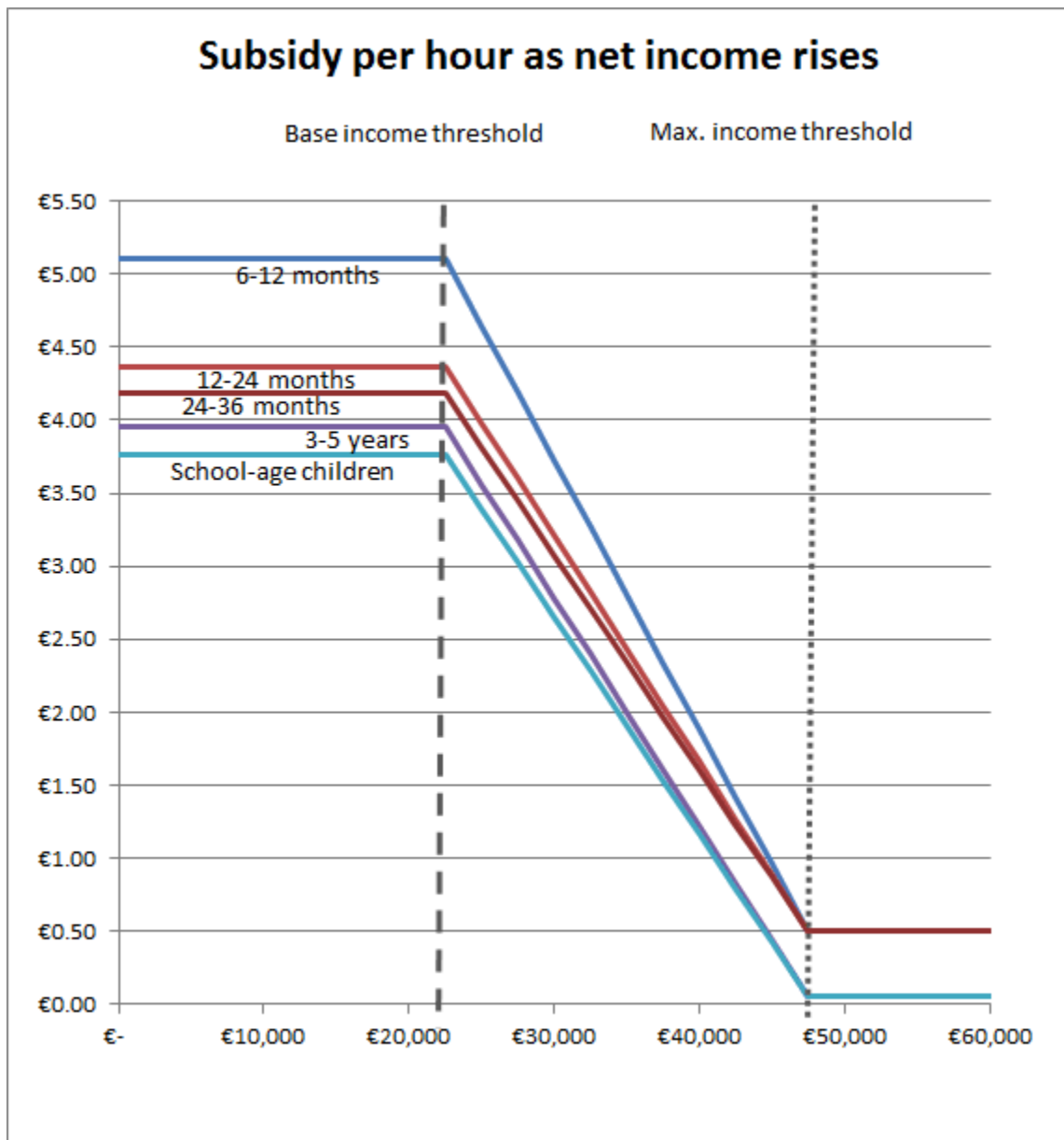
The maximum subsidy per hour will depend on the age of the child and the net income of the parents but will range from €5.11 for a baby under 12 months to €3.76 for a school age child.

Hourly rate for a child under 1 year	€5.11
Hourly rate for a child aged 1- 2 years	€4.37
Hourly rate for a child aged 2- 3 years	€4.18
Hourly rate for a child aged 3-5 years	€3.95
Hourly rate for school-aged children	€3.76
Average hourly co-payment for parents based on maximum subsidy rate	€0.52 per hour or €21 per week based on 40 hour week

Further details on the scheme will be published in the coming weeks. A diagram illustrating the income thresholds and subsidy rates for both the universal and targeted elements is set out below. Some sample case studies are also set out at the end of this Q&A document.

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Diagram showing key scheme parameters



### 7. What do these net income thresholds mean in gross income terms?

The net income thresholds can translate into different gross income thresholds depending on each family's circumstances and their tax liabilities, credits etc. However, by way of example:-

- a family of two adults and two children which has a net income of €51,300 (i.e. the maximum income threshold for a family with two children) may have a gross income of approximately €70,000<sup>1</sup>. A range of illustrative examples are set out in the box below.

**Box 1: Illustrative examples of subsidies at different gross income levels:**

- Family with two children, aged 2 and 4.
- The 2 year old needs full-time childcare (40 hours per week).
- The 4 year old is in the ECCE free pre-school scheme, but needs an additional 25 hours 'wraparound' care per week.
- The family makes a pension contribution equal to 10% of gross income.

Gross family income	Net family income	Weekly childcare fee (illustrative example, assuming €4.60 fee per hour for 2 year old, €4.40 fee per hour for 4 year old)	Subsidy per week under Affordable Childcare Scheme	Parental co-payment per week (illustrative example based on sample fee)
€ 20,000	€18,000	€ 294	€ 266	€ 28
€ 30,000	€ 26,580	€ 294	€ 265	€ 29
€ 40,000	€ 33,697	€ 294	€ 195	€ 99
€ 50,000	€ 39,264	€ 294	€ 139	€ 155
€ 60,000	€ 45,514	€ 294	€ 77	€ 217
€ 70,000	€ 51,764	€ 294	€ 20	€ 274
€ 80,000	€ 57,134	€ 294	€ 20	€ 274

### 8. How much will parents have to pay?

Childcare fees are determined by childcare providers. The Affordable Childcare Scheme will provide a subsidy towards the fee charged by the provider, but the sum that parents will have to pay will then depend on the childcare provider's own fee policy. The amount of subsidy provided by the Affordable Childcare Scheme will depend on the family's income level. At the lower end of the income scales parents will pay a very small amount towards their childcare costs, the parental co-payment will increase as the income approaches the maximum threshold.

<sup>1</sup> This assumes that the family makes a pension contribution of 10% of gross income.

### **9. Will the benefits of the scheme for parents be eroded by childcare providers increasing their fees?**

The scheme is intended to support parents in meeting the cost of childcare. Childcare providers set their own fees, and there is no current plan for the Government to control fees, which would be a major intrusion in the market and could, if not managed carefully and appropriately, create risks around the viability and quality of childcare provision. The Programme for Government includes a commitment to carrying out an independent review of costs. This review will be overseen by the Department and will include analysis on the potential benefits and risks of imposing price caps on childcare providers.

Finally, it is intended that all providers participating in the scheme will be required to clearly publish their fees so that parents can compare providers and can see what their co-payment would be after taking account of any State subsidy.

### **10. How can I apply for a subsidy through the Affordable Childcare Scheme?**

Funding has been allocated for the development of an online IT application system that will allow parents to apply for subsidies online. It is intended that applications for the new scheme will be allowed from September 2017. The exact launch date is yet to be determined.

### **11. What is the youngest and oldest age of children who will be covered by the scheme?**

It is intended that the Affordable Childcare Scheme will cater for children from the age of 6 months up to 15 years old.

The universal subsidy will be payable for children from the age of 6 months to 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the free pre-school programme if later than 36 months).

### **12. Will the level of subsidy depend on a family's gross income or net income?**

In the case of targeted subsidies, the level of subsidy provided for the targeted scheme will depend on a family's net income, i.e. income after the deduction of income tax, USC, PRSI and pension contributions and certain other allowable deductions.

### **13. What types of childcare provider will be included in the scheme?**

The scheme will be open to all childcare providers who are **registered with Tusla initially**, including both centre-based childcare providers (e.g. crèches, preschools and daycare centres) and child-minders. Currently only a small percentage of child-minders are registered and only a portion are eligible to register. The Department is working with Childminding Ireland currently to explore how childminding services can be quality assured in order to access State funding under this scheme. Options to be explored will include a system of non-statutory quality assurance, possibly leading to statutory registration for a wider group of childminders in the medium to long term.

### **14. Will there be subsidised childcare places available in all areas of the country?**

The scheme is a national scheme and will be open to all childcare providers who are registered with Tusla. Participation in the Scheme, by childcare providers, will be voluntary and the choice of childcare provider will be up to the parent, subject to the provider participating in the Scheme. Local City and County Childcare Committees will be able to help parents find local childcare providers who are participating in the scheme. It is expected that the 900 community / not for profit services currently in existence will register for the scheme in addition to a large percentage of private providers.

### 15. Why are we providing a universal subsidy for children between the ages of 6 months and 36 months?

The Programme for Government commits to “the introduction of a robust model for subsidised high quality childcare for children aged 9- 36 months”. At present, paid maternity leave in Ireland extends to 26 weeks or about six months, although the Programme for Government commits to further increasing paid parental leave in the first year of life. In line with *current* leave entitlements, the universal subsidy will be available from six months of age. This approach recognises that the cost of childcare can push many parents out of the labour market when paid leave ends. Indeed, the gap between the end of paid leave and the start of an entitlement to early care and education is an international indicator used to examine national policies in this area.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, it is also worth noting that the cost of childcare is generally highest when children are under 3 years of age. This is due to both the hours of care required (i.e. notably longer than afterschool care needs) and the underlying cost of providing quality childcare for very young children. Recent reports also suggest that cost and sustainability issues are affecting the availability of childcare places for children under 3 years. The Government commitment to provide a universal subsidy for this age cohort, as well as to provide higher rates of targeted subsidy, recognises and responds to these issues.

### 16. What will be the benefits of the new scheme?

The Affordable Childcare Scheme will bring a number of benefits. The new scheme will:

- ✓ Contribute to the reduction of **child poverty**.
- ✓ Enhance **affordability**, providing both universal and targeted subsidies for parents towards their childcare costs.
- ✓ Be more **user-friendly** than existing targeted schemes for both parents and childcare providers, enabling online applications for subsidies.
- ✓ Encourage **labour market activation**, through shifting the focus which has existed historically on linking childcare subsidisation to eligibility for social welfare benefits and medical card entitlement to income.
- ✓ Facilitate **parental choice** and improve **access** to affordable childcare through being open to all childcare providers registered with Tusla, including registered childminders.
- ✓ Provide a **flexible platform** for sustained investment in childcare in future years so that affordability can be further strengthened, while also providing a **basis for quality improvements** through supply-side funding of childcare services.

### 17. How many children will benefit from the new scheme?

In 2017, the expected number of children benefiting from the new scheme is estimated at **79,000**. This includes 25,000 children who will benefit from the universal subsidy. Many of these children are expected to already be using services. An estimated 54,000 children will benefit from the targeted subsidies, including 31,500 children who already receive support under the current targeted schemes and 22,500 new beneficiaries. Some of the new beneficiaries are also expected to be within the system already, although paying full cost.

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<sup>2</sup> Koslowski, A., Blum, S. and Moss, P. (2016) *12<sup>th</sup> International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2016*, International Network on Leave Policies and Research.

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The number of children benefiting is expected to rise further in 2018 as demand for the new scheme increases, to 64,000 targeted beneficiaries and 26,000 universal beneficiaries, i.e. **90,000** children in total will be supported under the new scheme.

(127,000 children are expected to benefit from ECCE in 2017. Capacity has been met for the September 2016 and January 2017 entries. The DCYA and CCI continue to review the April capacity needs.)

**18. Is there a minimum number of hours a week a child has to be in childcare (registered with Tusla) before parents qualify for targeted subsidy and/or universal payment? Or is it all done on basis of per hour?**

It is not intended that there will be any minimum number of hours of childcare for participation in the scheme. Recognising the importance of flexibility to families, arrangements in terms of the numbers of hours per day or days per week of childcare that is used will be a matter for childcare providers to agree with parents.

**19. Is the universal subsidy available to stay at home parents?**

Yes, the universal subsidy is available to any family using Tusla- registered childcare services regardless of their income or work status once the child meets the age requirements.

**20. Does the targeted element of the scheme provide any support for stay at home parents?**

Yes, where a parent qualifies on income grounds but does not need childcare for work or study reasons, they can avail of a targeted subsidy for up to 15 hours of childcare per week. These hours are inclusive of time spent in school or pre-school. As such, the subsidy can benefit stay at home parents where their child is under 3 years of age (i.e. has not yet availed of the free pre-school programme) or during school holiday periods when their child is not in school or pre-school.

**21. How many weeks of subsidised childcare can I receive per year?**

The number of weeks of subsidy paid per year will reflect the number of weeks of childcare used, with allowances for sickness and holiday periods. This provision will allow a parent to retain a subsidised childcare place during periods when a child is sick or away from the childcare service as a result of a holiday, provided that the parent continues to pay their co-payment to the childcare provider. As long as the duration of holiday periods falls within specified limits, which will be set out in the scheme's guidelines to be published in the coming months, there will be no maximum number of weeks of subsidy payable per year. (This is a change from the 48-week limit that was proposed in the policy paper published in October 2016.)

**22. Do changes made since the policy paper was published mean I will now get a different amount of subsidy?**

Two linked changes were made when the Heads of Bill were approved by Government in January 2017: the maximum number of weeks of subsidy payable per year was increased from 48 weeks to 52 weeks (allowing for payment of subsidies during holiday periods, within defined limits), and the targeted hourly subsidy rates were reduced slightly in order to ensure the overall effect of the change is Budget-neutral. There is no change in the hourly subsidy-

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rate proposed for families in receipt of a universal subsidy (€0.50 per hour). For families in receipt of a targeted subsidy, the increase in weeks payable per year and the small reduction in proposed hourly subsidy rates will offset each other. The combined effect of the changes will be a change in the total subsidy paid per year of between 3% and 5% relative to what was initially proposed in the policy paper. In the majority of cases, the net effect will be a small annual increase in the total annual subsidy proposed. It should be stressed that even in cases where the total annual subsidy is slightly less than was envisaged in the policy paper, in the very large majority of cases beneficiaries will see an increase in their subsidy relative to current subsidies available through existing schemes (e.g. the Community Childcare Subvention). And in all cases where a current beneficiary of one of the existing targeted childcare schemes faces a lower subsidy than they currently receive, their current rate of subsidy will be protected for a transitional period (e.g. until the end of the education or training course which the current beneficiary is on and as a result of which they receive a childcare subsidy).

**See Appendix B for summary of 2 components of the Affordable Childcare Scheme.**

### Appendix A Case Studies.

**Case Studies (all based on illustrative example fees of €4.80 per hour for 1 year olds, €4.60 per hour for 2 year olds, and €4.40 per hour for school-age children)**

**A. Lone parent on net annual income of €22,700, with one child aged 2 years and in need of 40 hours of childcare per week**

Under the existing targeted schemes, this family may have qualified for a subsidy of €95 per week and faced a corresponding co-payment of €89 per week.

Under the new scheme, this family will qualify for a weekly subsidy of €167 and might be expected to have a corresponding co-payment of €17.

**B. Family with a net annual income of €25,000, with two children aged 1 and 2.5 years and in need of 25 hours of childcare per week**

Under the existing targeted schemes, this family may have qualified for a subsidy of €47.50 per week for each child, giving a total subsidy of €95, with a corresponding co-payment of €140 per week.

Under the new scheme, this family will qualify for a weekly subsidy of €214 and might be expected to have a co-payment of €21.

**C. Family with net annual income of €35,000, with two children aged 1 and 2.5 years and in need of 25 hours of childcare per week**

Under the existing targeted schemes, this family may have qualified for a subsidy of €25 per week for each child, giving a total subsidy of €50, with a corresponding co-payment of €185 per week.

Under the new scheme, this family will qualify for a weekly subsidy of €149 and might be expected to have a co-payment of €86.

**D. Family with net annual income of €47,500, with two children aged 2 years (40 hours childcare per week) and 5 years (17 hours out-of-school care per week)**

Under the existing targeted schemes, this family is unlikely to have received any subsidy, and therefore had to pay the full fee of €259 per week. Under the new scheme, this family will qualify for a weekly subsidy of €52 and may have a co-payment of €207.



## Appendix B

### Summary of two components of Affordable Childcare Scheme in 2017

# Single Affordable Childcare Scheme

#### Part 1: Targeted (€12m)

##### Lower Income Families

- Lwr income threshold €22,700 *net*
- Hgher income threshold €47,500 *net*
- Below €22,700: aver. co-payment is 30c p/hour or €12 for 40 hr week
- Payable to Tusla registered childcare (over 4500 services)
- Maximum 40 hours per week
- Covers children from 6 mths to 15 yrs
- Above based on 2017 budget, thresholds will change as more investment becomes available.

#### Part 2: Universal (€7m)

##### All families with children under 3

- Up to a maximum of €960 per year per child / €80 per month
- Based on full-time care (paid pro-rata)
- Payable to Tusla registered childcare services (over 4500 services)

For further information, please email [affordable\\_childcare@dcya.gov.ie](mailto:affordable_childcare@dcya.gov.ie)