

March 2026

Close the Gap

An Information Booklet
on the gap between Family
Leave and Childcare



Close the Gap

Families face a long gap between the end of paid family leave and accessing childcare services

For parents, the time between the birth of a child and their first day of school is both a lifetime and the blink of an eye.

The support society provides to parents during this time is essential. Paid leave from work allows parents to care for their child in those crucial first years of life. And early childhood education and care – childcare – is essential for parents, particularly women, to reintegrate into society after the birth of a child.

However, in Ireland today, many parents face a long care gap in their child's early years. Family leave is not paid enough to provide an income replacement, and it doesn't even cover the first year of a child's life.

While EU laws have created a set of minimum standards for family leave rights and benefits, some countries go much further than others in supporting parents and families during their children's early years.

Ireland is the only country in the EU that doesn't link family leave benefits to income, but instead pays at a very low flat rate.

There have been positive changes in family leave supports in recent years in Ireland, but we still fall far behind many of our European peers. Some of the key issues and gaps in this area include:

Key issues

1. Leave is paid at half the rate of minimum wage

The current rate of the various Family Benefits is €299 per week – only 53% of the rate of National Minimum Wage for a 40-hour week. Ireland is the only country in the EU where state support for family leave is not directly linked to earnings.

2. Gap between family leave and childcare

Because there is no guaranteed right to access early years education (and there just aren't enough places!), for most families there is a gap between leave and the time they can access early years education. Ireland is again far off many of the most supportive countries in Europe. Some of the Nordic countries have legal entitlements to early childhood education and care for every child from 1 year old.

3. Women still do most of the care work

Despite welcome additional supports like expanded Parent's Benefit, the most recent data shows that women still do twice as much work looking after children as men.¹ On top of this, only half of fathers take Paternity leave, while only one quarter of fathers take parent's leave.²

1 IHREC/ESRI (2019) Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland

2 ESRI (2025) Child Related Leave: Usage and Implications for Gender Equality

4. Inequalities faced by lone parents

Lone parents don't receive the same leave entitlements as couples – they only receive the leave entitled to one person. This creates further barriers and inequalities among a group (predominantly women) who already face significant barriers and inequalities in accessing services and supports.

5. Not everyone has access to family leave benefits

Not every person or family is entitled to access family leave benefits. The complex social insurance requirements don't cover every person's work and caring histories – particularly women who are more likely to take time out of paid employment to engage in unpaid community and caring work, and to work in precarious employment. Some categories of workers, like PhD students, are also left out.

Despite the fact that these issues remain and there is a long way to go, there have been some very significant developments in recent years in expanding and strengthening access to family leave benefits in Ireland. Some of these changes are as a result of the transposition of European Directives like the 2019 Work Life Balance Directive.



What does Government need to do to Close the Gap, and ensure that families aren't left without support during their child's early years?

1. Pay Family Leave Properly

Implement Pay-Related Benefit for Parent's Leave, Maternity Leave, and Paternity Leave as a matter of priority to provide a proper income replacement for parents taking family leave.

2. Expand Maternity Leave and Parent's Leave

Ensure that parents and families have access to properly paid family leave for at least the first year of their child's life; this can be done by converting current additional unpaid Maternity Leave to paid Benefit, and expanding Parent's Leave.

3. Take concrete steps towards Public Childcare

Implement a public system of ECEC as called for by the Together for Public Alliance, with a guaranteed right to affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare from at least one year of age; the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's upcoming *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 2)* is a clear opportunity lay out a roadmap to a public system.

Positive steps

- **Domestic Violence Leave**

The Work Life Balance Act 2023³ introduced a new form of leave – workers can now take 5 days fully paid Domestic Violence Leave within a 12-month period. This is a vital support for victim-survivors of domestic violence.

- **Pay-Related Benefit**

The new Programme for Government has a clear commitment to introduce a pay-related element to Parent's Benefit, making it income-related – they have committed to a consultation on this issue later in 2026.⁴ This is a very positive step towards closing the gap with our European peers, and follows last year's introduction of Jobseeker's Pay-Related Benefit.

- **Recent increases in both weeks and rate of family leave benefits**

The 2023 Act also introduced an extra two weeks of Parent's Leave and Benefit, bringing the total to 9 weeks. Budget 2026 also increased the rate at which family leave benefits are paid by €10 to €299 per week.

Key terms explaining family leave and benefit in Ireland⁵

“Leave” generally refers to the non-paid aspect, while “Benefit” is the paid aspect provided by the Social Protection system. All Benefit payments are paid at the flat rate of €299 per week as of 2026.

- **Maternity Leave/Benefit**

For pregnant employees; 26 paid weeks and up to 16 unpaid weeks

³ Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2023/act/8/enacted/en/html>

⁴ Parliamentary Question No. 12702/26 asked by Robert O'Donoghue TD, answered on 17/02/2026

⁵ See Citizens Information: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment-rights-and-conditions/leave-and-holidays/leave-for-parents/>

- **Adoptive Leave/Benefit**
For one parent of couple, or parent adopting alone; 24 paid weeks and up to 16 unpaid weeks
- **Paternity Leave/Benefit**
New parents (not the parent who's taking adoptive or maternity leave); 2 paid weeks
- **Parent's Leave/Benefit**
Parents of children under 2/in the first 2 years of adoptive placement; 9 weeks paid
- **Parental Leave**
Parents and guardians of children under 12; 26 weeks unpaid
- **Domestic Violence Leave**
Employees experiencing domestic violence or abuse; 5 days paid
- **Leave for medical care**
Parents who need time off to deal with serious medical care for their child; 5 unpaid days per 12 months
- **Carer's Leave/Benefit**
Employees leaving work temporarily to provide full-time care for someone who needs it; minimum of 13 unpaid weeks, maximum of 104 unpaid weeks



So what are the family leave and benefit entitlements in other countries?⁶

Sweden

Sweden has very limited provision for maternity or paternity leave – instead, most of the leave they provide is gender-neutral parental leave.

- **How long is it and what rate is it paid at?**
 - Maternity Leave: obligatory 2 weeks before or after birth
 - Paternity Leave: 10 days, paid at 77.6% of earnings with an upper limit
 - Parental Leave: each parent is entitled to 240 days (8 months) paid, plus additional unpaid leave until the child is 18 months old; a portion of the paid days can be transferred to the other parent. First 195 days are paid at 77.6% of earnings (with upper limit), and there is a flat rate for the remainder
- **What's the gap between leave and an accessible entitlement to childcare?**
 - No gap: paid leave after birth for both parents can amount to around 16 months; there is an entitlement to ECEC from 1 year of age
- **Anything additional?**
 - Pension supplement: Sweden provides for an extra pension supplement for the parent who earns lower income during the child's first four years

⁶ All other country comparisons sourced from the International Network on Leave Policies & Research: <https://www.leavenetwork.org/>; Fig. 1 adapted from Eurydice (2025) Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has an entitlement to a lengthy maternity leave, and specific paternity leave, as well as parental leave.

- **How long is it and what rate is it paid at?**
 - Maternity Leave: 410 days (more than 13 months), with first 135 days obligatory, paid at 90% of salary with upper limit
 - Paternity Leave: 15 obligatory days paid at 90% of salary with upper limit, with a possible additional 2 months up to age of 8 paid at flat rate
 - Parental Leave: up until the child reaches 2 years of age paid at flat rate; there is an additional 6 months per parent that can be taken up to 8 years of age
- **What's the gap between leave and childcare entitlement?**
 - 1 year gap unpaid/3 year gap paid: as there is no entitlement to ECEC before 4 years of age; 1 year if unpaid leave is counted, but 3 years if not counting unpaid/flat-rate leave
- **Anything additional?**
 - Parental Leave is automatically claimed by the mother but can be fully transferred to the father or to a grandparent if they are in employment

Germany

Germany has some entitlement to maternity leave and additional generous parental leave for both parents, which in effect acts as paternity leave.

- **How long is it and what rate is it paid at?**
 - Maternity Leave: 14 weeks, with 8 weeks after the birth being obligatory, paid at 100% of income with no upper limit

- Paternity Leave: no statutory entitlement, but are entitled to two exclusive months which can only be used by them, taken as part of parental leave
- Parental Leave: can be taken by both parents up until a child is 3 years of age, paid at 65% for a year; there are also two bonus paid months provided on top of the 12 months if both parents take at least two months of leave, or for single parents
- **What's the gap between leave and childcare entitlement?**
 - No gap: paid leave at a high rate amounts to around a year; there is an entitlement to ECEC from 1 year of age
- **Anything additional?**
 - There is also a supplementary monthly payment for parents with multiple births; and a supplementary payment for parents with more than one young child

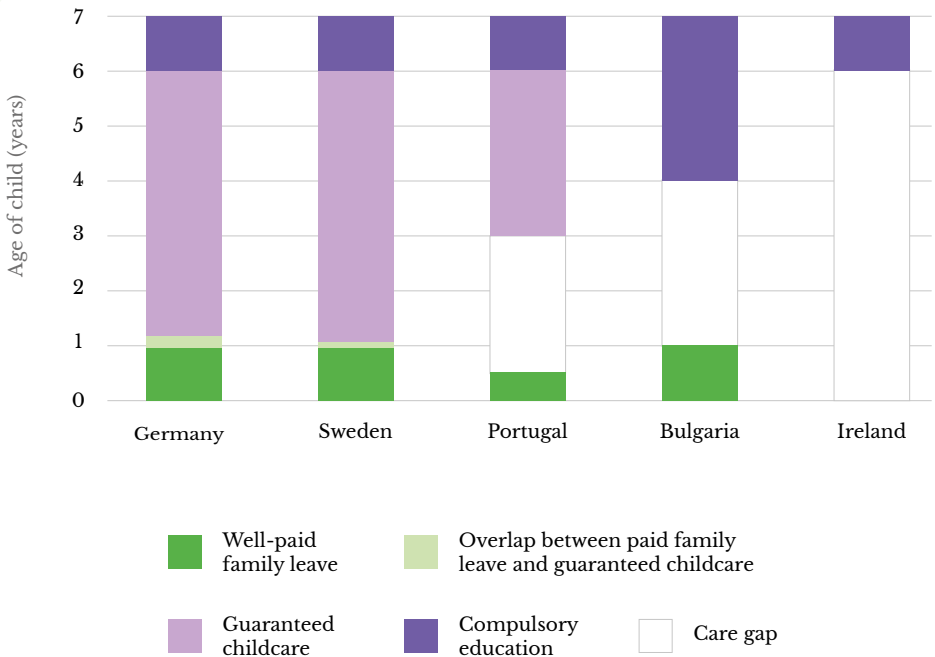
Portugal

Portugal's generally gender-neutral approach to leave entitlements means Maternity Leave provision is referred to as Initial Parental Leave, while fathers have an entitlement to Fathers-only Parental Leave.

- **How long is it and what rate is it paid at?**
 - Maternity Leave: 120 days at 100% of earnings or 150 days at 80% of earnings; 42 are obligatory for the mother and the remainder may be divided between parents by mutual agreement
 - Paternity Leave: 35 days (28 obligatory) as part of Parental Leave, paid at 100% of income with no upper limit
 - Parental Leave: alongside the above entitlement, there is an additional 3 months per parent non-transferable, paid at 30/40% of earnings depending on whether either/both parents and whether part-time/full-time

- **What's the gap between leave and childcare entitlement?**
 - 1 year gap unpaid/3 year gap paid: as there is no entitlement to ECEC before 4 years of age; it's 1 year if unpaid leave is counter as one parent can take an additional two years unpaid childcare leave, but 3 years if not counting this unpaid leave
- **Anything additional?**
 - There's a 30-day 'sharing bonus' available if parents share the leave and the father takes at least 30 consecutive days or two periods of 15 days alone

Fig. 1: Gap between childcare leave ECEC place guarantee, 2024/2025





National Women's Council
100 North King Street, Dublin 7

(01) 6790 100
nwci.ie