

PRESS RELEASE



**An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige**
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

Minister Foley announces the opening of applications for a new fund to upskill early years staff

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley has today announced the opening of applications for a new fund to upskill early years staff.

The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund will cover 90 per cent of the course fees for early years staff who undertake a degree course. They can study the course over a four-year period while continuing their regular daily work within the early learning and care sector.

Announcing the opening of applications, Minister Foley said:

“In the Programme for Government, we committed to ‘remove barriers in education and training for early years educators to broaden access to the profession.’

I am delighted to announce the opening of the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund 2025 which supports this commitment by contributing up to 90% of course fees for early years educators who are studying for an approved degree-level qualification, while continuing to work within the sector.

“There are very talented and dedicated staff working in the early years sector. I am keen to provide opportunities for upskilling which do not place additional financial burdens on the staff. This Nurturing Skills Learner Fund is an excellent opportunity to pursue a degree level qualification. I look forward to as many participants as possible availing of this opportunity and I wish all involved well with their studies.”

The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund 2025 is co-funded by the European Union through the EIST programme 2021 to 2027. It was introduced on a pilot basis last year, with 350 applicants successfully receiving funding for the academic year 2024/2025. There are 350 funded places available for applicants this year.

The fund aims to help meet the Government objective of achieving a graduate-led workforce in early learning and care services by 2028.

Current data indicates that the proportion of early years educators with a relevant degree qualification has risen from 12% in 2012 to 39% in 2023. Nurturing Skills aims to increase this proportion to at least 50% by 2028.

Under this scheme, funding will be provided directly to approved higher education institutions on behalf of the early years educators to reduce the upfront costs of studying for them at level 7 or 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

It is designed to complement and add to other Government financial supports, such as the Free Fees Initiative and SUSI grants, which early years educators can also qualify for depending on their circumstances.

Funding opportunities for early years educators to upskill was a key commitment in *Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028*. Nurturing Skills aims to build on the significant progress already made in raising skill levels across the workforce.

First 5, the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families, also recognises that the workforce is at the heart of high-quality early learning and care sector

Further information on the Nurturing Skills Learner fund can be found at www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund

ENDS

Notes to the Editor

- The reports mentioned are available at www.gov.ie/nurturingskills and <https://www.first5.gov.ie/>
- Further information on the ESF+ programme in Ireland is available at <https://eufunds.ie/>
- To be eligible for financial support, courses must have been approved by the Qualifications Advisory Board for the ELC sector <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/c2e6b-qualifications-advisory-board-qab-for-the-early-learning-and-care-elc-sector/>
- A list of approved courses is available [here](#)