



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

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Minister O’Gorman publishes detailed progress reports for First 5, the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’ Gorman, has today published the Government’s First 5 Annual Implementation Reports 2020 and 2021/22.

First 5, the ten-year Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028) was published in November 2018 followed by an initial implementation plan for the Strategy in May 2019

The reports highlight how the interim target set for paid parents leave – of 7 weeks per parent by 2021 – has been reached; the interim target of a 30% graduate early learning and childcare workforce by 2021 exceeded and the investment target for early learning and childcare – of €970 million by 2028 – has been exceeded five years ahead of schedule.

The Report also outlines key achievements over the period 2020 – 2022, including:

- an extension of paid parents leave and extended entitlements to unpaid parent leave;
- the publication of Supporting Parents, A New Model of Parenting Support Services to improve awareness of, and access to, parenting support services;
- a range of new measures to promote healthier childhoods;
- major reforms to the early learning and care system; and
- a range of measures to help families struggling with the cost of living and to reduce the risk of early childhood poverty.

First 5 focuses on the period of early childhood, from the antenatal period to age five, and takes a joined-up, cross-government approach to supporting babies, young children and their families during these critical early years.

Speaking about today’s publication, Minister O’ Gorman said:

“As Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, I am delighted to publish the First 5 Annual Implementation Reports 2020 and 2021/22 and share an update on the very considerable progress that has been made to deliver on First 5 commitments.

“Over the last few years, we have extended paid parents leave, improved parent support services, and are now investing €1 billion annually in early learning and childcare. All of this is making a hugely positive change in the lives of children and their families”

“These Reports illustrates the positive work that is taking place right across Government and society to ensure children get the best possible start in life”

The Minister welcomed the collaborative efforts and shared ambition to deliver on the vision of First 5 across Government Departments, State Agencies and the Community and Voluntary sector and reiterated Government’s continued commitment to First 5.

Speaking about future work under First 5, Minister O’ Gorman said:

“We delivered on a range of key commitments in First 5 that are tangibly improving the lives of babies, young children and their families, and are significantly enhancing life-long outcomes.

“But there is more to be done if we are to fully realise the vision of First 5”.

“As we embark on the development of a new implementation plan for First 5 for the period 2023-2025, I look forward to continued positive collaboration with colleagues across Government Departments, State Agencies, Community and Voluntary sector and wider partners in the pursuit of better outcomes for babies, young children and their families”.

An Open Policy Debate on the First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025 will take place on 20 June.

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITOR

A high-level summary of progress on 2020 and 2021/22 milestones across the First 5 Big Steps are set out below.

i. A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring

Extended entitlements to paid parents’ leave were announced in 2020. The Family Leave and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2021 extended the statutory entitlement to paid parents’ leave from three weeks paid leave per parent to five weeks, and extended the period in which leave can be taken from within one year of the child’s birth or adoptive placement to two years. In April 2021, a further three weeks of Parent's Leave and Benefit became available to each parent. In July 2022, Parents’ Leave and Benefit increased by a further two weeks, bringing the current entitlement to seven weeks which meets the First 5 target.

The Family Leave and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2021 also amended the Adoptive Leave Act 1995 to enable adoptive couples to choose which parent may avail of adoptive leave and, in doing so, rectified an anomaly in the legislation that left married male same-sex couples unable to avail of adoptive leave.

Furthermore, the phased introduction of an additional eight weeks unpaid parental leave commenced in 2019, and rose from 22 to 26 working weeks in September 2020. The leave is available to a 'relevant parent' of a child, which is defined in the 1998 Act as a parent, an adoptive parent, or a person acting in 'loco parentis'.

A General Scheme of the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, which transposes provisions of the EU Directive (2019/1158) on work life balance for parents and carers, was published in April 2022 and referred to the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for Pre-legislative Scrutiny. The Joint Committee issued its Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny on

9 June 2022 and the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022 was published on 5 October 2022.

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, which incorporates the Right to Request Remote Working Bill, will introduce a range of measures to improve family-friendly work practices and support women in the workforce including:

- A right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes, for parents and carers;
- A right to request remote working for all workers;
- A right to leave for medical care purposes, both for employees with children up to age 12 and carers; and
- Extension of the current entitlement to breastfeeding/lactation breaks from six months to two years.

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill has passed all Stages in the Oireachtas in 2023 and was enacted on the 4th of April 2023 as the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023.

ii. A new model of parenting support.

The development of a national model of parenting support services began in 2020, led by the Parenting Support Policy Unit in DCEDIY, in partnership with Tusla, the HSE, and other partners from the community and voluntary sector. Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services was launched in 2022. Supporting Parents aims to develop a more coherent and strategic approach to the development and delivery of parenting support services so that all parents can access the support they need when they need it.

Plans to consolidate, streamline, and strengthen parenting information resources into a single, coherent platform were brought forward due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with the launch of the 'Parents' Centre' platform in April 2020 on gov.ie. Subsequently the Parents' Centre platform has been merged with the 'Supporting Children and Parents' platform, which launched in 2022 and brings together new and existing resources that parents may find helpful. The platform also includes resources for Ukrainian parents in Ireland.

Additionally, two informational social media campaigns were conducted in 2020. The national public information campaign on positive parenting originally scheduled for 2020 was delayed to prioritise other projects in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This campaign was successfully run in 2021.

iii. New developments in child health

A Steering Group was established by the Department of Health in 2019 to commence work on a dedicated child health workforce - one of the major commitments of First 5. As a result of the re-prioritisation of work in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the work on the establishment of a dedicated child health workforce did not progress. However, the Department has recommenced this important work.

During the 2020-2022 period, significant progress was made on a number of actions which aim to promote positive health behaviours and the physical and mental health of babies, young children and their families including:

- Progress on the development of a curriculum programme for antenatal educators following the publication of National Standards for Antenatal Education in Ireland in 2020
- Publication of Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services following the publication of Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-15 year olds in 2020.
- Opening of the Paediatric Outpatient and Emergency Care Centre at Tallaght.

- Launch of three infant mental health e-learning units and the addition of a mental health and well-being module to the Making Every Contact County e-learning programme.
- Pilot of the school milk school scheme in early learning and care settings.
- Roll-out of the National Child Health Record for Public Health Nurses and Community Medical Doctors
- Ongoing development to, and roll out of, www.mychild.ie and the START campaign
- On-going development of an extensive range of breastfeeding supports, and the allocation of funding for additional lactation consultant posts.

iv. Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system

During the period covered by the Annual Implementation Reports, 2020 - 2022, there have been significant developments in the Early Learning and Care system delivering commitments to improve affordability, accessibility and quality.

A number of the major First 5 achievements in this context include:

- Publication and initial implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028)
- Publication and initial implementation of Nurturing Skills: the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (2022 – 2028)
- Publication of initial implementation of the Independent Review of the for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Operating Model
- Publication and initial implementation of recommendations in Partnership for the Public Good: The Report on a New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare.
- Launch of 'Together for Better', the new funding model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, which brings together three major elements, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, including the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and the new Core Funding Scheme – the latter of which supported the introduction of the historic Employment Regulation Orders for workers in the the sector and fee management measures in 2022.
- The publication of the 12-month review of the National Childcare Scheme and introduction of a number of significant enhancements to the Scheme (i.e. end of the practice of deducting hours in pre-school and school from NCS subsidised hours and the extension of the universal subsidy to all children under 15 in 2022 and the increase the minimum hourly subsidy from €0.50c to €1.40 in 2023), which has given rise to record number of children benefiting.

Over this period also, multiple Covid-19 support packages were developed in response to evolving circumstances to support the early learning and childcare sector.

Measures in 2020 developed included:

- Continuation of DCEDIY subsidy schemes on an ex-gratia basis (12 March – 5 April)
- Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (6 April – 28 June 2020) that layered on top of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), providing a top-up for staff wages and funding towards non-deferrable operational costs.
- Reopening Funding Package, (29 June – 23 August 2020), including a Reopening Support Payment, a capital grant; continued access to the TWSS and resumption of DCEDIY subsidy schemes.

- July Stimulus Package (24 August - 31 December) including the continuation of DCEDIY subsidy schemes, resumption of the ECCE Programme, the Employer Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) with an exemption to the turnover rule and a Sustainability Fund

Measures in 2021 and 2022 included:

- Continuation of DCEDIY subsidy schemes (with the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)) (4 January – 31 January 2021)
- Funding arrangements for ELC and SAC during extended Level 5 restrictions (with EWSS) (1 February – 5 March 2021) including a new Covid-19 Operating Support Payment and a new Covid-19 strand of the Sustainability Fund.
- Funding arrangements for ELC and SAC during the phased lifting of restrictions (with EWSS) from 8 March-29 March 2021 including an extension to the Covid-19 Operating Support Payment.
- A range of once-off grants (including the €5.5m playing outside grant in June 2021 and the €10 million Grant Programme for Improved Ventilation and Other Measures to Reduce Transmission in December 2021) and other measures such as Student Temporary Employment Arrangements and an Antigen Programme for ELC and SAC (both introduced in December 2021).

v. A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty and disadvantage

Throughout the period 2020 – 2022, progress was made on a number of First 5 actions which tackle early childhood poverty and disadvantage.

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments was published in 2020. The Roadmap includes a commitment to continue to report on progress against the Child Poverty target and set a new target for the period to the end of 2025.

A Food Poverty Working Group was established by the Department of Social Protection in 2021, comprising a range of Government Departments, including DCEDIY, DoE and DoH, along with representatives from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Crosscare and the Children’s Rights Alliance. The Working Group conducted a mapping exercise to identify the various programmes across Government that address food poverty and provide related supports. ‘Food Poverty: Government Programmes, Schemes and Supports’ is the report on this mapping exercise which was published in July 2022.

Budgets 2020- 2023 included measures specifically aimed at supporting families on low incomes through increases in qualified child (IQC) rates, including the introduction of separate rates for children aged under and over 12, increases in earnings disregards for One Parent Family and Jobseeker Transition payments, increases in the income thresholds for Working Family Payment, as well as an increase in the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.

The Hot Meals Pilot for Early Learning and Care settings was announced in November 2022 and the roll out of the pilot began in 2023.

In addition, the development of the Equal Participation Model is now underway, which will fulfil the First 5 commitment to develop a DEIS type model for early learning and childcare.