

2021 has been a key year in realising the ambition of *First 5* to develop an effective early childhood system. A series of major policy reforms for early learning and care and school-age childcare reached important points of development during the year. At the same time, government measures on Covid-19 have supported both public health and the sustainability of services while enabling innovations.

### Introduction

*First 5*, the 10-year whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families, published in 2018, sets out how to develop ‘a system of integrated, cross-sectoral and high-quality supports and services – an effective early childhood system – that will help all babies and young children in Ireland to have positive early experiences’.

2021 is a key year in realising the ambition of *First 5*, with several critical policy-reform processes for early learning and care being finalised. During the year, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has worked with an Expert Group to develop a new funding model for the sector, and led on planning a number of other major reforms, including a Workforce Development Plan and the National Action Plan for Childminding.

At the same time, the government has continued to provide a range of supports to early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare services during the Covid-19 pandemic, maintaining the sustainability of services while supporting compliance with public health guidelines. As restrictions begin to loosen, focus has turned to drawing learning from innovations in the response to Covid-19.

### Policy reforms

Key policy reforms under way during 2021 include:

- Development of a new funding model for the sector. *First 5* commits to increasing investment in ELC and school-age childcare to up to approximately €1 billion by 2028, and a new funding model will be a key vehicle to ensure that such significant additional investment delivers for children, families, and the State. An Expert Group was established in 2019 to examine the effectiveness of the funding model in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable, and inclusive services

# A Key Year for Policy Reform in Early Learning and Care

Policy reforms under *First 5*, and responses to Covid-19



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and to consider how additional resources can best be structured to achieve these objectives. This group will report by the end of 2021, and their work has significantly informed the package of developments announced in Budget 2022.

- Publication in April 2021 of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028, which sets out a pathway towards regulation, support, and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders. Up till now, most of Ireland’s 15,000 childminders have been outside the scope of regulation and supports. Over the coming years, the Action Plan will bring significant benefits for childminders, and for the children and the families using their services.

“ April 2021 saw the publication of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028, which sets out a pathway towards regulation, support, and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders.

- Preparation of a Workforce Development Plan, to be completed by the end of 2021, which will set out actions to achieve the workforce commitments in *First 5*, including ensuring enough staff at all levels of qualifications in the sector, strengthening career development and leadership opportunities, and working towards a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce.

Moves to establish a Joint Labour Committee (JLC), in line with a commitment in the Programme for Government, recognising the importance of wages and conditions of employment to achieving the ambitions of the Workforce Development Plan, strengthening careers, and improving staff recruitment and retention. While the State is not the employer and therefore cannot determine wages, DCEDIY has over a number of years provided funding to support services to improve wages.

- In December 2020, Minister Roderic O’Gorman began a process to examine the possibility of regulating pay and conditions and the suitability of a JLC. The Minister appointed Dr Kevin Duffy, former chair of the Labour Court, to be the independent chair of this process. On foot of Dr Duffy’s report, and in line with the provisions of the Industrial Relations Acts, the Labour Court recommended the establishment of a JLC, and an Establishment Order came into effect in July. The JLC will provide an opportunity for unions and employer representatives to work together to determine pay and conditions. Budget 2022 announced a new Core Funding stream for services, which will help cover costs linked to quality improvement, including supporting an Employment Regulation Order that may result from the JLC.

A comprehensive review of the operating model for ELC and school-age childcare, also due for completion by the end of 2021. Following substantial growth in the sector over the past decade, the objective of this review is to ensure that the operating model is fit for purpose to implement ELC and school-age childcare policy relating to quality, affordability, and access, to the scale and standards required in an evolving and expanding sector.

At the same time, recent system reforms have continued to evolve. Budget 2022, announced in October 2021, committed to further extension of the National Childcare Scheme, introduced in 2019.

The reform processes have involved extensive collaboration with stakeholders and have built on a significant programme of research and public consultation. Work on preparing the Workforce Development Plan has involved international collaboration, through both EU and OECD networks.

An OECD Country Policy Review of Early Learning and Care in Ireland, which began in 2019, will be published at the end of 2021. Public consultation on both the new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan took place in 2020, and further detailed consultation took place on the funding model during 2021, while a number of stakeholder working groups worked intensively in 2021 on detailed proposals for the Workforce Development Plan. Research and consultation reports related to the New Funding Model process are available at <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/>.

As the planning phase for this comprehensive suite of interlinked policy reforms is only drawing to a conclusion at the end of 2021, it is too early to assess impact. But there is no doubting the intent and the scale of ambition to deliver on the First 5 commitment to build 'an effective early childhood system', and the scale of additional investment announced in Budget 2022 underscores this commitment.

### Responding to Covid-19

At the same time as progressing work on major policy reforms, 2021 saw a continued strong focus by DCEDIY on efforts to support the sector through the Covid-19 pandemic. Right through the pandemic, DCEDIY has worked closely on Covid-19 supports with sector representatives and with other government departments and agencies, including the HSE, Department of Education, Department of Social Protection, Department of Finance, and the Revenue Commissioners.

DCEDIY funding schemes were adjusted to work in tandem with the government-wide Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme to support ELC and school-age childcare services, enabling them to comply with public health guidelines and remain sustainable. Sustainability has been a key concern, to ensure that services remained in operation for children and families who needed them, both during the pandemic (particularly for children of essential workers and vulnerable children) and as more parents returned to work later in 2021.

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The sector was the first to reopen in June 2020 following temporary closures, and was the first sector to reopen without the application of the two-metre social distancing rule or the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), reflecting the importance of close contact between educators and children in early childhood.

The approaches adopted have proved successful, and that success in large part reflects the commitment and resilience shown throughout the pandemic by all those working in ELC and school-age childcare services,

and by the children attending those services. Throughout a time of great stress and challenge, services have remained open and have remained places of learning and opportunity for children.

Services have remained sustainable, with no significant change in the number of services operating, while the number of employees in the sector remains comparable to pre-Covid-19 levels. The evidence also shows the effectiveness of the public health guidance – and its application by service providers and educators – in minimising the spread of Covid-19 in services.

As we gradually move out of the pandemic, attention has increasingly turned to innovations that responded to the pandemic and that may bring longer-term benefits. Two stand out in ELC and school-age childcare. First, there has been increasing activity outdoors, with many services taking advantage of funding made available by DCEDIY in 2020 and 2021 to enhance outdoor spaces. It will be important to sustain this transition given the benefits of outdoor activities for children’s health, learning, and development.

Second, there has been increasing use of online learning methods for early years educators. Accelerated by public health restrictions on face-to-face training, there has been much innovation in ways to engage learners online, and high levels of participation in those training courses that have moved online. While many courses will now move to blended formats, innovations in online learning will continue, and greater use of online methods is likely to remain a feature of future continuing professional development (CPD) resources, especially given their flexibility for early years educators who are studying while working.

More broadly, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of early learning and care and school-age childcare. This is a public good that confers significant benefits to children, especially disadvantaged children. It is also critical in enabling parents to work, both for those who have worked in essential services through the pandemic, and more broadly for the whole of society and the economy post-Covid-19.

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