

Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland

An essential prevention and early intervention service for children, parents, and families

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) is an evidenced-based proven service delivery strategy that helps children and families thrive. In 2022 only 4,340 children aged 0-5 years – 1% of the eligible population – received this service. The current policy context in Ireland is an unique opportunity to develop an integrated, strategic ECHV approach aligned with national policies, in particular *First 5* (DCEDIY, 2018). Creating the necessary funding, infrastructure, research, and strategic planning supports at national and local level would enable, at the very least, the 12,000 babies born into poverty each year to receive a high-quality home visiting service.

Introduction

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) is a proven service-delivery strategy that helps children and families thrive, and has a long history in Ireland. An essential local community lifeline, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, home visiting programmes address wellbeing, developmental delays, educational disadvantage, parental isolation, and poor mental health. It provides a continuum of support and prioritises first-time parents, children with additional needs, and families who are socially isolated and experiencing challenging circumstances.

A body of research, including multiple randomised controlled trials and longitudinal studies, has shown that home visiting significantly improves the lives of children and their families. Demonstrable impacts include improving maternal and child health, preventing child abuse and neglect, increasing family education and earning potential, promoting children's development and



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readiness to start school, and connecting families to community resources and support.

Established in November 2020, the Home Visiting Alliance (HVA, 2022) is a collaboration of five Irish, evidence-based ECHV programmes: Community Mothers, Infant Mental Health, Lifestart, ParentChild+, and Preparing for Life. Together we represent the collective national voice of ECHV in Ireland, visiting 4,340 children aged 0–5 years across 40 local programme sites.

2022 was a significant year for home visiting, with the publication of *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* (DCEDIY, 2022) and the commencement of actions to progress agreement on a national approach to home visiting as part of *First 5* (DCEDIY, 2018). With support from the Department's What Works 'Sharing Knowledge' Fund 2022, the HVA engaged in a collaborative feasibility study on the replication, scaling, and expansion of ECHV in Ireland. This article outlines the findings and recommendations of the resulting report.

Study methodology and findings

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) is a proven service delivery strategy that helps children and families thrive, and has a long history in Ireland.

The primary methodology was participatory action learning, involving a collective iterative process, including literature reviews, documentary evidence, structured reflective practice reviews, interviews, and consultative workshops. Existing expertise on replication, scaling, and expansion among the five HVA home visiting programmes complemented learning from the UK, US, Jamaica, Australia, and elsewhere. Existing barriers and facilitating factors in the replication and scaling-up of evidence-based programmes were identified.

Replicating, scaling up, and expanding evidenced-based programmes is complex. ECHV in Ireland developed organically in response to needs identified at local level, and currently operates in a policy and service-delivery context that does not provide the necessary infrastructure, research capacity, funding, or strategic planning support. The small scale and absence of a recognised 'sector' has resulted in a lack of clarity about home visiting and whether it is a programme, a service, or both. Home visitors' unique skill set and role are undervalued in terms of pay, terms, and conditions. They are not explicitly differentiated from other professions and functions working with parents from pregnancy to school age.

In order for sustainable, high-quality, evidence-based home visiting to reach a significant population of children and families, a strategically funded approach is required with integrated, top-down and bottom-up, national and local-level infrastructure. A national approach to funding, research, evidence, and quality was highlighted as essential in creating the context to enable viable home visiting at scale.

With only 1% of the current eligible child population receiving home visits, the following strategic fundamentals were identified:

- » Ensure the sustainability of existing services and learn from real-time data-gathering to inform future delivery and expansion.
- » Build the national and local infrastructures required to support scaling across Ireland. An integrated four-layered infrastructure connecting government departments at national level and sectors, agencies, and structures at local level is necessary to sustain and grow home visiting across Ireland.
- » Support National Programme Support Structures to ensure quality, fidelity, ongoing programme development, and data collection and analysis so that home visiting remains responsive to emerging needs and a high-quality, consistent service is available no matter where you live in Ireland.
- » Adopt and fund mechanisms for a real-time innovative evidence base aligned to national outcomes, which can inform budgets, policies, and delivery locally and nationally.

The full potential of ECHV in engaging and supporting all parents across the continuum of need and multiple sectors needs to be recognised. The quote below illustrates home visitors' impact on parents, particularly when families are isolated and suffering from various stresses and mental health issues:

Thank you for your support during this time. You were there in our tiny apartment and the stressful situation we were living in. You were there when I could not stop crying and feeling lonely. Thank you for the job you do. Supporting families like you do is essential in some situations, and it really does make a difference. Waiting for your weekly home visit sometimes really saved my life.

Conclusion

The current policy context in Ireland presents a unique opportunity to develop an integrated, strategic approach to ECHV. This study makes a valuable contribution to informing the upcoming national approach to home visiting as outlined in *First 5* and other national policies such as the National Model of Parent Support Services, Tusla's Parenting Strategy, the Health Service Executive's Mental Health Promotion Plan, and Sláintecare.

In particular, this study highlights important considerations for the replication and scaling-up of evidence-based ECHV programmes across Ireland. With almost 60,000 children born in Ireland each year and 12,000 born into poverty, our new social reality requires that every community in Ireland has skilled

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home visitors who can deliver high-quality home-visiting experiences that enable children and parents to thrive.

Aspiring to ensure that all children and families have access to an ECHV programme from pregnancy to five years of age seems dauntingly ambitious. But by building a viable infrastructure to support the sustainable growth of ECHV incrementally over the next 10 years, it is hoped that access to such invaluable parental support could grow from its current 1% reach to 30% of the eligible population, with clear benchmarks of how to ensure the whole child population would be offered an ECHV programme.

REFERENCES

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028*. Dublin: Government publications.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2022) *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*. Dublin: Government publications.

Home Visiting Alliance (HVA) (2022) Home Visiting Alliance. <https://hva.ie/>.



Following the Home Visiting Alliance Launch on 13 October 2023, the full Feasibility Study on *Scaling Up Home Visiting*, and a summary, are available on the Home Visiting Alliance Website: *Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland – Feasibility Study – Home Visiting Alliance* (hva.ie).