Country
FACT SHEET 2020*



IRELAND

Contributor: Children's Rights Alliance

* The information provided in the country fact sheets reflects the situation by end of August 2020.

first years first priority

A FAIR START FOR every CHILD IN EUROPE

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Ireland has made adequate efforts over the past year to deliver on early childhood development policies and to support families with young children. ●●●○○*

Ireland has a national law or act guaranteeing access to basic ECD services in Education, Health, Nutrition, and/or Social and Child Protection for all children under six. YES

In Ireland, there are numerous legislative provisions providing access to primary school education, services in health, and/or social and child protection services[1]. Although in Ireland, early education is not compulsory and children can start attending ECEC from the age of two years eight months, different Strategies and Schemes have been introduced in order to address the needs of the families and the children in a holistic way. Specifically:

- The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme provides early childhood education and care for children of pre-school age.
- The "First Five" Strategy[2] focuses on five key areas in relation to early childhood, access to a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring, a new model of parenting support, new developments in child health and measures to tackle child poverty.
- First Five also commits to extend the statutory powers of the Educational Welfare Service to all children under six years of age enrolled in a recognised school in line with legislative developments.
- Maternity and Infant Care Scheme and free access to a General Practitioner for all children under six.

Other policies that are in place and aim to promote guarantee coordinated cross-sectoral services and support targeting children (from birth to six years old), in particular children in vulnerable situations, include:

- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020.[3] Work is underway on a new framework for 2021.
- Childcare Ireland - A new agency has been proposed in Programme for Government – Our Shared Future (2020).[4] The aim of this agency when set up will be to assist the expansion of high-quality childcare.
- A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 outlines a plan to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU.[5]

* This country sheet is based on a contribution from national coordinators, including the ratings - between ○○○○○ (worst) and ●●●●● (best)

1 Children Act 2001 (Provision for the care and protection of children); Child Care Act 1991 (Promotes the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection); Criminal Justice Act 2006 (Youth Justice matters); Education Act 1998 Education (Welfare) Act 2000 access to education and associated supports); Children First Act 2015 (protection and welfare of children).
2 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f7ca04-first-5-a-whole-of-government-strategy-for-babies-young-children-and/
3 Department of Children and Youth Affairs Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020.
4 Department of An Taoiseach, Programme for Government, Our Shared Futures (2020).
5 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE DURING THE FIRST WAVE

The recent COVID-19 crisis has caused widespread unemployment and the prospect of a severe recession in Ireland. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has projected that the impact of the pandemic could push child poverty rates to 22.6% if there is no economic recovery and to 19% if there is an economic recovery and activation of the labour market.[6]

The research conducted by ESRI shows that the pandemic has accelerated inequalities experienced by vulnerable groups of children such as Travellers, Roma, and children with a disability. Effects of the pandemic include: 'learning loss' as a result of school closures; low well-being and physical and mental health problems for children and young people; increased levels of family stress because of income loss and difficulties in combining remote working with home-schooling and childcare; increase in domestic violence; food poverty; homelessness; inequalities in access to online education; etc.
In response to the emerging needs resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, the Children's Rights Alliance, with funding from a number of funders, established a food provision scheme to support the nutritional needs of children under the age of six years experiencing poverty and deprivation during the COVID-19 crisis. There was a total of €164,000 issued to 21 organisations across Ireland.[7]
At governmental level:

- There has been a big focus on reopening early years settings for all children, in particular those from vulnerable groups and for children of frontline workers. As of mid-August 2020, 85% of services that are normally open over the summer have reopened.[8]
- Let's Play Ireland – This is a government-led initiative to promote play for all children living in Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis.[9]
- Supporting Children – This is a focused government campaign outlining information about services for children, young people, and families, including those with additional needs and highlighting that child protection and welfare services continue to operate[10].
- Let's Get Ready - This is a government campaign to help parents and children prepare to return to early learning and childcare services or make the move to pre-school and school for the first time.[11]
- The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced at the start of the Pandemic and is available to employees and the self-employed who have lost their job on or after 13 March due to the COVID-19 crisis and it will be in place until April 2021.[12]

6 Irish Heart Foundation, Investing in children's future health, Pre-Budget Submission (IHF July 2015) <http://bit.ly/2bLAw5v> accessed 30 January 2017.
7 Children's Rights Alliance, Food Provision Scheme, https://www.childrensrights.ie/resources/food-provision-scheme-june-update, accessed 24th July 2020
8 Early Childhood Ireland, https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/dealing-pandemic-early-childhood-ireland-member-consultation-project/, accessed 26th August 2020
9 Early Child hood Ireland, https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/dealing-pandemic-early-childhood-ireland-member-consultation-project/, accessed 26th August 2020
10 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Supporting Children https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/42dcb-supporting-children/ accessed 18th July 2020
11 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Let's Get Ready https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1e8a3-lets-get-ready/ accessed 18th July 2020.
12 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Pandemic Unemployment Payment https://www.gov.ie/en/service/be74d3-covid-19-pandemic-unemployment-payment/?referrer=/pandemicsupport/ accessed 19th July 2020.

EUROPEAN SEMESTER

The 2020 Country Report published in the framework of the European Semester highlights that child poverty remains a challenge in Ireland and notes that while the at risk of poverty rate for children has decreased, it is doing so at a slower pace and **23.9% of children remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion**. The report also notes that child poverty has become central to the policy debate due to the 'No Child 2020' initiative run by the Children's Rights Alliance in partnership with the Irish Times[13]. This can be supportive of Early Childhood Development (ECD) reforms as it highlights the levels of vulnerable children who can benefit from ECD.

The Country Report also highlights that additional funding has been provided to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the revised 2020 budget of €103 million, €63 million of which is targeted towards Early Education and Care.
The Country Report places an emphasis as well on the implementation of Sláintecare which is the cross-party plan for reforming the healthcare service. The Sláintecare plan contains important commitments to introduce and develop a universal child and wellbeing service which would include increased numbers of public health nurses to work with young children and their families. This would be beneficial for crucial ECD reforms that need to happen in Ireland in the healthcare sector.
Despite the fact that the Country Specific Recommendations do not explicitly mention ECD, some key recommendations can be supportive of ECD Reforms in Ireland. Among these:

- improving the accessibility of the health system and strengthening its resilience, including by responding to the health workforce's needs and ensuring universal coverage to primary care;
- addressing the risk of a digital divide, including in the education sector;
- increasing the provision of social and affordable housing.

- Develop an affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care system that is accessible to all.
- Fully implement the First Five to improve the lives of babies, young children, and their families.
- Address food poverty and reduce childhood obesity: While the short-term impact of food poverty is poor diet and lack of nutrients, the long-term effects can lead to diet-related illnesses, including obesity.[14] One child in four living in Ireland is obese or overweight[15] meaning that around 16,338 three-year olds are overweight or obese.[16]
- Create a dedicated Child Health workforce that can provide an integrated approach to service planning and delivery to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for infants and their families in Ireland.
- A European Child Guarantee is planned to be included in the next EU budget (2021-2027). The aim of the Child Guarantee is that every child in Europe has access to key services. This European Child Guarantee should be integrated into the next National Children's strategy.

13 https://www.irishtimes.com/nochild2020
14 Irish Heart Foundation & Social Justice Ireland, Reducing Obesity and Future Health Costs, (IHF and SJI 2015) 7.
15 Department of Health, A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025 (Stationary Office 2016) 1.
16 Phil Jennings, Sarah O'Brien and Donal O'Shea, 'Tackling Childhood Obesity - A written submission from the Health Service Executive to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs' < https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_children_and_youth_affairs/submissions/2018/2018-08-22_submission-health-service-executive_en.pdf> 4.

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The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.

- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.

- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.

- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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