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Overview of the Policy, Social and Economic Context Related to Growing Up in Ireland Cohort '24

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RESEARCH +
EVALUATION 

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Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Block 1, Miesian Plaza, 50 – 58 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2
D02 XW14
Tel: +353 (0)1 647 3000
Email: research@equality.gov.ie
Web: www.gov.ie/dcediy

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Introduction

In 2022, Government agreed to the establishment of a new Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) birth cohort. This was on foot of a commitment in First 5, the whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. This ten-year plan to help ensure all children have positive early experiences is the key policy commitment relevant to the new GUI birth cohort. A key focus of the planned data collection therefore will be to address the policy relevant data needs outlined in First 5.

This paper sets out the policy, social and economic context surrounding the new birth cohort for the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) longitudinal study. First, it highlights the key priorities in First 5. Then, it outlines the wider policy, social and economic context surrounding the new birth cohort, bringing together information on a range of other relevant strategies and policy actions focused on babies and young children.

All of this information will inform priority data needs and data collection plans in the early years of the new GUI birth cohort.

First 5

First 5 takes an evidence informed approach to identify the goals, objectives and actions needed across government to support young children and their families. The strategy has four overarching goals (DECDIY, 2018a).

- Goal A: Strong and supportive families and communities
- Goal B: Optimum physical and mental health (encompassing issues such as the impact of food poverty both in terms of a lack of food and an inability to afford healthy food, on children's health, wellbeing and development, as well as their social)
- Goal C: Positive play-based early learning
- Goal D: An effective early childhood system

Additionally, First 5 identifies nine primary objectives to achieve Goals A to C. These relate to:

- Helping parents balance work and care
- Providing information, services and supports to parents

- Providing practical and material resources to parents
- Encouraging positive health behaviours
- Providing high-quality health services
- Promoting positive mental health
- Supporting a positive home learning environment
- Ensuring affordable, high quality early learning and care (ELC)
- Supporting the transition to primary school

Goal D is supported by five building blocks, which aim to assist with the implementation of an effective early childhood system. The five building blocks relate to:

- Supporting leadership, governance and collaboration
- Developing and reforming regulation, inspection and quality assurance standards
- Ensuring a skilled and sustainable workforce
- Supporting and developing research, data, monitoring and evaluation
- Strategic investment

The Wider Policy Landscape

Ireland's National Action Plan on the EU Child Guarantee

Ireland's National Action Plan is a first step toward full implementation of the EU Child Guarantee. The Child Guarantee is a European Commission initiative, which sets out to ensure that at the very least the most vulnerable children in the EU will have access to healthcare, childcare, education, housing and adequate nutrition (DECDIY, 2022b). On foot of this, the Irish government prepared a national action plan as a first step to ensuring the child guarantee.

The Guarantee seeks to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children who are in need, to a range of key services. It calls on Member States to guarantee for children in need; free access to early childhood education and care; education (including school-based activities); healthcare; access to healthy nutrition, a healthy meal each school day; and adequate housing (DECDIY, 2022b).

The EU Child Guarantee offers countries guidance on integrated strategies to tackle child poverty and promote children's well-being. It goes beyond welfare and labour market policies to promote access to quality services and the active participation of children themselves. The Guarantee also further highlights the importance of EU cohesion policy in mobilising reform.

The key focus is on addressing social exclusion and child poverty by alleviating barriers to access which may cause sub-optimal outcomes in education, ELC, school age childcare, housing health and nutrition. The plan identifies the overarching barriers of service cost, staff shortages, supply and demand issues and stigmatisation, as significant. Each action in the plan falls under one of the following key barriers: non-financial barriers in education; financial barriers in ELC and school age childcare; non-financial barriers to participation in ELC and school age childcare; cost of access to healthcare; availability of healthy meals each school day; and timely access to adequate accommodation for children in need (DECDIY, 2022b).

Like First 5, the National Action Plan on the EU Child Guarantee is a wide reaching strategy which seeks to improve multiple childhood indicators and both strategies share similar objectives and priorities. Poverty rates, access to healthcare services,

access to ELC, housing quality and accessibility were all core to both documents. The composition of this Action Plan, in the main, is drawn from the constituent elements of extant policies, strategies and programmes operating across relevant Government Departments. These strategies span key policy sectors and include:

Education

- DEIS Plan 2017 –Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools
- National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030
- Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan
- Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027
- Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (process to develop new strategy currently underway)
- STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026
- Languages Connect – Ireland’s Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026
- The Action Plan for Education 2022
- Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023)

Early Years

- First 5 – a whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019–2028

Health

- Sláintecare
- Child Health and Nutrition Policy
- Sharing the Vision
- Connecting for Life: Ireland’s National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015–2024
- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025
- Get Ireland Active! The National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland
- National Drugs Strategy
- National Obesity Strategy
- Obesity Policy and Action Plan

Nutrition

- National Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds
- General Nutrition Guidelines

- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025
- Nutritional Standards for School Meals
- Food in Schools Forum

Housing

- Housing for all - a New Housing Plan for Ireland (to 2030)

Other related strategies include:

- The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill
- The Sports Action Plan (to 2023)
- The Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027
- The National Sports Policy 2018–2027
- The Youth Justice Strategy 2021–2027

The National Action Plan also notes the level of funding provided by Government to programmes aligned with the aims of the EU Child Guarantee (DECDIY, 2022b).

Better Outcomes Brighter Future Indicator Set Report 2022

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF) is the national policy framework for children and young people, 2014-2020. BOBF sets out priorities in relation to children and young people up to the age of 24, and represents a whole-of-government effort to improve outcomes across five national outcome areas:

- Being active and healthy
- Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development;
- Being safe and protected from harm
- Economic security and opportunity
- Being connected, respected and contributing to their world

A successor to the BOBF framework is currently being developed within Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DECDIY, 2022a).

The 2020 Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF) Indicator set was developed to support the BOBF framework. It identifies over 100 indicators across 70 areas, with one or more indicator per area. BOBF indicator reports regularly provide data on

these indicator measures. The indicator measures span the five BOBF outcomes, with measures aligned to the aims associated with each of these outcomes.

BOBF and First 5 have a number of areas in common with both policies having goals which focus on positive physical and mental health, learning and development and economic security (DECDIY, 2022a). GUI will generate data in each of these areas and on many of these common goals.

More specifically, data from the new birth cohort could be especially useful for measuring progress on a number of indicators focused on very young children such as breastfeeding. Improving breastfeeding rates is a key aim for the outcome of being active and healthy. Currently, the BOBF breastfeeding indicators are based on breastfeeding rates at discharge at three months. GUI data could provide additional data up the age of 9 months for this cohort in wave 1 and further data from the following wave where breastfeeding continues beyond 9 months. Analysis of GUI data could also provide evidence about the factors associated with breastfeeding rates in terms of identifying what supports it; and also helping to identify more clearly the barriers and challenges associated with breastfeeding. GUI will also provide data on weight at 9 months old and provide additional data on immunisation rates.

Other areas where GUI data may be helpful to these indicators are in relation to parental drug use and/or alcohol problems, parental mental health, joblessness and housing conditions.

Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion is a five year plan which seeks “to reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive States in the EU” (DSP, 2020). The roadmap presents seven high-level goals, 22 targets and 66 commitments. The seven high level goals focus on extending employment opportunities to all who can work; ensuring work pays - fair pay and provides fair conditions for workers; providing income security for older people; supporting families and reducing child poverty; reducing poverty among people with disabilities and helping them to maximise their ability;

building inclusive communities and encouraging active citizenship; and ensuring that all people have access to quality services (DSP, 2020).

The roadmap crosses over significantly with First 5 due to its primary child focus being on various forms of poverty reduction, particularly on supporting family related payments and extending family supports.

One topic identified in the roadmap but not mentioned in First 5 is linked to communications and public awareness of in-work income support payments for families on low incomes. Commitment 16 of the Roadmap indicates an aspiration to develop and run a communications campaign to raise awareness among low income families of income supports. Assessing awareness levels among lower incomes households through GUI would therefore be valuable in evaluating progress on this commitment.

Housing for All

Housing for All is Government's current housing plan which has a high level goal of tackling the housing crisis and ensuring everyone has the chance to access sustainable, good quality and rental and purchase homes (DHLGH, 2021). The plan is broad in nature and aims to tackle the housing needs of many differing groups including first time buyers, renters and low-income households, while also focusing on the impact housing has on communities, towns and construction workers and the need to eradicate homelessness. Housing for All provides four pathways for achieving the overall aim of everyone in the State having access to a home to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and in the right place offering a high quality of life. The four pathways focus on supporting homeownership and increasing affordability; eradicating homelessness, increasing social housing delivery and supporting social inclusion; increasing new housing supply; and addressing vacancy and the efficient use of existing stock (DHLGH, 2021).

In relation to First 5, housing quality and the social housing needs are also identified as two objectives under the goal relating to strong and supportive families and communities.

The pathway to eradicating homelessness, increasing social housing delivery and supporting social inclusion encompasses issues relating to family, youth and child homelessness. This section focuses on providing homes to households at a high risk of homelessness. The plan emphasises targeted supports for both those at risk and those already in emergency accommodation. Long-term family homelessness is also highlighted and it is acknowledged that these parents and children may have more complex support needs and may need enhanced tenancy sustainment supports. The report indicates that these supports will work in conjunction with the continued provision of the housing assistance payment (HAP). An important step outlined by the report is the intention to establish a youth homelessness strategy, this plan will aim to break the cycle of longer-term homelessness with targeted interventions (DHLGH, 2021).

The new birth cohort could generate data on the housing situation and needs of families with infants. In addition, the availability of a wide range of other data in GUI will allow for analysis which can help identify the factors associated with housing tenure or housing needs, and the consequences for infants and families.

National Sustainable Mobility Policy 2022-2030

The National Sustainable Mobility Policy sets out a strategic framework from now until 2030 for active travel and public transport to support Ireland's carbon emission requirement of a 51% reduction by the end of this decade. The Policy aims to support this modal shift between now and 2030 through infrastructure and service improvements, as well as demand management and behavioural change measures. Two of the plans primary targets are to deliver at least 500,000 additional daily active travel (walking and cycling) and public transport journeys and a 10% reduction in kilometres driven by cars run on fossil fuels. The three guiding principles of safe and green mobility, people focused mobility and better integrated mobility guide the policy throughout (DoT, 2022).

There is little crossover between First 5 and the National Sustainable Mobility Policy.

The policy includes a review of road traffic policy and legislation to prioritise the safety of walking and cycling. More specifically, it includes a roll out of the Safe

Routes to School Programme. GUI could aid this by collecting data from parents on; the perceived safety of local walking and cycling routes; congestion on the school route and on the modes of transport used by children. The policy plan also includes an expansion of Cycle Right Training in both primary and post-primary schools to train an additional 5,000 children annually. There is some potential for GUI to provide useful data in this area and on cycling accidents and safety. GUI could also potentially collect data linked to plans to invest in remote working hubs by asking parents about their proximity to a remote working hub or more generally about parent commutes. This would help assess the extent to which hubs meet their goals of being in locations that suit workers and are close to ELC facilities.

Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021–2025

The Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan sets out a roadmap for building a physically and mentally healthier Ireland. The plan has four key high level objectives (DoH, 2021):

- Increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life
- Reduce health inequalities
- Protect the public from threats to health and wellbeing
- Create an environment where every individual and sector can play their part in achieving a healthy Ireland

GUI data could play a role in understanding the extent of health inequalities, and physical health in relation to issues such as nutritional knowledge, infant nutrition (including breastfeeding), weight, parental weight and its relationship to child weight, and physical activity of both the parents and child.

National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020: Creating a Better Society for All

The National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 is a strategy designed to change attitudes and practices which prevent women's and girls' full participation in education, employment and public life at all levels, and to improve services for

women and girls with a priority given to those experiencing the poorest outcomes.

The strategy contains six high level objectives (DCEDIY, 2018b):

- To advance socio-economic equality for women and girls
- To advance the physical and mental health and well-being of women and girls
- To ensure the visibility in society of women and girls, and their equal and active citizenship
- To advance women in leadership at all levels
- To combat violence against women
- To embed gender equality in decision-making

There is some cross over between First 5 and the National Strategy for Women and Girls. Both seek to support the knowledge and uptake of maternity benefit, and balanced work and care that allows equal opportunities for both parents. They both aim to increase the access to and availability of safe and high quality ELC, while also reducing poverty in female-headed and one-parent households.

GUI data on issues such as parent's views on and use of childcare, childcare affordability, availability, quality and proximity would all be useful in this context. The relationship between these factors and the mother's likelihood to return to work could also be explored through GUI. Data on the gender division of caring responsibilities would be beneficial.

The National Equality Data Strategy is also currently under development by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Central Statistics office. The strategy will put in place a strategic approach to improving the collection, use and dissemination of equality data.

The strategy will provide a general approach for identifying current gaps in equality data and guidance on how to fill those gaps, as well as develop standard practices in classification.

National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021

The National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy is designed to promote inclusion, protect rights and to improve quality of life and wellbeing for LGBTI+ people enabling them to participate fully in Ireland's social, economic, cultural, and political life. The strategy

has four thematic pillars, it aims to ensure that LGBTI+ people in Ireland are (DCEDIY, 2019):

- Visible and included
- Treated equally
- Healthy
- Safe and supported

There is little overlap between First 5 and The National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy in terms of infants.

The National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy highlights the need for same sex parents to be treated equitably under the law to opposite sex parents and for same sex parents to be supported to the same extent of opposite sex parents. GUI data on same sex families and the challenges they encounter with encountering services and/or discrimination would be useful in this context.

National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017 – 2021

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy aims to improve the lives of the Traveller and Roma communities within Ireland. Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in Ireland. The plan has 10 strategic themes which include (DCEDIY, 2017):

- Cultural identity
- Education
- Employment and the traveller economy
- Children and youth
- Health
- Gender equality
- Anti-discrimination and equality
- Accommodation
- Traveller and Roma communities
- Public services

First 5 and the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy both include a theme for diversity in ELC settings. First 5 aims to ensure a proportional amount of Roma and Traveller children are enrolled in ELC settings.

The ability to generate sufficient data on Traveller children in the new infant cohort to allow for statistical analysis and disaggregation is a key issue to be considered in the GUI sampling strategy.

Caolan Rooney

Research and Evaluation Unit | April 2023



For queries please contact
the Research and
Evaluation team at
research@equality.gov.ie

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