

New Funding Model for Early learning and Care and School-Age Childcare and Related First 5 Commitments

Introduction

First 5, A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, published in November 2018, sets out an ambitious programme of work across Government Departments to improve the experiences and outcomes of children in Ireland from birth to age 5 across all aspects of their lives in the coming ten years.

First 5 includes four Goals that will be delivered through nine interlocking Objectives (under Goals A, B and C) and five Building Blocks (under Goal D) as follows:

Goal A: Strong and supportive families and communities

Objective 1: Parents will be assisted to balance working and caring to contribute to optimum child development and to best suit their family circumstances.

Objective 2: Parents will benefit from high-quality, evidence-based information and services on various aspects of parenting to support child development and positive family relationships along a continuum of need.

Objective 3: Families and communities will be supported to provide children with the necessary material and practical resources to encourage positive development in the early years.

Goal B: Optimum physical and mental health

Objective 4: Parents, families and communities will be supported to engage in and promote positive health behaviours among babies and young children, starting from the pre-conception period.

Objective 5: Babies and young children have access to safe, high-quality, evidence-based integrated primary, preventative and specialist healthcare services.

Objective 6: Babies, young children and their parents enjoy positive mental health.

Goal C: Positive play-based early learning

Objective 7: Parents, families and communities are supported to provide a nurturing and stimulating environment for children's early learning, starting from birth.

Objective 8: Babies and young children have access to safe, high-quality, developmentally-appropriate, integrated ELC (and school-age childcare), which reflects diversity of need.

Objective 9: Children will be supported in their transitions to (and through) ELC settings and onwards to primary schooling.

Goal D: An effective early childhood system

Building Block 1: Committed leadership, strong governance and positive collaboration and engagement aligned around a shared vision for babies, young children and their families.

Building Block 2: A robust regulation, inspection and quality assurance regime to enforce and raise standards.

Building Block 3: An appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families.

Building Block 4: A strong national infrastructure for research and data that is used to inform policy and practice alongside an ongoing programme of monitoring and evaluation.

Building Block 5: Additional public funding that is strategically invested to achieve the best outcomes for babies, young children and their families.

Under Goal D, Building Block 5, there is a commitment to at least doubling investment in early learning and care and school-age childcare by 2028. This Building Block also sets out the commitment to develop a new funding model for early learning and care and school-age childcare. This funding model will serve as the vehicle to ensure additional investment delivers for children families and the State and there are a range of First 5 commitments that will inform this development. The funding model also has the potential to serve as the vehicle for other First 5 commitments.

Summary of commitments that will inform the development of, and/or can be delivered through, the funding model

First 5 identifies a range of actions that will be key inputs to the development of the funding model. For example, there is a commitment to a) develop an appropriate mechanism to control fees charged to parents, b) undertake a review of working conditions that could be supported so that employers can attract and retain staff, c) develop mechanisms to provide additional supports to settings where there are high proportions of children at risk of poverty. There is also a commitment to develop early learning and care and school-age childcare as a mechanism to provide supports for parents (resourced through the funding model).

With the potential to also resource through the funding model, First 5 commits to:

- integrating health behaviour supports and services into child-serving settings, including early learning and care and school age childcare. A range of actions will deliver on this commitment, including an action to pilot a meals programme in early learning and care. Funding has been secured to undertake this pilot in 2020.
- develop mechanisms to support parental involvement in early learning and care settings. While mechanisms have yet to be determined, a range of examples are provided in First 5, including parent advisory boards, home-setting liaison officer, designated staff with responsibility for supporting parents.
- develop a model of transition supports. As part of this development, transition templates developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment will be

piloted (with the necessary supports) and commitment has been given to explore the possibility introducing a requirement for all settings to engage with this initiative.

Finally, there is a commitment to continue to administer a sustainability fund to ensure provision in the most deprived areas do not fail as a result of higher levels of need or temporary fluctuations in occupancy while an alternative mechanism to this sustainability fund is developed as part of the new funding model.

Other commitments that may influence the development of the funding model

Given the importance of parental care in the first year of life. First 5 seeks to facilitate mothers and fathers to care for their child at home during their first year. Building on existing provision for maternity leave and paternity leave, a new parents leave and benefit scheme will be introduced in 2019. Under this scheme, an individual entitlement of two weeks paid parents leave will be introduced in November 2019 and, over lifetime of First 5, this individual entitlement will increase incrementally so that by 2028 parents in Ireland will be supported to look after their babies at home for their first year. This will significantly reduce the demand for non-parental early learning and care for children under 12 months.

First 5 seeks to make high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare more affordable. While affordability is a key consideration for the Expert Group and specific commitments have been set out in this regard (i.e. fee control mechanisms), First 5 also commits to addressing affordability through continuation of, or enhancements to, existing programmes and schemes, (Early Childhood Care and Education Programme and the National Childcare Scheme).

Likewise, while the Expert Group will seek to leverage quality through the funding model, there are other First 5 commitments that also seek to raise the quality of early learning and care and school-age childcare. For example, First 5 commits to a graduate-led workforce so that by 2028, all managers, assistant managers and room leaders will hold an appropriate degree level qualification. A Workforce Development Plan (separate briefing note provided) will support the achievement of these targets – so too will the funding model. In addition, First 5 commits to considerable reform of the regulatory and inspection regime. Such reform may influence the overall development of the funding model.

Finally, given the scale of reform envisaged for the early learning and care and school-age childcare system over the next decade and the increased levels of investment anticipated, First 5 commits to redesigning the operating system for early learning and care and school-age childcare to ensure it is equipped to deal with the reform. As part of this review, a range of possible options will be considered, including the establishment of a new dedicated Statutory Agency or an executive arm to the Department or the use of existing State Agencies.

Conclusion:

First 5 is an ambitious ten-year strategy for early childhood that will radically improve supports and services for young children and their families. Significant reform of the early learning and care and school-age childcare system is envisaged over the next decade.

The new funding model will be the vehicle to ensure additional investment committed to in First 5 will deliver for children, families and the State. There are also a number of commitments



in First 5 that can be delivered through this funding model or may influence its development. This paper has provided a summary of these commitments.

The Department will provide periodic updates on these commitments; will prepare more detailed briefing for the Expert Group if requested to do so and will consider approaches to effectively manage how the implementation of these commitments interact with the work of the Expert Group.