

OECD Public Governance Reviews

Together for Children and Young People in Ireland

TOWARDS A NEW GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK



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Please cite this publication as:

OECD (2024), *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/12f4dfb2-en>.

ISBN 978-92-64-93857-1 (print)
ISBN 978-92-64-89165-4 (PDF)
ISBN 978-92-64-44261-0 (HTML)
ISBN 978-92-64-45717-1 (epub)

OECD Public Governance Reviews
ISSN 2219-0406 (print)
ISSN 2219-0414 (online)

Photo credits: Cover design by Francesca Romani using primary artwork from disat386/Freepik.com.

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Foreword

Ireland has passed significant reforms over the last three decades to enhance outcomes for children and young people. Despite progress, child poverty remains a concern with some groups, including single-parent households, being disproportionately affected. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges by widening inequalities and having a disproportionate impact on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The cost-of-living crisis added further pressure on government to place children and young people at the centre of policy. Trust in government has also been impacted, with only 2 in 10 (or 21%) young people (aged 18-34) reportedly trusting their government in 2022. Further, while young people across OECD countries tend to trust their government less than older age groups, Ireland shows the widest disparities, with a 38-percentage point (p.p.) difference between young people (18-29) and those over 50 compared to a gap of 9 p.p. on average between both age groups across OECD countries.

In this context, Ireland's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth requested the support of the Directorate General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) of the European Commission and the OECD in strengthening policy and governance arrangements for tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people, including implementing *Young Ireland*, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (0-24) 2023-28. This report compiles the research, analysis, and good practices – most prominently from Finland, New Zealand, and Spain – that underpin the OECD assessment and recommendations to support Ireland in these efforts. It also informs the development of a proposed action plan to guide policymakers to build strong governance arrangements underpinning *Young Ireland*, as well as the execution of capacity-building exercises and peer-learning workshops for child and youth policymakers in Ireland.

The report was prepared by the Youth Empowerment and Intergenerational Justice Unit in the OECD's Public Governance Directorate (GOV), which led Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 and 8, and contributed to Chapter 3. Contributions were made by the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Goals Division in GOV, which led Chapter 7 and contributed to Chapters 1 and 8. The Child Well-Being Unit in the Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE) prepared Chapter 6, and contributed to Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 7. Finally, the Social Policy Division in the OECD's Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (ELS) provided contributions to Chapters 1, 3, 7, and 8.

The report is guided by the OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People, the OECD Child Well-being Measurement Framework, and OECD work on Integrated Policymaking for Child Well-Being. It contributes to the OECD programmes of work on public governance for inclusiveness and investing in youth, investing in children's well-being, and country-specific collaboration. The analysis on public governance was carried out under the auspices of the OECD Public Governance Committee and it is informed by the work and legal standards of the OECD Public Governance Committee, the Committee of Senior Budget Officials, the Regulatory Policy Committee, and their sub-bodies. The analysis on youth and child well-being was carried out under the auspices of the OECD Employment, Labour, and Social Affairs Committee.

The action was funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument, and implemented by the OECD, in co-operation with the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support of the European Commission.

Acknowledgements

The report was prepared by the OECD Public Governance Directorate (GOV), headed by Elsa Pilichowski. It was developed under the strategic direction of Martin Forst, Head of the Governance Reviews and Partnerships Division in GOV, and of Miriam Allam, Deputy Head of Division.

The report was led by Moritz Ader, who co-ordinates the OECD's work on Youth Empowerment and Intergenerational Justice, and co-authored by Ollin Pérez-Raynaud (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8, and contributions to Chapter 3), Gamze Igroglu and Aysegul Bayar (contributions to Chapter 2 and 3), Karen Smith and Patrick Lee (contributions to Chapters 4 and 5), as well as Giulia Morando, Cindy Boreillo, and Fabian Keske in the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Goals Division in GOV (Chapter 7 and contributions to Chapter 1 and 8). Other co-authors include Grainne Dirwan and Olivier Thevenon from the Child Well-Being Unit in the Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE) who prepared Chapter 6, and contributed to Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 7. Finally, Veerle Miranda and Martina García Aisa from the Social Policy Division in the OECD's Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (ELS) provided contributions to Chapters 1, 3, 7, and 8. Ciara Muller with support from Francesca Romani prepared the manuscript for publication and conducted quality control.

The report benefitted from comments of colleagues from the OECD Public Governance Directorate, including Andrea Uhrhammer (Director's Office), Misha Kaur (Governance Reviews and Partnerships Division), Tatyana Teplova (Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Goals Division), and Daniel Trnka (Regulatory Policy Division).

The OECD would like to thank European Commission's DG REFORM for its financial support and guidance throughout the project, in particular Elisa Gomez Aleman. The Secretariat would also like to acknowledge the excellent collaboration with Bryan Patten and Clare Farrell from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in Ireland, which has been instrumental to the success of this project and report. The report has also greatly benefited from the information, assessments and feedback received from many stakeholders in Ireland, in particular representatives from government departments including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Education, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Health, the Department of Justice, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The OECD also wishes to express its gratitude to representatives from agencies including Tusla – the Child and Family Agency, the Health Service Executive (HSE), an Garda Síochána and the Central Statistics Office. The report also benefited from inputs from sub-national government bodies including Local Community Development Committees, Local Authorities and the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC). Feedback also was received from the Ombudsman for Children's Office, the National Economic and Social Council, Irish experts in social, legal, and economic protection for children and young people, and non-governmental associations working with children and young people.

The co-authors would also like to express gratitude to the Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in New Zealand, the National Child Strategy Unit, Ministry

of Social Affairs and Health of Finland, and the Sub-Directorate General for Child and Adolescent Policies and Institute of Youth of the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 of Spain for sharing good practices and lessons learned as peers, which have informed this report.

This report was reviewed by the Public Governance Committee [as document GOV/PGC(2024)6] and by the Working Party on Social Policy of the Employment, Labour, and Social Affairs Committee [as document WISE/ELSA/WP1(2024)1] on 22 March 2024 and prepared for publication by the OECD Secretariat.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

BOBF	Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children & young people 2014-20
CAHMS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CFSN	Child and Family Support Network
CRA	Children's Rights Alliance
CRIA	Child Rights Impact Assessment
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CWPRG	New Zealand's Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group
CYP	Children and Young People
CYPP	Children and Young People's Plan
CYPSC	Children and Young People's Services Committees
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education Programme
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
FRC	Family Resource Centre
GAL	Guardian Ad Litem
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GUI	The National Longitudinal Study: Growing Up in Ireland
GYDP	Garda Youth Diversion Projects
HIQA	Health and Information Quality Authority
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICT	Information Communication Technology
LCDC	Local Community Development Committees
LECP	Local Economic and Community Plan
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
OCO	Ombudsman for Children Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEI	Prevention and Early Intervention Initiatives
PPFS	Programme of work for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support
(Youth) RIA	Youth Regulatory Impact Assessment (Youth Check)
SOG	Senior Officials Group
SLA	Service Level Agreement
Tusla	Child and Family Agency
YDPs	Youth Diversion Projects

Executive summary

Ireland has committed to addressing child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people. At the conclusion of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* in 2020, the Irish Government launched reforms to achieve the Prime Minister's ambition to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child and to meet EU Child Guarantee obligations. In 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach established a Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office. Additionally, *Young Ireland*, the new National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-28 was introduced, as was a review of the Child Care Act 1991.

Despite improvements, challenges persist for children and young people. While the number of children living in consistent poverty, (i.e., who are both at risk of poverty and experiencing material deprivation) fell from 9% in 2011 to 5% in 2021, it rose to 7.5% in 2022. Additionally, over one in seven children are at risk of poverty, living in households with income below the poverty line. Ireland benefits from high tertiary education rates and low school dropout rates, with youth unemployment aligning with OECD averages. Although youth poverty is below the OECD average, 13% of young people received income-replacement benefits in 2019. Socio-emotional and mental health outcomes have been worsening since the mid-2010s and, along with the topic of housing shortages, require greater investment. Young people's trust in government is declining, and their participation in institutionalised civic activities remains low. Despite a younger-than-OECD-average Government Cabinet, young people are underrepresented in the public service and parliament.

Streamlining inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination

National policy co-ordination structures in Ireland have improved collaboration on policies for children and youth, but are challenged by overlapping mandates, co-ordination fatigue, limited action-oriented focus, resource-intensiveness, unclear accountability lines, and proliferation. Greater alignment of goals among departments and agencies is needed. At the subnational level, differences are noted regarding co-ordinating, planning and reporting cycles. New governance and co-ordination structures under *Young Ireland*, the proposed National Childcare Advisory Committee, and the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office aim to tackle siloed approaches and promote accountability in addressing complex policy challenges facing children and young people.

The Government of Ireland could consider:

- Enacting statutory child poverty reduction targets.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in driving government co-ordination on cross-cutting policy challenges, including across electoral cycles.
- Mapping co-ordination mechanisms and defining clear terms of reference to prevent mandate overlaps.
- Developing a monitoring framework to co-ordinate tracking of child and youth policy.
- Setting a statutory 'duty to co-operate' for departments and agencies beyond information sharing.

- Allocating dedicated funding for policy delivery structures including the Child and Family Agency to support strategic alignment and address service gaps.
- Reviewing and streamlining subnational level co-ordination structures for effective planning and delivery.

Promoting evidence-based policymaking and services

Ireland aims to improve evidence-based policymaking through enhanced data collection. However, gaps persist regarding gathering and utilising data on vulnerable children and young people's unmet needs and outcomes. Initiatives including the Child Rights Impact Assessment, the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024-28, and the Children and Young People's Research Programme aim to integrate children's needs into policymaking while building skills for engaging with vulnerable youth.

The Government of Ireland could consider:

- Basing prioritisation of policy objectives on robust evidence on inequalities.
- Strengthening stakeholder co-ordination on data priorities.
- Improving statistical measures and evidence collection to address evidence gaps for monitoring child poverty and its impact on child well-being.
- Enabling disaggregation and linkage of data in Ireland based on, among others, age, and equality indicators.
- Ensuring timely reporting on unmet public service needs and building robust information systems.
- Enhancing data quality and integration of datasets by standardising definitions and data collection/reporting cycles and building data protection capacities.
- Integrating international experiences in developing the Child and Youth Impact Assessment prototype.
- Supporting Departments to conduct meaningful child and youth consultation, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances, through training and guidance dissemination.

Reinforcing accountability frameworks

Political accountability mechanisms exist, but not all relevant Ministers engage in Committees affecting child and youth outcomes. The oversight system is complex, with frequently unclear or overlapping roles among bodies. Interdepartmental accountability is limited by siloed policy implementation. Reforms on spending transparency include changes to the budget system and studies assessing government spending on children. Yet, Public Service Performance Reports lack conclusive information on child-related investments. While government actions are publicised, citizen-focused documentation for public accountability is limited.

The Government of Ireland could consider:

- Ensuring that relevant Oireachtas Committee(s) periodically invite the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to report on the implementation of *Young Ireland*.
- Defining and clarifying roles, responsibilities, and mandates across independent oversight institutions.
- Requiring concise reporting on outcomes and impacts from departments involved in implementing *Young Ireland* and constituent strategies to enhance interdepartmental accountability.

- Reinforcing financial and public accountability through, among others, strengthening expenditure tracking methodologies.

Implementing *Young Ireland* and promoting policy coherence

Young Ireland aspires to promote co-ordinated, effective, and efficient policy implementation. It introduces new governance structures, measures to strengthen policymaking and service delivery, and a focused policy scope. “Spotlights” target persistent cross-sectoral challenges – child poverty, disability services, and youth mental health – and foster co-ordinated cross-departmental work. Constituent strategies on specific areas or groups complement *Young Ireland*, although improved policy coherence, stronger monitoring and evaluation, streamlining inter-ministerial co-ordination, and clearer allocation of implementation and reporting responsibilities is required.

The Government of Ireland could consider:

- Clarifying mandates of governance bodies underpinning *Young Ireland* and constituent strategies.
- Incentivising continuous high-level representation and strengthening local-level representation in *Young Ireland* governance structures.
- Enhancing policymakers’ capacities to engage children and young people meaningfully throughout *Young Ireland*’s lifetime, using child-friendly platforms and materials.
- Developing a formal results-based Monitoring and Evaluation framework to systematically monitor and track *Young Ireland*’s progress and performance.
- Aligning strategic goals of *Young Ireland* with other child and youth-related strategies and integrating monitoring and accountability processes of relevant strategies into those of *Young Ireland*.

1 Recommendations to strengthen governance capacities to deliver for children and young people in Ireland

This chapter outlines policy recommendations to strengthen inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination in the delivery of policies and services for children and young people. It also provides guidance to foster evidence-based approaches to policymaking and service delivery for children and young people, and bolster monitoring and evaluation practices and governance arrangements to ensure and promote accountability for policy outcomes. Further, recommendations in this chapter include guidance on the implementation of *Young Ireland*, Ireland's National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (0-24) 2023-2028, as well as coordination with constituent strategies.

Summary of Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed with the aim to strengthen the planning and delivery of policies and services for children and young people in Ireland, and to respond to the challenges and opportunities identified in Chapters 3 to 8 of this Report. Existing OECD guidelines and Recommendations were used to inform this chapter, as were examples selected by the Government of Ireland, with support from the OECD, from Finland, New Zealand, and Spain.

Coordination

To strengthen priority-setting and the implementation of national child and youth policy, enhance cross-government coordination and interagency working, and support more effective coordination at the sub-national level, the OECD recommends that the Government of Ireland considers:

Enhancing inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination on policy planning and service delivery for children and young people by:

- Establishing mechanisms to ensure addressing child poverty and improving policy outcomes for children and young people remains high on the policy agenda and that successive governments continue to promote a whole-of-government approach to child and youth policy, for instance by:
 - legislating for a statutory obligation to set periodic child poverty reduction targets as well as and broader child and youth outcome targets – for the medium term and the long-term, considering sub-groups at greatest risk of poor outcomes, and to report on progress against set targets.
 - setting out a long-term vision, mandate and human and financial capacity needs for the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office that ensures policy coherence across electoral cycles to help safeguard its operations from political considerations.
- Minimising the risk of coordination fatigue, creation of new siloes and/or duplication of efforts while increasing the accountability of interdepartmental coordination mechanisms by:
 - Ensuring that the terms of reference, composition and roles and responsibilities of interdepartmental coordination bodies are clearly defined and agreed in advance;
 - Mapping and streamlining existing mechanisms in place to support interdepartmental working on child and youth policy;
 - Ensuring that the division of responsibilities within and across government departments does not create avoidable demands for interdepartmental working (e.g., by allocating closely related responsibilities to a single unit where possible).
- Ensuring that in monitoring cross-government progress in relation to child poverty and well-being, the Programme Office is also evaluated in terms of its effectiveness to co-ordinate and focus government action, to inform the future development of the Office. This evaluation could include feedback from across relevant departments.
- Reviewing and establishing a robust framework for interdepartmental and interagency cooperation to implement *Young Ireland* in relation to planning, provision and delivery of services and programmes as well as sharing of information by:
- Providing for a statutory ‘duty to cooperate’ through amending the Child Care Act 1991 with the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023), which is prescriptive rather than permissive and imposes a duty on relevant departments and agencies to work collaboratively in the planning and delivery of services and activities to children; share information and documentation to assist in the provision of services where relevant; and identify and address structural issues.

- Creating effective and accountable coordination structures at senior levels across all relevant public agencies. This includes, in particular, the Child and Family Agency and the Health Service Executive as well as agencies under the respective aegis of the Departments of Education, Social Protection, and Justice.
- Allocating funding for relevant agencies to support cooperation in relation to planning, provision and delivery of services and programmes for children, young people, and families.
- Strengthening alignment of strategic and operational priorities between DCEDIY and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency by leveraging ongoing governance reforms to, for instance, promote the Agency's mandate and improve monitoring of performance and expenditure of resources used to deliver early intervention, prevention, and family support services.
- Enhancing the capacity of the Child and Family Agency to drive efforts addressing child and youth disadvantage and integrated service delivery by:
 - Allocating and prioritising sufficient resources for the Tusla Integrated Reform Programme, including the expansion of more integrated family support and preventative and welfare services' in line with its mandate.
 - Requiring the agency to adopt measures to increase the effectiveness of responses, including reporting on waiting times under integrated service delivery pathways (Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks) and on the service gaps inhibiting delivery under these pathways, to gauge unmet need for services at local level.
- Enhancing coordination at sub-national level by:
 - Reviewing and streamlining the structures for coordinating child and youth service planning and delivery at local level by defining clear mandates for the role of local government and housing, Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) and other existing structures and bodies (e.g., Education and Training Boards).
 - Strengthening the functioning of local government and CYPSC structures by reviewing the funding model to support the coordination function of CYPSC; and aligning planning, delivery, and reporting cycles across CYPSC and Local Community Development Committees (LCDC); including by ensuring that CYPSC are represented on LCDC; and that both inform each other's strategic plans.

Evidence

To strengthen evidence-based approaches to policymaking and service delivery for children and young people, and informing policy planning and service delivery with the perspectives of children and young people, the OECD recommends that the Government of Ireland considers:

Addressing data and evidence gaps, enhancing data quality and compatibility, addressing barriers to accessing, and sharing and using data, by:

- Selecting priorities for national child and youth policy and related objectives and targets based on robust multidimensional evidence on the nature, extent, and determinants of inequalities in outcomes, across the five national outcomes across sub-groups of children and young people. This includes evidence on which subgroups are at greatest risk of poor outcomes and why, including evidence on policy gaps, as well as inequalities in access to resources and services and the factors behind them (e.g., lack of demand, availability, affordability, or discriminatory practices).
- Improving statistical measures and evidence collection to fill key evidence gaps for monitoring child poverty and child well-being. Key improvements include enriching income poverty measures with age disaggregation to capture the effect of a child's age on poverty risk, including measures on children exposed to persistent poverty. Further, developing more extensive indicators on child living

standards that include children not covered in household income surveys (e.g., children in alternative care, homeless children), as well as map financial barriers to accessing healthcare. Supporting local data collection on parenting support initiatives, aligned with national standards and common data collection instruments, would further aid policy monitoring.

- Establishing a mechanism to bring together relevant stakeholders involved in data collection and research in relation to children, young people and families to improve consultation and coordination on the selection of research and data priorities and funding allocation, in alignment with existing commitments of *Young Ireland* to develop a cross-government research programme.
- Ensuring that survey and administrative data gathered in Ireland can be disaggregated and linked together, as appropriate bearing in mind ethical and legal considerations on the basis of, (1) age (using smaller age bands reflecting different stages of childhood and adolescence) (2) the full range of equality indicators, including the equality grounds currently protected by law, as well as indicators of socio-economic status and (3) local geographic area.
- Ensuring timely and regular reporting on service provision for children, young people and families using indicators which highlight gaps and disparities at national and subnational levels. These indicators should identify disparities in services, unmet needs, inequalities in respect of access to and uptake of services across sub-groups of children, young people and families, particularly those at greatest risk of poor outcomes. Measures to consider include, for example:
 - Setting up robust, integrated, and consistent information systems and compiling data on unmet needs or waiting lists for services and on relevant socio-demographic and equality characteristics of those waiting for services (including, e.g., ethnicity; citizenship/residency status; socio-economic status; disability and children-in-care) to facilitate reporting across geographic/administrative areas;
 - Collecting and using relevant survey and administrative data to gauge unmet needs for healthcare and other social services across different areas and sub-groups;
 - Ensuring that indicators of the *Children and Young People's Indicator Set* are informed by targeted efforts to map the needs of sub-groups at greatest risk of poor outcomes.
- Enhancing data quality and integrating data from different data sets by (1) establishing common standards and developing guidelines and templates to collect sociodemographic and equality data; (2) building capacities among relevant personnel in government departments and agencies, and in the CSO sector, with emphasis on responsibilities in relation to data protection and ethical considerations; (3) promoting the adoption of uniform definitions for variables in survey and administrative data; (4) supporting standardisation of data collection and reporting cycles.

Strengthening consultation and engagement practices, as well as mainstreaming the perspectives of children and young people in policymaking by:

- Developing public management tools to mainstream child and young people's perspectives in policymaking. This includes the development of a regulatory impact assessment mechanism with the capacity to anticipate the impact of policy and new and amended legislation on children and young people, building upon the ongoing prototype for a Child Rights Impact Assessment under the Enabling Environment of *Young Ireland*.
- Build on existing work and initiatives (e.g., Hub na nÓg, the National Participation Office, the Comhairle na nÓg, and the Student Participation Unit in the Department of Education) to further strengthen capacities across government departments and agencies to deliver, and make full use of, meaningful consultation with children, young people and, when relevant, with their guardians/carers/parents (e.g., parents/foster parents of children in care, parents experiencing homelessness, parents with mental health concerns). This involves equipping policymakers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence to deliver consultation activities through

disseminating clear and accessible guidance material that includes steps, principles, and methods to deliver meaningful consultation and participation opportunities which reflect ethical considerations and consider the needs and capacities of children, young people, including those living in vulnerable circumstances (e.g. in care, homeless, physical, and mental health barriers). Further work can also be done to strengthen policymaker capacities to engage with seldom-heard children by setting participation benchmarks and targets in consultation plans, among others.

Accountability

To strengthen accountability for child and youth policy and outcomes, the OECD recommends that the Government of Ireland considers:

Strengthening political accountability

- Promoting a practice for the relevant Oireachtas Committee(s) to invite the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth to report periodically (e.g., annually) on the implementation of the national policy framework for children and young people, including at the beginning and at the end of the government term of office.
- Further defining and clarifying roles, responsibilities, and mandates in the current system of independent oversight institutions and considering assessing the adequacy of capacities and resources, to prevent duplication of efforts and ensure their effectiveness and efficiency.

Reinforcing interdepartmental accountability

- Introducing annual reporting requirements for all departments involved in the implementation of the national policy framework for children and young people and relevant DCEDIY-led strategies (e.g., DCEDIY, Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Justice, Department of Social Protection, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, etc.) and providing training and guidance (e.g., standardised templates) for policymakers to report in a concise and systematic way on their outcomes and impact. This could be facilitated, for example, by investments in building data and digital infrastructure at the central government level, in line with the *Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023*, to allow departments to share evidence and report efficiently on their respective contributions, e.g., using a centralised platform or database.

Supporting efforts to increase financial accountability

- Reviewing existing methodologies developed by DCEDIY to track and analyse expenditures benefitting children and young people and, in alignment with current reforms to develop an *Enabling Environment*, expanding child and youth-sensitive budget planning to all Government departments, with the aim of quantifying investments made for the implementation of the child and youth policy, and prioritising ‘value for money’ interventions that consider the best interest of children and young people.

Promoting public accountability

- Issuing child and youth-friendly communications on a centralised online platform and disseminating age-appropriate material on child and youth rights, government services, relevant stakeholders, legislation, strategies, and engagement opportunities available to them, with a special focus on seldom-heard children and young people. These efforts could be prioritised through the new Communications Platform developed in the context of the *Young Ireland*.

Young Ireland and policy coherence

Reinforcing governance capacities to support the implementation of Ireland's national child and youth strategy, Young Ireland

To improve public governance arrangements and capacities to deliver on the commitments of *Young Ireland*, the OECD recommends that the Government of Ireland considers:

- Coordinating and clarifying the mandates of coordination bodies responsible for the implementation of *Young Ireland* to mitigate overlap in functions with other coordination bodies of relevance. Further, developing legislative and administrative incentives to secure continuous and ongoing high-level representation from the Department of the Taoiseach, DCEDIY, relevant Departments, Tusla and other relevant stakeholders driving the implementation of *Young Ireland*.
- Include the national-level representation of (a) local coordination structure(s) on the governance structures set up for *Young Ireland* with the capacity to coordinate among relevant child and youth (stakeholders) and service providers locally to consider local contexts and priorities in rolling out the strategy and ensure alignment between national priorities and local programming and operations.
- Drawing on the forthcoming Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024-28, enhancing policymakers' and service providers' abilities to engage inclusively, responsively, and meaningfully with children and young people in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of *Young Ireland*. This involves disseminating information about *Young Ireland* through child-friendly platforms and in co-operation with national and local child and youth organisations, building administrative capacities across Departments to engage with seldom heard groups throughout the policy cycle, developing age-appropriate consultation materials, and communicating on how feedback informs *Young Ireland*.

Promoting evidence-based policymaking by strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) mechanisms

To enable policymakers to better understand what works and what does not to ensure policy choices are rooted in evidence-informed decisions, the OECD recommends that the Government of Ireland considers:

- Developing a formal results-based Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system to rigorously monitor and track the progress and performance of *Young Ireland*. Such M&E system would help policymakers to demonstrate the impact generated by government actions and allow to rigorously identify promising interventions, as well as challenges or weaknesses that may arise throughout the implementation of those interventions. The M&E system should be sustained on a clear and explicit articulation of the logic of change underpinning *Young Ireland*, detailing what the policy framework is expected to do (inputs, activities, and outputs) and what it aims to achieve (outcomes and impacts). Adequate funding, resources, and training for the development and implementation of the M&E system would be key.

Promoting policy coherence and implementation in a context of multiple strategies and frameworks

To foster policy coherence and implementation of strategies and frameworks aiming to tackle child poverty and promote better outcomes for children and young people, the OECD recommends that the Government of Ireland considers:

- Ensuring coherence of existing and future child and youth-related policy frameworks with *Young Ireland*, by:

- Continue streamlining implementation structures and arrangements of *Young Ireland*, other strategies led by DCEDIY, including the European Child Guarantee NAP, *First 5*, the Action Plan for Youth Services, and the Department of the Taoiseach's Child Poverty and Well-Being Work Programme 2023-2025.
- Aligning, to the extent possible, strategic goals, objectives, and the definition of the stakeholders responsible for the implementation of relevant sectoral (i.e., linked to specific policy areas such as health, justice, etc.) strategies with an impact on children and young people led by relevant departments (e.g., Department of Education, Department of Health, Department of Social Protection, Department of Justice, etc.) with the goals, objectives and relevant entities identified in *Young Ireland* to ensure policy coherence.
- Integrating the monitoring and accountability processes of relevant policy frameworks into the ones set up for *Young Ireland*. This could be facilitated, for example, by investments in data and digital infrastructure at the central government level, in line with the *Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023*, that would enable standardised reporting on the implementation of the relevant child and youth-related policy frameworks through, e.g., a centralised database/platform.

2 Improving policy outcomes for Ireland's children and young people in a complex context

This chapter provides an overview of existing policy and governance approaches to deliver for children and young people in Ireland. It discusses the most relevant developments in the policy landscape, including the adoption of *Young Ireland*, the Child Poverty and Well-being Work Programme 2023-25 and the National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee. It sets the scene for the report by exploring the legal and institutional reform efforts underway to strengthen policy and governance frameworks towards a whole-of-government approach to tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people.

Improving policy outcomes for children and young people in a complex context

Over the past three decades, Ireland has demonstrated a strong commitment to addressing child poverty and enhancing outcomes for children and young people through a series of legislative, policy, and institutional reforms. This commitment is evidenced by Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. Subsequent significant developments include the elaboration of Ireland's first National Children's Strategy (Our Children - their Lives) in 2000, the creation of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2014 under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, the 2012 Children's Rights Referendum, and the Children's First Act 2015. Other notable initiatives include the renaming of the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 – the predecessor of today's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCYA). Further, developments include the adoption of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People "Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures" (BOBF) 2014-2020 and constituent strategy "First 5" strategy on early years in 2019, the National Youth Strategy for 2015-2020, the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making 2015-2020, and the National Action Plan (NAP) for the European Child Guarantee (ECG), among others.

In Spring 2023, Ireland recognised addressing child poverty and improving child wellbeing as key priorities with the establishment of a Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach (Department of Taoiseach, 2023^[1]) and the publication of its first Child Poverty and Well-being Work Programme 2023-25 "From Poverty to Potential" (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023^[2]). The establishment of this Unit responds to the Taoiseach's ambition to "making Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child" (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023^[3]). Its establishment also aims to bring strategic focus, leadership, and enhanced accountability to action on child poverty and wellbeing by harnessing its convening power and capacity to encourage alignment of sectoral and strategic policy objectives (OECD, 2020^[4]). In addition, a review of the Child Care Act 1991 led to the publication of the Heads and General Scheme of the child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023, which proposes arrangements to strengthen cross-sectoral and cross-agency coordination through, for instance, legislating for a 'duty to cooperate' (DCEDIY, 2023^[5]).

Despite progress over the past 10 years, child poverty and social exclusion are still major concerns in Ireland. Ahead of the global financial crisis 2008-09, efforts of poverty reduction were supported by high levels of economic growth and relied mainly on income transfers. Measures implemented as a response to worsening economic and fiscal indicators in the aftermath of the global financial crisis had negative impacts on households with children and resulted in an increase in the number of children living in consistent poverty (from 6.2% in 2008 to 12.7% in 2013) and children "at risk of poverty" (from 17.8% in 2008 to 19.7% in 2014).¹ Notably, the deprivation rate surged from 17.8% to 36.3% over the same period. Child poverty rates had been decreasing since 2014, but 2022 again saw an increase (see Chapter 3). Moreover, some groups of children fare consistently poorly including those in lone parent households, those with low levels of maternal education, children of migrants, minority ethnic groups, Traveller children and children with a disability (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023^[6]).

According to the Social Inclusion Monitor, Ireland did not meet its target of lifting 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020 as initially established in BOBF, and consistent poverty rates and the "at risk of poverty" rate for children is consistently above the national average (Department of Social Protection, 2021^[7]). As of 2022, the Central Statistics Office of Ireland's Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) reports that 19.9% of children under the age of 18 face deprivation, 15.2% of children are at risk of poverty, and 7.5% face consistent poverty (Central Statistics Office, 2022^[8]). In addition, anxiety disorders are prevalent among children, particularly among girls, ranking second highest in the OECD with 55 per 1,000 children, and 71 per 1,000 girls being concerned in Ireland (OECD, 2022^[9]).

The Children's Rights Alliance's Child Poverty Monitor in 2023 highlights progress on addressing child poverty, but also points to existing challenges across issues including food poverty, income adequacy,

education inequality, the high cost of living and the need to emphasise the importance of child play policies (Children's Rights Alliance, 2023^[10]). The report is informed by the European Commission's Recommendation *Investing in Children*, which highlights the importance of tackling child poverty and social exclusion through integrated strategies encompassing not only children's material security but also the promotion of equal opportunities (European Commission, 2013^[11]).

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted outcomes on children and young people due to prolonged school closures, social isolation, and limited access to health and welfare services, among others. The impact of the pandemic was disproportionate, particularly on children and young people with socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, including Traveller and Roma children, children with a disability, children in lone parent families, as well as sexual and gender minorities. Available evidence confirms that the pandemic led to an increase in domestic and online violence, worsening mental health, a surge in poverty, learning losses and increased school dropout rates for children and young people. More recently, global developments including Russia's war against Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis increased pressures on already limited public housing availability and the capacity of public services to improve social and economic outcomes (Central Statistics Office, 2022^[12]), pointing to the complex context in which the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and other relevant stakeholders in the Irish child and youth sector are operating.

Towards a new governance approach to implement child and youth policy

Exposure to inequality, poverty and social exclusion during childhood can translate into worse educational, social and employment outcomes during adolescence, and later adult life. OECD evidence also demonstrates that the lack of access to or perception of poor quality of support services can have broader implications. The OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions finds that government responsiveness (i.e., the capacity to provide efficient, quality, affordable, timely and citizen-centred public services) is an important determinant of citizen's trust (OECD, 2022^[13]). In Ireland, only 1 out of 5 young individuals (21%) aged 18-34 expressed trust in their government in 2021, compared to 3 out of 5 individuals (59%) aged 50 or above (OECD, 2022^[13]).

Public governance plays a critical role in improving policy outcomes for children and young people as it forms the broader ecosystem of rules, procedures and practices in which stakeholders interact with each other, design and implement policy and programmes and deliver public services and support (OECD, 2020^[14]). Effective coordination across government departments, agencies, service providers, and the community and voluntary sector is crucial, given that children and young people have specific needs spanning all policy and service areas such as education, employment, health, housing, justice, civic and political participation, gender equality and environment. Moreover, outcomes in different policy areas can impact each other. Breaking down silos to promote whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to improving policy outcomes for children and youth is therefore critical, as well as for tracking the outcomes and impact of government action and spending for this purpose.

Children and young people are not homogeneous groups, and the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated again that intersecting identity factors need to be considered when assessing levels of vulnerability and disadvantage (OECD, 2022^[15]). Prominent examples of governance gaps in Ireland, such as the *Molly* case² and the case of *Jack*³ (See Chapter 4) have prompted significant legal, policy and institutional reforms. However, despite these important initiatives, OECD interviews with stakeholders in the Irish child and youth sector suggest that relevant service needs are not being met. For instance, children and young people with complex mental and physical health needs continue to face challenges to access appropriate counsel and quality support due to fragmentation in the delivery of services and lack of coordination between relevant departments and agencies. Reportedly, a lack of incentives to drive policy co-ordination, siloed accountability structures, lack of age-disaggregated evidence in relevant areas and the absence of

incentives rewarding cross-sectoral approaches, among others, persist as barriers to improving outcomes, in particular for disadvantaged groups.

In a context of limited financial resources, effective governance arrangements are also crucial for the effective use of such resources. For example, a child's access to education can have a significant impact on future employment opportunities, ability to afford housing and health outcomes and the risk of long-term dependence on state support. Individuals with a history of unemployment in their first years after graduating are likely to face lower wages, limited job opportunities, and reduced pension benefits (OECD, 2020^[14]). The OECD study on the economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage highlights negative impacts of childhood disadvantage on adult health and access to employment, and points to large costs for societies, totalling the equivalent of 3.4% of GDP annually, or 3.9% in Ireland due to potential loss of income tax and social contribution revenues (OECD, 2022^[16]). Reducing child poverty is therefore not only crucial to improve economic prospects and well-being at an individual level, but also for economic growth and social cohesion more broadly (OECD, 2022^[16]).

To address governance gaps and improve outcomes for children and young people, the Government of Ireland has sought to establish a more effective governance framework for child and youth policy. In this context, the OECD, in cooperation with the European Commission's DG REFORM, is supporting Ireland through an assessment of the current governance and policy frameworks in place to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. Recent developments, such as the expansion of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in 2020, the review of governance mechanisms in DCEDIY, an ongoing reform of Tusla, proposed amendments to the Child Care Act 1991, and most notably the new Policy Framework, *Young Ireland*, provide an occasion to identify more effective and sustainable structures, procedures, and practices.

Beyond the various constituent policy strategies and plans operating under its lead (e.g. *Young Ireland*, First 5, National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee, and others), the Departments of the Taoiseach (Child Poverty and Well-being Work Programme 2023-25), Social Protection (policies supporting families with children, such as the Child Benefits), Justice (Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027), Health (Healthy Ireland Framework 2013-2025; and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-25), each implement important thematic strategies with a significant impact on the five national outcomes that *Young Ireland* identifies for children and young people (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Five National Outcomes for Children and Young People in Ireland

ACTIVE AND HEALTHY

- They have the best possible physical and mental health;
- They make informed health and lifestyle choices;
- They enjoy leisure time, express themselves creatively and access nature and recreation.

ACHIEVING IN LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- They are positively engaging with their learning and development from birth;
- They can successfully navigate life's transitions and make informed choices around their future;
- They have the social, emotional and communication skills to achieve their potential and lead fulfilling lives.

SAFE AND PROTECTED FROM HARM

- They have family and homes that are loving, connected, safe and nurturing;
- They are protected from violence, neglect, ill-treatment and harm;
- Everyone is alert to child protection issues and knows how to report a concern.

ECONOMIC SECURITY AND OPPORTUNITY

- They are protected from poverty and social exclusion;
- They live in stable housing that is affordable, warm and dry, in child- and youth-friendly communities;
- They have pathways to economic participation and independent living.

CONNECTED, RESPECTED AND CONTRIBUTING TO THEIR WORLD

- They are aware of their rights, and are civically socially and environmentally engaged offline and online.
- They are accepted, respected and valued at home, school, and in their community.
- They have their own identity, connected to their culture, language and beliefs.

Source: (DCEDIY, 2023^[17]).

In this complex policy landscape, inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination across the policy cycle is crucial to ensure policy coherence and the delivery of integrated support to children and young people, especially those living in vulnerable circumstances. The importance of pursuing a whole-of-government approach has been acknowledged in previous policy frameworks, notably the National Children's Strategy 2000-2010, *Our Children – Their Lives* and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-20*. The adoption of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (created in 2011 and predecessor of today's DCEDIY) led to the development of new structures to institutionalise cooperation and collaboration and new efforts to promote a culture of shared accountability for child and youth policy outcomes. The whole-of-government ambition of *Young Ireland* underlines these government-wide efforts to strengthen cross-departmental cooperation, such as through the *Civil Service Renewal Strategy 2030*

launched by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in 2021 (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021^[18]).

The implementation arrangements underpinning *Young Ireland* and the Child Poverty and Well-being Work Programme 2023-25 (in development as of February 2023) have been informed by the experiences from the implementation of BOBF 2014-20. Chapter 4 and 8 discuss these learnings and new innovative approaches to foster cross-sectoral approaches, such as the “Spotlights” initiatives, in greater detail. Notable among the extensive review of BOBF 2014-20 is the mid-term review prepared by the Children and Young People’s Advisory Council, a structure established under the now-defunct framework to convene civil society and independent experts to actively inform and support the development and implementation of policies in respect of children and young people. This review points to important initiatives, such as the convening of different government departments to address child poverty, improved child and youth participation in policymaking, and stronger engagement with the voluntary sector. It also highlights challenges to cross-government working, calling for strengthened leadership, accessible data, engagement and collaboration across all relevant departments, agencies and stakeholders (“whole-of-society and cross-government approach”), and a sharper focus for effective implementation and monitoring (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017^[19]).

To support the Government of Ireland in delivering more integrated and coordinated policies and services for children and young people, this Report reviews the implementation of measures to strengthen policy and governance arrangements for tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people with a focus on three dimensions: (i) strengthening evidence-informed approaches; (ii) promoting inter-departmental and inter-agency cooperation; and (iii) reinforcing accountability mechanisms and policy coherence.

Beyond insights collected from evaluations performed by the Irish government and independent stakeholders, as well as relevant studies, the assessment draws on the evidence collected from 30 interviews conducted by the OECD and DG Reform with relevant departments, agencies, and non-governmental stakeholders in Dublin and through virtual meetings between November 2022 and April 2023. The report integrates findings from child and youth outcomes notes (Chapter 3), an analysis of existing policy coordination mechanisms (Chapter 4) and a review of the types of evidence produced to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies at reducing child poverty and improving outcomes of children in socio-economic disadvantage (Chapters 5 and 6). A review of existing accountability structures (Chapter 7), and the implementation of *Young Ireland* and constituent strategies (Chapter 8) is also included in this report. The good practices and recommendations (Chapter 1) presented in this report are informed by a comparative analysis across EU and OECD countries prepared for this project and a peer learning workshop conducted online with the participation of peers from Finland, New Zealand, and Spain on 6 November 2023.

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Notes

¹ The consistent poverty measure in Ireland is based on the number of households both at risk of poverty (as measured as living on less than 60% of the median income) and experiencing enforced deprivation (as defined as lacking two or more items from an 11 item deprivation index) (Central Statistics Office, 2022^[8]; Cantillon et al., 2017^[22]).

² In the *Molly case*, a child with a disability in the care of State reportedly did not receive adequate support due to a lack of coordination between Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the application of standardised approaches in each (Ombudsman for Children Office, 2018^[20]).

³ In the context of the absence of a duty to cooperate, in the case of *Jack*, a child diagnosed with an array of physical disabilities and a profound intellectual disability reportedly did not receive the support needed to improve health and well-being (Ombudsman for Children, 2020^[21]).

3

Analysing child and youth outcomes in Ireland from a comparative perspective

This chapter provides an overview of selected child and youth well-being outcomes in Ireland. It analyses child socioeconomic outcomes, how these affect children's access to key service areas, and the effects of children's socio-economic disadvantages on developmental outcomes. This chapter also explores the outcomes for young people in Ireland, examining socio-economic and public governance factors. Through a comparative lens with OECD countries, it identifies areas of strength and areas needing improvement, providing insights into Ireland's standing in international comparison.

Child well-being outcomes

Introduction

Over the past decade, Ireland has undertaken a comprehensive review of its approach to tackling child poverty and childhood disadvantage, with a renewed focus on significantly reducing poverty levels in line with a pledge articulated in the European Commission 2020 Strategy (Byrne, 2020^[1]). In essence, Ireland's approach to child poverty and tackling childhood disadvantage encompasses a combination of income supports and child-related services and assistance (Gol, 2020^[2]). Further, in 2023, following the statement by the Taoiseach to “making Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child”, Ireland created a Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach to focus on six areas of early action and to bring together policies and services to make an impact on children living in poverty (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023^[3]).

Ireland has been making ongoing efforts to improve children's outcomes by enhancing access to key services. For instance, in 2019, the National Childcare Scheme was introduced with the purpose of significantly reducing the cost of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) and school age childcare for families and extending state-subsidised childcare provision. However, achieving universal access to general practitioner care for children has been slower, while the country has entered a serious housing crisis caused by a lack of supply of houses to buy or rent, high constructions costs and low supply of social housing (DHLGH, 2021^[4]), which has led to the highest number of homeless families on record in Ireland.

Ireland has also been reorienting service provision for children and families to prevention and early intervention and towards progressive universalism, providing services to all children and families yet at the same time ensuring tailored and targeted support to those most in need (Kennedy, 2019^[5]). This entails providing children and families with a richer set of services. Ireland launched First 5 in 2018, a ten-year cross-government strategy for babies, young children, and their families, which is focused on making sure all children have positive early experiences and get life off to a good start. First 5 shares common features with the First 1000 Day approach in several OECD countries to structuring family policy (Riding et al., 2021^[6]). First 5 recognises the early years as a distinct and critical time in child development and aims to give parents and children access to a broader range of supports to promote healthy development.

Ireland established Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in 2014 to deliver child protection and family support services, removing these portfolios from the country's health service, the HSE, and to deliver responsibilities previously performed by the National Educational Welfare Board and the Family Support Agency. Tusla has been engaged through its Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) pillar in reorientating service provision towards prevention and early intervention. This reorientation has led to the introduction of new tools and structures to work with families with lower support needs or where children are at lower risk of harm (i.e., Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks) and area-based prevention and early intervention initiatives for children and families living in areas of high deprivation where outcomes for children and young people are significantly lower (i.e., Area Based Childhood Programme) (DCECIY, 2022^[7]). An 2022 spending review of Tusla-funded community and voluntary sector family support services, which are commissioned under the PPFS pillar, indicated that family support services may be becoming more expensive on a per-child basis because of a rise in case complexities while the demand for family support services is likely to increase in the near term because of the rise in the numbers seeking international protection and the arrival of Ukrainian temporary protection applicants (DCECIY, 2022^[7]). Tusla's child protection services continue to be hindered by ongoing issues with recruitment and retention of social workers (Clarke and Mahon, 2020^[8]; Smith, 2022^[9]). In addition to this, Tusla developed a Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-22 to set out a strategic vision to improve child protection and welfare services in Ireland through six strategic objectives: establishing a national approach to practices, developing clear responsive pathways, fostering a learning environment for staff, growing proactive relationships with partners in the child protection space, empowering staff and leaders to make risk-

sensible decisions, and establishing well defined and measurable outcomes (Tusla, 2017^[10]). For more, see Chapters 4 and 8.

Ireland has developed a national model of parenting support services which the DCEDIY is tasked to oversee. Developing a national model of parenting support services is a key action under Ireland's main policy frameworks for children i.e. First Five and *Young Ireland*. The new national model seeks to address the ad-hoc development of parenting support services in Ireland and the complex and fragmented delivery structure (including state, voluntary/community, and for-profits services). The institutionalisation of parenting supports is in line with the approach of other EU member states (Daly, 2022^[11]).

Another significant policy development is the adoption at the European level of the Child Guarantee to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing the access of children in-need to a set of key services. Ireland is required to earmark 5% of its total ESF+ allocation to combat child poverty (Kennedy, 2022^[12]). Ireland's National Action Plan to implement the Child Guarantee outlines the targeted categories of children in need (to include those children living in or at risk of poverty, children in jobless households, children living in households with substance misuse, mental illness, assessed with a housing need, using emergency accommodation, with disabilities, with mental health issues, membership of the Traveller community, with a migrant background), as well as the intended measures, many of which are already in process. One new action is the development of local Child Poverty Action Plans on a pilot basis.

Partly as a result of the initiatives and plans, the amount of public spending on children has increased significantly over the past decade, reinforcing a trend that had already begun in the mid-2000s. The available comparative data do not include all the spending involved in these plans. However, available data on social spending on families and child education indicate that, since 2011, spending per child in the Irish population has increased by 12% on average, with the increase being highest for pre-school children (+33%) (Table 3.1). Public spending on childcare for children under 6 has particularly increased since 2011 (+47%); however, the level of spending per child in 2019 (USD 22,000) remains below the OECD average (USD 30,800). Expenditure on cash transfers has also risen sharply, covering children of all ages but again especially for children below school age. It is noticeable, however, that income support benefiting older children in Ireland is higher than the OECD average. Spending on education per school-age child has also increased, by an average of 10% since 2011.

Table 3.1. Ireland is increasingly investing in children

OECD average public spending on family benefits and education (primary and secondary) by age, per child USD PPP amounts

		2005	2011	2013	2019	OECD 2019
Cash	age 0-5	14 752	18 945	29 871	26 008	28 330
	age 6-11	13 143	15 632	20 977	23 013	14 398
	age 12-17	12 787	15 614	20 937	23 024	13 776
Childcare ¹	age 0-5	8 268	14 086	15 332	21 887	30 798
	age 6-11	2 515	4 844	3 280	1 212	3 679
	age 12-17	2 515	4 844	3 280	1 212	3 713
Education	age 0-5	2 515	4 844	3 290	1 167	3 789
	age 6-11	8 050	11 655	10 948	10 693	1 157
	age 12-17	34 367	51 373	49 165	52 800	55 672
Total	age 0-5	47 650	73 259	67 761	67 377	65 145
	age 6-11	33 584	49 531	59 431	59 801	63 964
	age 12-17	50 024	71 849	73 422	77 491	78 101
		62 952	93 718	91 988	91 568	82 932

Notes: Public spending on children by age group and by type of spending is calculated using data on public spending on education, social expenditure, benefit rules and enrolment rates. The three age groups covered are: early childhood (ages 0-5 years), middle childhood (ages 6-11 years) and late childhood (ages 12-17 years). The types of public spending are cash benefits and tax breaks towards families, childcare, other benefits in kind for families, and education (primary and secondary).

Childcare services are geared towards pre-school children, but a small fraction of older children may access them.

Source: [OECD Family Database](#), PF1.6 Public spending by age of children.

Childhood poverty and material deprivation

This section provides an outline of child socio-economic disadvantage in Ireland from a comparative perspective. It covers indicators for child income poverty, financial strain, and child-specific material deprivation. It demonstrates that, although significant progress has been made to tackle poverty, a sizeable minority of children do not have access to basic material goods and resources, despite comparatively high levels of financial support to families.

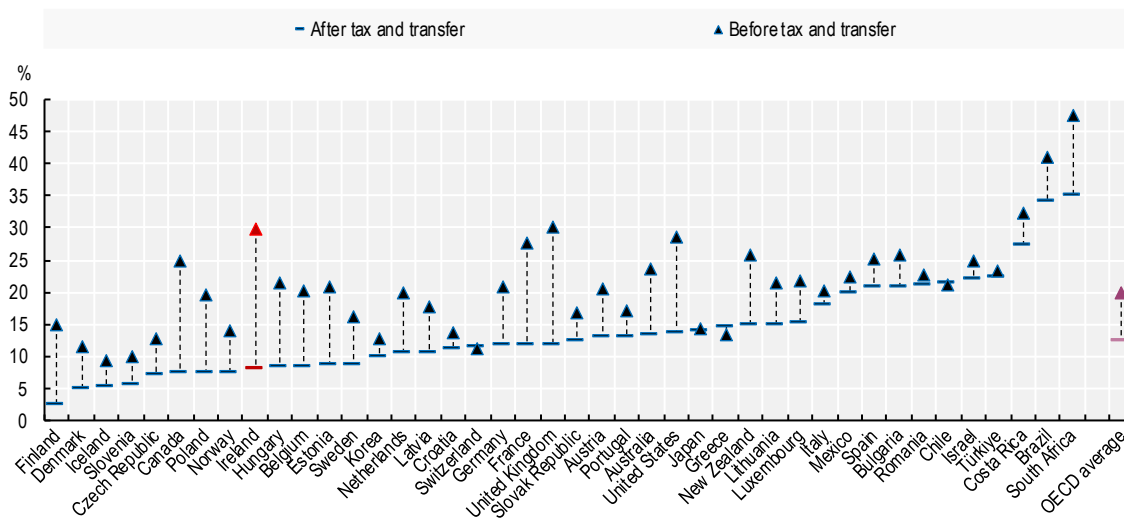
Child poverty has fallen but short of meeting national poverty targets

Ireland has achieved great progress in reducing child poverty but has fallen short of meeting its 2014 national poverty target to reduce the number of children living in consistent poverty by at least two-thirds on 2011 levels of 107 000, or 70,000 by 2020.¹ In 2011, 9.3% of children lived in consistent poverty falling to 5.2% in 2021 or 42 000 fewer children. However, the rate of consistent poverty among children rose again in 2022 to 7.5% or 89 000 children in absolute terms (CSO, 2023_[13]). Children under the age of 18 thus make up more than a third of the total population living in poverty. Moving forward, Ireland requires a more active approach to child poverty reduction than previously considered, capturing the different policy levers that can improve the lives of children living in poverty.

Part of Ireland's progress in child poverty reduction can be credited to the country's progressive tax-benefit system. Ireland is very effective at reducing child poverty through cash supports, especially compared to other OECD countries with similarly high pre-tax and transfer child poverty rates. After tax and transfers, Ireland reduces its child poverty rate by almost four, from one of the highest in the OECD to below the OECD average (Figure 3.1). Other countries with high pre-tax and transfer child poverty rates, for example, France and the United Kingdom, are not as effective at reducing child poverty through tax and transfers. Ireland reduces its child poverty rates from 30% to 8%, while France only reduces its child poverty rate from 27.5% to 11.7% and the United Kingdom from 30.2% to 11.9%.

Figure 3.1. After tax and transfers, Ireland's child poverty rate falls from among the highest to the lowest in the OECD

Child relative income poverty rates (%), before and after tax and transfer, 0- to 17-year-olds, 2020 or latest available



Notes: Data are based on equivalised household income, i.e., income adjusted for household size. The poverty threshold is set at 50% of median income in each country. Children are defined as 0–17-year-olds. Data refer to 2020 except for Brazil (2016), Chile, Iceland and South Africa (2017), Ireland, Italy, Japan and Poland (2018), Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania (2019), and Costa Rica and the United States (2021).

Source: [OECD Income Distribution Database](#).

Despite year-on-year improvements in the financial situation of households with children since 2014, many continue to find themselves under financial pressure. In 2020, almost 58% of all households with children reported at least some difficulty in making ends meet, higher than the European OECD average of 47%. Almost 53% of working households with children reported financial strain, which is slightly lower than the rate in Portugal (55%), but well above France (43%) and the Netherlands (18%). Difficulties in making ends meet is an even bigger issue for households headed by a lone parent or by a parent with a low level of education, at 63% and 94% respectively (OECD, 2024^[14]). The rate of income poverty of lone parent households and jobless households with children remains substantially higher. In 2018, 27.5% of lone parent households with at least one child lived in poverty, compared to only 4.5% of two-parent households, while around 45% of jobless households with at least one child live in poverty (OECD, 2024^[14]). Moreover, three quarters of all one-parent households reported some level of difficulty making ends meet, of which almost 16% had great difficulty (CSO, 2022^[15]).

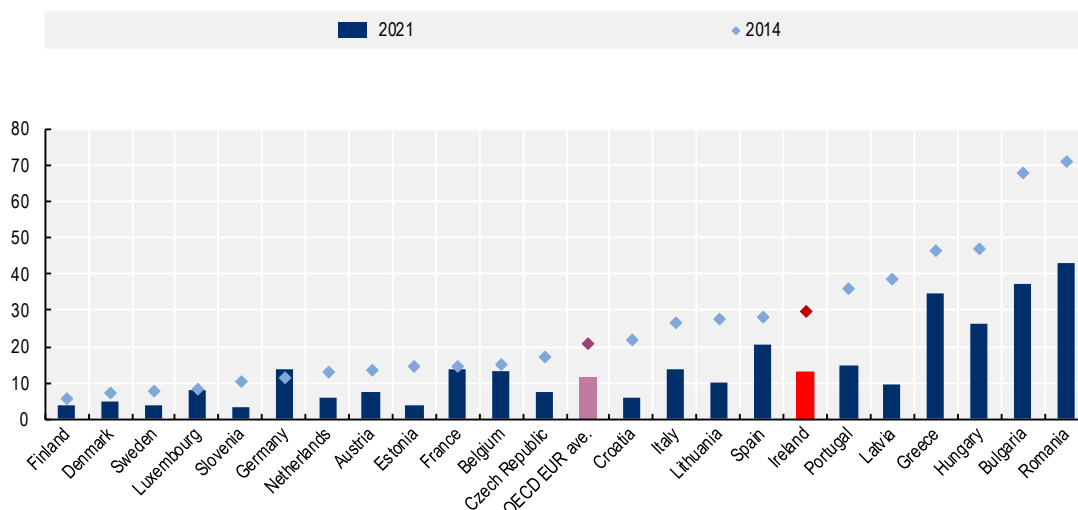
Child specific material deprivation has halved yet remains above the European OECD average

Ireland has had one of the largest declines in child specific material deprivation in European OECD countries, halving the share of children experiencing child specific material deprivation from 30% in 2014 to 13% in 2021. Latvia is the only other European OECD country where rates of child specific deprivation were higher than Ireland yet has managed to reduce the share of materially deprived children even further, from 38% in 2014 to 10% in 2021. Despite this large reduction, in absolute and relative terms, Ireland's

share of materially deprived children remains slightly above the European OECD average of just under 12% (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Ireland has halved the share of materially deprived children but still remains above the European OECD average

Percentage of children experiencing child specific material deprivation, 1- to 15-year-olds, European countries, 2014 and 2021



Notes: “Child specific material deprivation” is defined and measured in line with the Eurostat definition. Under the Eurostat definition, a child is classified as experiencing “child specific material deprivation” if they suffer from an enforced lack of at least three of 17 items, including items relating to food and nutrition, clothing and footwear, social activities, leisure activities, and household-level items such as an internet connection at home and access to a car for private use. No data for 2021 for Iceland, Norway, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Switzerland.

Source: OECD calculations based on the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey 2014 and 2021 (preliminary release).

Ireland’s reduction in child specific material deprivation follows positive trends seen across European OECD countries. As elsewhere at the European OECD level, fewer children in Ireland experience multiple forms of deprivation than in 2014. Ireland compares particularly well with regards to the very low number of households, 1.8%, reporting at least one child experiencing food deprivation, lower than the European OECD average of 2.8%, but less well for clothing deprivation at 7.5% of households reporting compared to the European OECD average of 4.5% (OECD, 2024_[14]). However, a survey published in February 2023 indicates that a growing number of parents worry about not being able to provide their children with sufficient food. Thirteen percent of parents are ‘always worried’, while 29% are ‘sometimes worried’, representing an increase of 7 percentage points and 10 percentages respectively from when the same survey was completed ten months prior (Barnardos, 2023_[16]).

Income poor children are more likely to be materially deprived but most materially deprived children are not income poor

In Ireland, as elsewhere in European OECD countries, the relative risk of material deprivation is higher for children in income-poor households. In Ireland, income poor children are around three times more likely than non-income poor children to experience child specific material deprivation, which is less than the European OECD average of four times more likely. The relative risk of material deprivation varies by deprivation type. In line with the European OECD average, in Ireland income-poor children are more than three times more likely to experience clothing deprivation and nearly two times more likely to live in poor

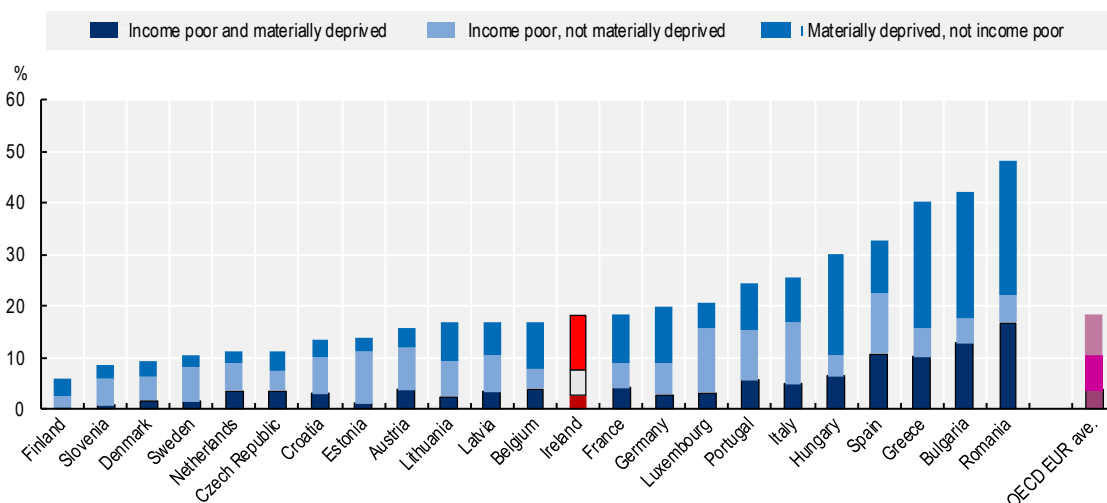
quality housing. On the other hand, the relative risk of food deprivation is higher in Ireland than in other European OECD countries. Income poor children are ten times more likely than non-income poor children to be deprived of food, compared to the OECD average of around four times. Overall, 10% of income poor children in Ireland are deprived of food, compared to only 1% of non-income poor children. The relative risk of leisure deprivation is smaller, around 2.5 times, compared to the OECD average of three.

By and large, in Ireland most children experiencing child specific material deprivation do not come from income poor households. In 2021, out of the 13% of children experiencing child specific material deprivation in Ireland, only 2.5% are income poor while slightly under 11% are non-income poor. At the European OECD level, of the 11.6% of children experiencing materially deprivation, almost 4% are income poor while around 8% are non-income poor Figure 3.3. Or in other words, non-income poor children make up 81% of all materially deprived children in Ireland compared to the European OECD average of 67%. Only a few other countries have as large of or even larger number of non-income poor children making up the share of all materially deprived children, for example, Finland (89%) and Slovenia (80%). However, in these countries child specific material deprivation rates are much lower than in Ireland.

Ireland's materially deprived children that are not income poor are in households whose incomes are well above the relative poverty line. The median equivalised disposable household income (i.e., an income after tax and transfers and adjusted for household size) of materially deprived children that are not income poor is €14 844, which is well above the relative income poverty threshold of €10 679. It is also almost twice that of €8 492 for materially deprived children that are income poor. Therefore, to alleviate children's exposure to material deprivation, doing more than lifting household income further is needed.

Figure 3.3. Non-income poor children make up the bigger share of all materially deprived children in Ireland, more so than in other European OECD countries

Percentage of children experiencing relative income poverty and/or child specific material deprivation, 1- to 15-year-olds, European countries, 2021



Notes: "Income poverty" refers to children (1- to 15-year-olds) with equivalised household disposable incomes (i.e., an income after taxes and transfers, adjusted for household size) below the poverty threshold (50% of median disposable income). "Child specific material deprivation" is defined and measured in line with the Eurostat definition. Under the Eurostat definition, a child is classified as experiencing "child specific material deprivation" if they suffer from an enforced lack of at least three of 17 items, including items relating to food and nutrition, clothing and footwear, social activities, leisure activities, and household-level items such as an internet connection at home and access to a car for private use. No data for Iceland, Norway, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Switzerland.

Source: OECD calculations based on the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey 2021 (preliminary release).

In Ireland and across European OECD countries, living in a single-parent household increases children's risk of experiencing income poverty and/or child specific material deprivation. Around 11% of materially deprived children in single-parent households in Ireland are income poor, while 30% are not classified as income poor. This compares to the European OECD average of 9% and 14% respectively. Similar levels of child specific material deprivation for non-income poor children in single-parent families are found in countries where child specific material deprivation is much higher, for example, Bulgaria (30%), Hungary (30%), Greece (34%) and Romania (33%) (OECD, 2024^[14]).

Income poverty and material deprivation are disproportionately experienced by children living in single-parent families, as well as by children living in households with low work intensity, low educated parents and with parents reporting poor health (Regan and Maître, 2020^[17]; Byrne and Treanor, 2020^[18]). The persistence of these trends over time suggests that, despite increases in social assistance and in supports for families with children, the Irish social protection system is not fully adjusted to entirely protect children in those vulnerable situations from poverty and material deprivation (NESC, 2020^[19]). The fact that children from non-income poor families - whose income may be well above the poverty line - experience material deprivation suggests that cash assistance alone cannot fix all problems of material deprivation.

How does socio-economic disadvantage affect children's access to key service areas?

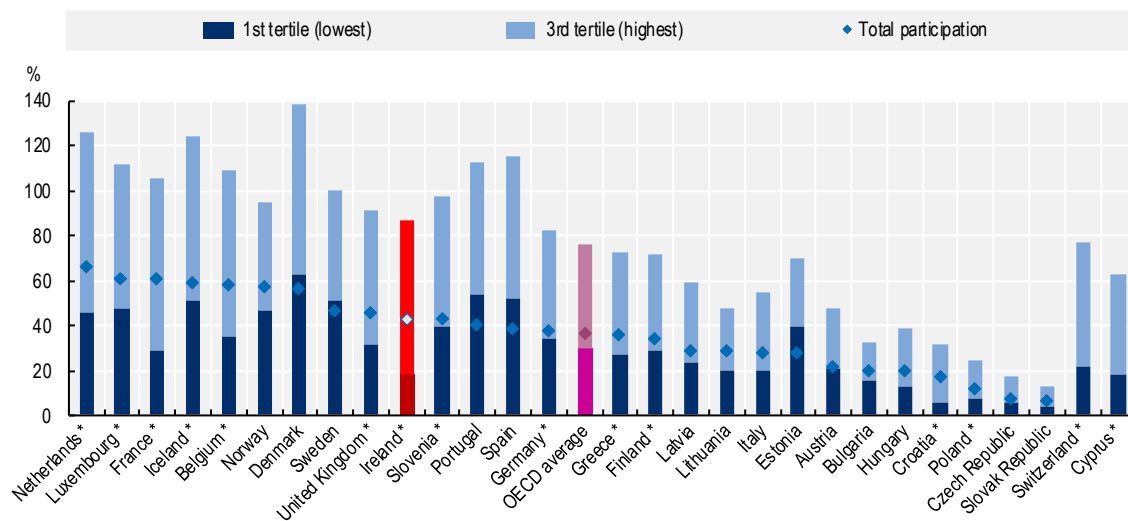
The introduction of the European Child Guarantee (European Council, 2021^[20]) has helped draw attention to the importance of access to services for children's well-being. Revolving around six key services (early childhood education and care; education, including school-based activities; at least one healthy meal a day health care; healthy nutrition; and adequate housing), the Child Guarantee seeks to ensure all children, including those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have effective and free access to the first four services and effective access to the latter two (European Council, 2021^[20]). With one eye on the European Child Guarantee, this section explores how socio-economic disadvantage currently affects children's access to four of these key services - early childhood education and care, health services, school meals and adequate housing – in Ireland from a comparative perspective. Despite an effective reduction of income poverty due to income support, many children have unmet needs and/or limited access to services in these key areas.

Access to childcare

In recent years, Ireland has introduced measures that have significantly reduced the cost of childcare for families. Ireland came from the basis of comparatively high childcare costs at the OECD level and lower participation rate of very young children in ECEC compared to other European OECD countries (OECD, 2020^[21]). In 2019, only 42% of two-year-olds accessed centre-based ECEC in Ireland, which is lower than in other European OECD countries, for example, France (60%) and the Netherlands (45%) but above the OECD average of 36% (Figure 3.4). Low participation in ECEC by two-year-old children in low-income households is more of an issue in Ireland than in other OECD countries. In 2019, only 18% of two-year olds in the bottom income tertile in Ireland accessed centre-based ECEC, compared to 69% of children in the top income tertile. At the OECD level, 30% of children in the bottom income tertile access centred-based ECEC, compared to 46% of children from the top income tertile, representing a smaller difference by socio-economic background. Slovenia has the same rate of overall participation in ECEC as Ireland, but a far greater share of children come from households in the bottom income tertile (39%). The situation is very different for the 3–5-year-olds. In 2019, 100% of 3-5 years olds in Ireland were enrolled in ECEC or in primary education as they benefit from the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) scheme, which provides two years of preschool education before starting primary school. The ECCE scheme provides 15 hours of ECEC for 38 weeks of the programme year (OECD, 2022^[22]; EC, 2021^[23]).

Figure 3.4. Children in low-income households participate in ECEC at a much lower rate in Ireland

Total participation rates in early childhood education and care, 0- to 2-year-olds, by equivalised disposable income tertile, 2019 or latest available



Notes: Data for Iceland, Lithuania and United Kingdom refer to 2018. Data are OECD estimates based on information from EU-SILC. Data refer to children using centre-based services (e.g., nurseries or day care centres and pre-schools, both public and private), organised family day care, and care services provided by (paid) professional childminders, regardless of whether the service is registered or ISCED-recognised. Please note that, for many countries, this is a different source and definition to that used in Chart PF3.2.A, and while in most cases the two sources produce comparable results, for some countries estimates of overall enrolment can differ. Equivalised disposable income tertiles are calculated using the disposable (post tax and transfer) income of the household in which the child lives – equivalised using the square root scale, to account for the effect of family size on the household's standard of living – and are based on the equivalised disposable incomes of children aged less than or equal to 12. In countries marked with an *, differences across groups are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Source: [OECD Family Data Base \(2022\)](#), Indicator PF3.2.

Before Ireland introduced the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) in 2019, the country had one of the highest childcare costs in the OECD as a percentage of women's full-time earnings (OECD, 2020^[21]). The NCS was introduced in November 2019 with the objective to provide a progressive universal model for early childhood education and care and school-aged childcare. NCS represents a first step towards reform of the childcare system by streamlining all existing subsidies into a more accessible and parent-friendly claim process. Under this new scheme, three types of childcare subsidies for children over six months of age are provided:

- A universal (i.e., not means-tested) subsidy for children up to fifteen years of age. Children over three who have not yet qualified for the ECCE are also eligible.
- A means-tested subsidy for children up to fifteen years old. The subsidy rate varies depending on household income, the child's age and educational stage, and the number of children in the family; and it can be used towards paying for the cost of a registered childcare place for up to a maximum of 45 hours a week if a parent is working, studying, training, or meets certain criteria, which makes them unavailable to care for the child; otherwise, a 20-hour maximum applies.
- A sponsor subsidy is available for children referred by certain specified sponsors on child welfare, child protection, family support or other specified grounds. There is no income assessment involved and the parent/s will pay no fees to the childcare provider.

The NCS is still in the early stages of roll-out, however already it has been effective at reducing childcare costs, particularly for households on lower incomes or living in areas of high deprivation (Paull, 2021^[24]). Low-income households in Ireland now pay in line with – or even less than – the OECD average for childcare. In 2021, households headed by a lone parent earning the minimum wage paid nothing on net childcare costs (depending on fees charged by service provider), less than the OECD average of 5%. Two-parent households with both parents working and earning the minimum wage paid 6% of the average income on net childcare costs, less than the OECD average of 7%. So far, decreases in childcare costs for middle and high-earning households have been more modest. In 2021, two-parent household where both parents work and earn the average wage, childcare costs represent 29% of the average income, well above the OECD average of 14% (OECD, 2023^[25]). It is expected that further changes to the NCS will reduce the burden on families further. For example, Budget 2023 allocated funding to increase the NCS minimum rate from €0.50 to €1.40, benefitting households on higher incomes, while the subsidy to households on lower incomes had no or only very small increases. Budget 2024 increased the NCS minimum rate again bringing up to €2.14.

A study looking at the impact of first year of NCS flagged reduced access to childcare and after-school care for some children in vulnerable families (Paull, 2021^[24]). Compared to the NCS, in some instances, legacy childcare schemes provided children in vulnerable families with more hours. While the NCS does contain a provision to broaden access through a sponsorship scheme in which a fixed number of professionals or services can support families' application for childcare on grounds of exceptional need, however this provision may need to be more flexible to capture broader family situations. Other issues flagged were receiving fewer subsidised hours than under legacy schemes and not meeting the work-study test to access 'enhanced' hours. The NCS may have influenced after-school care provision. Some providers reported offering fewer hours of after-school care or having stopped altogether, because of reduced demand from parents and/or the high administrative burden of the NCS for the lower number of hours involved (Paull, 2021^[24]). A study on the impact of NCS on not-for-profit, community-based childcare provision found the NCS negatively impacted access to and participation in ECEC. The study suggests that changes to eligibility and capitation rates for the NCS, compared with those on the CCS Programme, are likely to result in financial instability of not-for-profit settings (Dalton, 2022^[26]).

Several other developments are underway to sustain and improve the quality of ECEC services, in line with commitments in First 5, the Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. Actions include moving to a graduate-led workforce, as part of Nurturing Skills (the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028) and increases in minimum wage rates for those working in the sector with higher minimum wages for those in lead roles and with graduate qualifications, supported by increased funding for service providers through a new Core Funding programme (from September 2022). In addition, reforms are under way to strengthen quality supports for ECEC services, and to extend regulation and the National Childcare Scheme to non-relative childminders on a phased basis (in line with the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028).

Access to health care

Historically, free access to health care for children has been means tested in Ireland. Households are eligible for a Medical Card, which provides free general practitioner care, in-patient hospital services, dental, optical, and aural services, and some personal and social care services if they earn under a certain income threshold. The current income threshold for a couple or single-parent household with dependent children is €226.50 per week, with the threshold increasing for each dependent child (HSE, 2021^[27]). Ireland is in the process of expanding access to free general practitioner care for children aged 12 years and under. In 2015, Ireland started with free general practitioner (GP) care for children under six years of age, which included two periodic wellness checks for children at age two and five years of age. Budget 2023 extended this scheme to cover children ages six and seven pending the conclusion of consultations

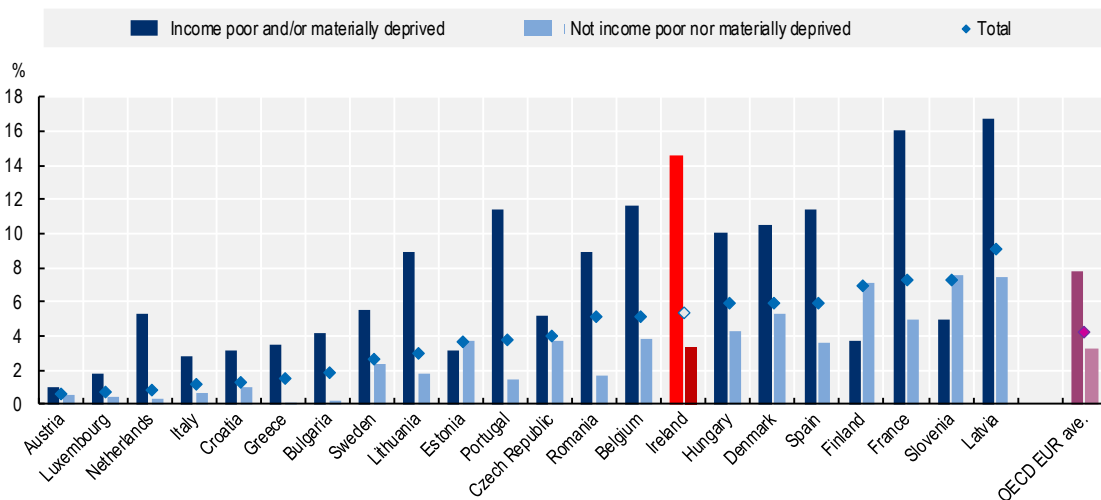
with GP representatives. In addition, Budget 2023 ended acute public hospital inpatient charges for children under 16 years of age in all public hospitals.

In Ireland, unmet need for health care is a particular issue for non-income poor children, especially those who are materially deprived. The 2015 introduction of free general practitioner care for under-sixes led to an increase in the number of visits to the GP by 25% among newly eligible children, suggesting that households faced financial barriers in accessing care, especially those on lower incomes (Nolan, 2017^[28]). In 2021, in Ireland, the rate of unmet need for either a medical or dental examination for at least one child (0- to 15-year-olds) in the household was 5.4%, higher than the European OECD average of 4.2%, and much higher again than European OECD countries such as Sweden (2.5%) and Italy (1.2%). Significantly, Ireland's rate of unmet health need is higher for non-income poor children who are materially deprived, reflecting income-poor children's receipt of the Medical Card. Belgium and Finland are the only other European OECD countries where the rate of unmet health need for non-income poor is higher than that of the income poor, at 3.4% and 5.5% respectively (OECD, 2024^[14]).

In Ireland, the rate of unmet health need for children who are income poor and/or materially deprived is much higher than for income poor children only. Almost 14.6% of income poor children and/or materially deprived children who are not income poor have an unmet health care need compared to only 3.3% of non-income poor children or non-materially deprived children (Figure 3.5). Increasing access to free healthcare for children in households above the Medical Card income threshold is needed.

Figure 3.5. Unmet need for healthcare is a particular issue for non-income poor children experiencing material deprivation in Ireland

Percentage of children in households reporting unmet needs for healthcare services for their children, 1- to 15-year-olds, European countries, by income poverty/child material deprivation status, 2021



Notes: Data refer to the percent of 1- to 15-year-olds in households reporting an unmet need for either a medical or dental examination for at least one child (0- to 15-year-olds) in the household. "Income poor" refers to children (1- to 15-year-olds) with equivalised household disposable incomes (i.e., an income after taxes and transfers, adjusted for household size) below the poverty threshold (50% of median disposable income). "Child specific material deprivation" is defined and measured in line with the Eurostat definition. Under the Eurostat definition, a child is classified as experiencing "child specific material deprivation" if they suffer from an enforced lack of at least three of 17 items, including items relating to food and nutrition, clothing and footwear, social activities, leisure activities, and household-level items such as an internet connection at home and access to a car for private use.

Source: OECD calculations based on the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey 2021 (preliminary release).

Access to adequate nutrition

Adequate child nutrition is critical for healthy development, at birth and during infancy and during the school years as hunger may affect children's capacity to focus their attention and to learn. By contrast, inadequate nutrition and obesity will have an impact on the health and well-being of children (OECD, 2021^[29]). Tackling inadequate nutrition requires several types of action being undertaken to reduce the costs of healthy food and increase its availability, make the provision of school meals free and of good quality, and integrate food into an inclusive pedagogy (Guio, Marlier and Frazer, 2020^[30]).

The high cost of good quality, nutritious food often prices low-income families out of maintaining healthy diets by limiting their choices to more processed and refined food-based diets as a cost-effective way of meeting daily calorific requirements (Madden, 2015^[31]). Around one in ten parents/caregivers in Ireland report difficulties feeding their family, with one in five skipping meals to ensure that their children get enough to eat. Worries about not being able to provide children with sufficient meals is higher among parents who are not working compared to those who are, at 34% and 25% respectively (Amárach Research, 2022^[32]).

There is evidence linking dietary quality to family social class. Fruit consumption among 7-8 years-old was found to be higher for children whose mothers had higher levels of education, while consumption of chips was higher for children whose mothers had lower levels of education. No difference in biscuit consumption by family background was found. Overall, 36% of 7-8 year-olds considered the most socially disadvantaged had the lowest dietary scoring, indicating the consumption of fewer food seen as beneficial for health, compared to 17% of 7-8 year-olds considered the most socially advantaged (ESRI, 2018^[33]).

Children arriving at school hungry remains an issue in Ireland, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2019, in Ireland, 20% of 10-year-olds reported arriving at school hungry, which is fewer than the OECD average of 27%. In Ireland, disadvantaged children are one and half times more likely than their advantaged peers to arrive at school hungry compared to most advantaged children, at 24% and 15% respectively (OECD, 2022^[34]). The quality of nutrition varies with children's socio-economic status and has consequences for child health. 32% of nine-year-olds in the lowest income fifth were overweight/obese, compared with 22% in the middle fifth and 14% in the highest fifth. Nine-year-olds of mothers with a low level of education or in the lowest income group have a lower rate of consumption of fresh fruit and higher rate of consumption of crisps and savoury snacks (ESRI, 2018^[33]).

Schools are an excellent setting to reach children, teachers, families, and the surrounding community with low financial constraints born by families. A systematic review of 42 European interventions to promote healthy diet and obesity prevention provides strong evidence that multi-component interventions (food availability, education curriculum integration, and parent involvement) had relatively strong effects on dietary improvements among children (Oostindjer et al., 2017^[35]).

Ireland is unusual in the European Union context in not providing a universal school meal programme. However, a targeted School Meals Programme is funded by the Department of Social Protection and there are plans underway to extend programme coverage. The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office will monitor the implementation of this programme expansion. The programme provides funding towards the provision of food through the allocation of a per pupil rate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. However, availing schools are located in disadvantaged areas, which means that only children attending these schools as opposed to all low-income children can receive free school meals (Reilly, 2023^[36]).

In 2022, around 1 600 schools and organisations participated in the Programme, reaching 260 000 children across Ireland, or around 28% of school-going population (Houses of the Oireachtais, 2023^[37]). A recent evaluation of this Programme provided qualitative evidence of programme impact on school attendance and recommended to progressively expand programme coverage, first focusing on disadvantaged schools in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme located in areas with higher levels of deprivation (RSM Ireland, 2022^[38]).

Education on nutrition and health is also critical. An adequate healthy diet can be inaccessible if parents do not have information to make healthy food choices or if they do not have the knowledge to prepare and cook fresh food. Parents are often unaware of when their child is not a healthy weight (Queally et al., 2018^[39]) and they may not be fully aware of the consequences of being overweight or obese can have, for example, on child physical and mental health (Clark et al., 2020^[40]).

Tackling inadequate nutrition can be enhanced through a cross-government approach to address the root causes of the many issues behind it. Ireland has a food poverty working group, which is tasked with looking at the drivers of food poverty and mitigation strategies, including the high cost of healthy food, the lack of emergency food provision in certain areas and the lack of information on good practices and on the consequences of inadequate nutrition (Children’s Right Alliance, 2022^[41]). The Obesity Policy Action Plan 2016-2025 is a cross-government plan that contains action to address health and food education and measures to tackle inadequate nutrition.

Access to adequate housing

Access to good-quality housing plays an important role in children’s well-being (OECD, 2021^[42]; Clair, 2019^[43]). Most immediately, exposure to overcrowded or unsanitary housing conditions can jeopardise children’s physical health, including through infection and respiratory conditions such as asthma (OECD, 2021^[42]; Beasley, Semprini and Mitchell, 2015^[44]). But housing quality also matters for several other aspects of children’s well-being and development, including their social and emotional well-being. Children growing up in low-quality housing may be at greater risk of developing emotional and behaviour problems, for example, as well as of experiencing poorer mental health outcomes (OECD, 2021^[42]). One potential reason is that poor-quality housing may add to the many stresses experienced by disadvantaged families and children.

Housing deprivation for children is increasing in Ireland, while on the decline at the European OECD level. In Ireland, the share of children in households reporting poor quality housing (i.e., problems with a leaking roof and/or damp ceilings, dampness in the walls, floors, or foundation and/or rot in window frames and door) has increased from 14.5% in 2014 to almost 18% in 2021. Denmark and Spain have seen similarly sized increases to Ireland (OECD, 2022^[34]). Ireland is also one of several European OECD countries where the share of children experiencing severe housing deprivation is increasing. In Ireland, 3.1% of children experience severe housing deprivation compared to only 1.7% in 2014.² Sweden and Greece have seen similar sized increases to Ireland, whereas in France and Spain increases have been larger. Although on the up, severe housing deprivation for children remains below the European OECD average of 5.4% (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Homelessness is an extreme form of housing deprivation that has serious implications for child development and well-being, and later adult outcomes (OECD, 2019^[45]). In Ireland, the number of children in homeless families has increased significantly in the past number of years. As of September 2023, there are 3 904 children from 1 892 families accessing emergency accommodation. Over half of these families are headed by a lone parent. Children make up 30% of the total population accessing emergency accommodation (DHLGH, 2023^[46]). The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office will support implementation across all relevant policy commitments addressing family homeless and provide an enhanced focus on children and their needs.

How does socio-economic disadvantage affect children’s developmental outcomes?

Growing up in socio-economic disadvantage has important and long-lasting effects on children, including on the lives they will lead as adults. Children from disadvantaged households often fall behind in many areas of well-being and development, with effects that continue to limit their opportunities and outcomes – including their health and labour market outcomes – long after they reach adulthood (Clarke et al., 2022^[47]). In Ireland, there is a substantial association between childhood poverty and the risk of experiencing poverty

in adulthood, with the strength of this risk having gotten stronger over the past decade. Most of this relationship is explained through educational attainment and current employment situation (Curristan, Maître and Russell, 2022^[48]).

Evidence from the Growing up in Ireland survey found that economic vulnerability (i.e., household income in the bottom quintile, difficulty making ends meet and material deprivation) is associated with poorer child outcomes across all dimensions of well-being. The only indicators for which experiencing economic vulnerability did not impact significantly were closeness of relationship and prosocial behaviours (Maître, Russell and Smyth, 2021^[49]). The relationship between economic vulnerability and child outcomes were equally strong for both younger and older children, suggesting that effective policy interventions to combat child poverty can be made throughout a child's life, and not just in early childhood. Indeed, preventing children from falling into poverty in middle childhood and adolescence, particular into persistent poverty, is likely to have a tangible effect across a whole range of outcomes (Maître, Russell and Smyth, 2021^[49]).

Physical health outcomes

Child health outcomes are mixed in Ireland compared to other countries. Like many other European OECD countries, the estimated prevalence of childhood diseases and medical disorders is low. In 2019, the estimated prevalence of communicable, maternal, neonatal, and/or nutritional diseases (CMNN) was 144 per 1 000, compared to the OECD average of 209 per 1 000. Ireland's low estimated prevalence of childhood diseases and medical disorders is in line with that of France and Iceland, and well below the United Kingdom (174 per 1 000) (OECD, 2022^[34]).

At the same time, however, children in Ireland are less likely than in other OECD countries to positively self-rate their health. In 2017-18, only 31% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds rated their health as "excellent", compared to the OECD average of 35%. While levels of self-rated health differ considerably across OECD countries, comparisons within countries point to large gaps in self-rated health along socio-economic lines. In Ireland, 25% of disadvantaged children self-rate their health as 'excellent', compared to 38% of advantaged children. Socio-economic differences are as big in Italy and Portugal, but smaller than the United Kingdom. France is the only OECD country where almost no difference by socio-economic lines exists. Boys are much more likely than its girls to self-rate their health as "excellent", with this standing true for many OECD countries (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Childhood obesity represents an increasingly important public health issue in Ireland and across the OECD. Excess weight is associated with a range of health conditions both in childhood and adulthood, as well as several social and emotional outcomes, including self-esteem, and children's outcomes at school (OECD, 2019^[50]). Around 19% of seven to 12-year-olds in Ireland are overweight or obese (Mitchell et al., 2020^[51]). This estimate is comparable to those available for other OECD countries showing that 21% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-old school children are considered overweight or obese based on the World Health Organization's definition (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Health outcomes, such as body weight, depend on many factors, including food consumption, regular exercise, and access to green spaces. Ireland performs well on these points. Ireland is second only to Finland in children's rate of participation in regular physical activity. In 2017-18, in Ireland, over half of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds (55%) reported usually engaging in vigorous physical activity outside of school at least four times per week, compared to only 32% in France and 44% in the United Kingdom (OECD, 2022^[34]). Differences in participation by socio-economic lines are relatively small in Ireland. Half of disadvantaged children participate in regular physical activity, while less than two thirds of advantaged children do, whereas in the United Kingdom over one third of disadvantaged children (36%) participate in regular physical activity compared to half of advantaged children.

A declining number of children regularly consume sweets and sugary drink in Ireland, with consumption now below the OECD average. In 2017-18, only 21% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds in Ireland reported usually eating sweets (including chocolate) and/or drinking sugared soft drinks at least once a day,

compared to the OECD average of 26%. Though regular consumption is higher for disadvantaged children across the OECD, the difference by children's socio-economic background in Ireland is among the largest in the OECD at seven percentage point. This difference is much larger than in England (UK), where there is only a two-percentage point difference, but around the same as Italy (six percentage points) where overall regular consumption is higher (OECD, 2022^[34]).

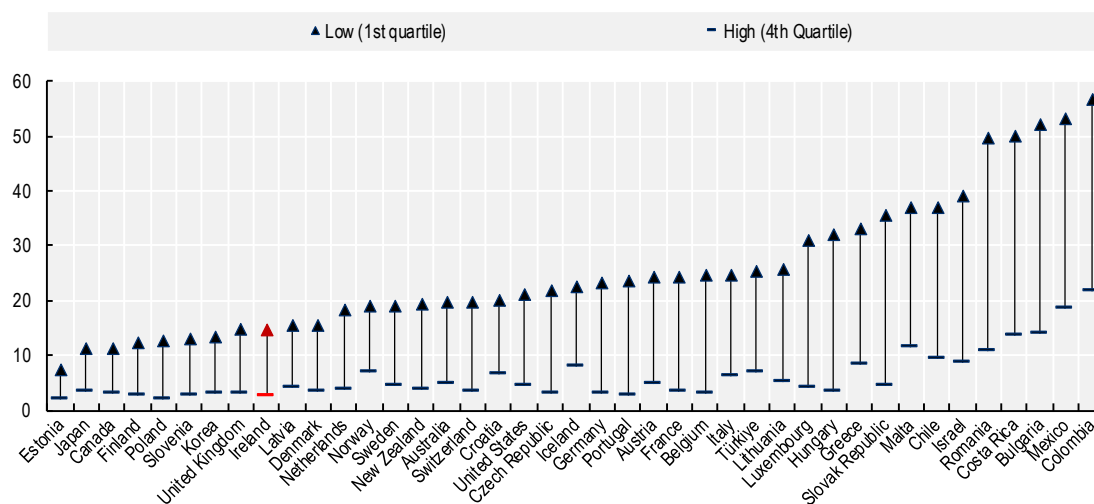
Learning outcomes

Children's learning outcomes are relatively high in Ireland. Relative to other OECD countries, disadvantaged children make up a smaller share of low performers in international student assessment tests. For example, Ireland has fewer low performers in PISA 2018 than most other OECD countries. 15% of disadvantaged 15-year-olds were low performers in PISA 2018 (defined as attaining below Level 2 on all three core PISA subjects), compared to the OECD average of 14% (Figure 3.6). The United Kingdom has a similar number of disadvantaged children who are low performers in PISA 2018, whereas France and New Zealand have far more, at 24.2% and 19.3%.

In a similar vein, fewer disadvantaged 10-year-olds in Ireland are low achievers in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) reading assessment and the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) assessment in two subjects, relative to other OECD countries. Less than 22% of disadvantaged 10-year-olds children are low performer in PIRLS, in line with Latvia and Poland. The performance gap between disadvantaged and advantaged 10-year-olds is smaller in Ireland than in most other OECD countries (OECD, 2022^[34]). In 2016, around 26% (25.5%) of 10-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds in Ireland were low achievers in two TIMSS assessment subjects, which is the same as Austria but higher than Northern Ireland (18%). Again, the performance gap between disadvantaged and advantaged 10-year-olds is smaller in Ireland than in most other OECD countries (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Figure 3.6. Fewer disadvantaged 15-year-olds in Ireland are low performers in PISA

15-year-old students who attained below Level 2 on all three core PISA subjects (reading, mathematics, and science), by ESCS scale.



Notes: Data refer to the percent of 15-year-old students who attained below Level 2 on all three core PISA subjects (reading, mathematics, and science). For more detail on the construction of the PISA proficiency scales and proficiency levels, see the PISA 2018 Technical Report (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/pisa2018technicalreport/>) and the corresponding Technical Reports from earlier rounds. "15-year-olds" and/or "15-year-old students" are used as shorthand for the PISA target population. PISA covers students who are aged between 15 years 3 months and 16 years 2 months at the time of assessment and who are enrolled in school and have completed at least 6 years of formal schooling, regardless of the type of institution in which they are enrolled, and whether they are in full-time or part-time education, whether they attend academic or vocational programmes, and whether they attend public or private schools or foreign schools within the country. The PISA index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) is a composite measure used to estimate a student's socio-economic background. The index is derived from several variables related to the student's home and family background: parents' highest level of education, parents' highest occupational status, and the availability of a series of home possessions, including books in the home. Here, students are divided into three groups according to their position in the distribution of ESCS scores in their country or economy in the given survey round: 'Low' (1st quartile): students with scores on the ESCS index that are among the bottom 25% within their country or economy. 'High' (4th quartile): students with scores on the ESCS index that are among the top 25% within their country or economy. Source: [OECD \(2022\) OECD Child Well-being Data Portal](#), Indicator CDE_PILA.

Socio-emotional and mental health outcomes

Reporting on life satisfaction can give a good indication of overall social and emotional well-being. Life satisfaction is on the decline for children in Ireland, with fewer now reporting a high level of life satisfaction than the OECD average. In 2018, only 26% of 15-year-olds reported a high level of life satisfaction, compared to 34% at the OECD level. Life satisfaction was higher in 2015, when over 34% of 15-year-olds in Ireland reported a high level of life satisfaction. This sharp decline suggests that Ireland should pay close attention to children's social and emotional well-being (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Reporting on subjective health complaints can give an indication of the prevalence of psychological distress among children, including at the non-clinical level. Slightly fewer children in Ireland report multiple subjective health complaints than the OECD average, however the social gradient is high. In 2017-18, 33% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-old school children in Ireland reported multiple subjective health complaints, slightly more than the OECD average of 36%. Forty-one percent of disadvantaged children reported multiple subjective health complaints, compared to only 30% of advantaged children (OECD, 2022^[34]). Though this difference is large, it is not as big as in England (UK), for example, where disadvantaged children are 16-

percentage points more likely to report multiple health complaints. Like other OECD countries, there are gender differences with more girls than boys reporting multiple subjective health complaints, at 37% and 27% respectively. This difference is significant. It is similar to the United Kingdom, yet not as big as in many OECD countries, for instance, Portugal where disadvantaged children are 17 percentage point more likely to report multiple health complaints and Italy and Sweden where they are 21 percentage points more likely. Reporting rates rise as children get older across the OECD.

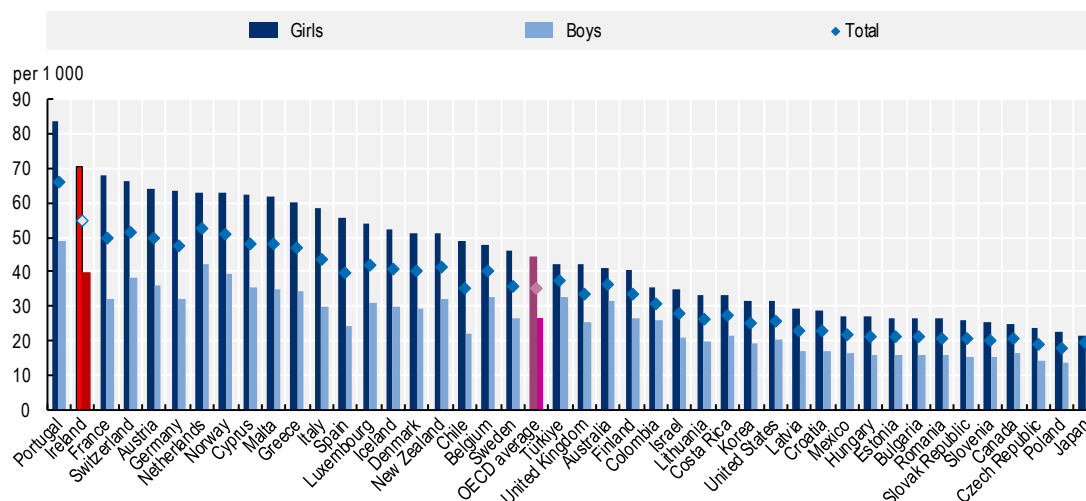
Prevalence of actual child and adolescent mental illness has increased over time across countries. While data on mental health disorders among Irish youth is limited, referrals to community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have increased in recent years, with fewer than half of children who are in need successful at accessing CAMHS (Lynch et al., 2022^[52]). Referrals to hospital for self-harm increased by 22% between 2007 and 2016, and most significantly among 10-14 year olds (Griffin et al., 2018^[53]), while during the pandemic the number of crisis psychiatry assessments of older adolescents in adult emergency departments more than trebled (McLoughlin et al., 2022^[54]). The percentage of 15-24 year olds reporting positive mental health has decreased from 21% in 2015 to 12% in 2021, and the percentage with probable mental health problems has increased from 10% to 20% during this time (DCECIY, 2022^[55]).

Available evidence suggests that across countries the mental health gap between children in relatively advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances is growing (Elgar et al., 2015^[56]; Collishaw et al., 2019^[57]). The effects of financial stress on children and parents' relationships and family processes are important factors driving this gap. Evidence from the Growing up in Ireland survey highlighted that subjective financial strain, measured as the ease with which the household can make ends meet, is predictive of externalised behavioural difficulties in adolescent boys. Material deprivation, measured as lacking one of more items in the official material deprivation indicator for Ireland, is predictive of externalised behavioural difficulties in adolescent boys and internalised in younger boys, but has no effect on girls' behavioural outcomes (Gibbons, Sprong and Chzhen, 2023^[58]).

Children suffering from anxiety disorders is a very big issue in Ireland, especially for girls. Ireland's overall estimated prevalence of anxiety disorders is the second highest in the OECD, while the rate for girls is also the second highest. The estimated prevalence of anxiety disorders in Ireland among 0-19 years old is 55 per 1 000, well above the OECD average of only 35 per 1 000. While girls suffer more than boys from anxiety disorders across OECD countries, Ireland's estimated prevalence for girls is the second highest in the OECD at 71 in 1 000, just behind Portugal where overall prevalence is higher. In fact, both girls and boys in Ireland suffer more from anxiety disorders than the overall OECD average (see Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7. Childhood anxiety disorders are high in Ireland, especially among girls

Estimated prevalence of anxiety disorders, rate per 1 000, 0- to 19-year-olds, by gender



Notes: Data refer to the estimated proportion of children and young people (0- to 19-year-olds) in the given country and year with anxiety disorders. Examples of major anxiety disorders include panic disorder, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobia, social phobia, separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The IHME Global Burden of Disease (GBD) data are standardised modelled estimates built on data from a range of sources, including vital records (e.g., births, deaths), population and household surveys, national censuses, hospital records, and academic research. Each modelled estimate is accompanied by an uncertainty interval at the 95% level, reflecting the certainty of the estimate. Larger uncertainty intervals can result from limited data availability, small studies, and conflicting data. Smaller uncertainty intervals can result from extensive data availability and consistency and scope. For more information on the IHME GBD's data, including the sources and methods used, see the IHME webpage (<https://www.healthdata.org/>).

Source: [OECD \(2022\) OECD Child Well-being Data Portal](#), Indicator SEC_DANX.

Children's sense of feeling supported and cared for, especially by family, is a fundamental component of social and emotional well-being. Children's positive perception of family support is lower in Ireland than in other OECD countries. In 2017-18, only 63% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds in Ireland reported feeling like they receive a high level of support from their families, lower than the OECD average of 73%. Conversely, a relatively high number of children in Ireland feel that they receive an overall low level of family support. In 2017-28, 20% of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds in Ireland reported feeling like they receive a low level of support from their families, much higher than the OECD average of 12% (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Disadvantaged children are less likely than advantaged children to report a high-level of family support, at 56% and 66% respectively, and they are also slightly more likely to report low level of family support (23%) than advantaged children (20%) (OECD, 2022^[34]). Though it is not yet fully understood why family support differs by socio-economic status, among the possible reasons are that disadvantaged households may face greater time constraints or may have less expertise on how to support children and on emotionally nurturing activities (OECD, 2022^[59]). Difference in the percentage of children reporting high family support by socio-economic status in Ireland is like those in the United Kingdom and Italy, yet bigger than Bulgaria and Norway.

Having a sense of meaning in life is also an indicator of subjective well-being that can be strongly challenged during adolescence. This seems to be particularly the case in Ireland where only 60% of 15-year-olds in Ireland agree (or strongly agree) with the statement "I have a clear sense of what gives meaning to my life" against 69% on average across the OECD. Nevertheless, the difference by socio-economic background is smaller in Ireland than in most other OECD countries (OECD, 2022^[34]).

Conclusion

The breadth and depth of social inequalities in child well-being mean that policy efforts are needed on multiple fronts. Different areas of child well-being and different aspects of children's lives are frequently inter-connected; therefore, policy efforts are likely to be fully effective only when designed and delivered in a co-ordinated and coherent way, with government departments, agencies, and other actors from within and outside government working together around shared objectives. Several policy mechanisms spanning a range of government departments are needed to address the current challenges of child poverty, in particular alleviating material deprivation among children living in non-poor households and addressing the rise in child and youth mental distress.

Access to services is a key issue, particularly timely access to appropriate mental health services. A persistent issue for children experiencing mental health difficulties in Ireland is that they are too often admitted to adult psychiatric units, which do not offer age-appropriate facilities, nor a programme of activities appropriate to age and ability (Mental Health Commission, 2022^[60]). Moreover, children and young people are not provided access to age-appropriate advocacy services, an explanation of their rights nor information about the hospital ward in language they could understand (Children's Right Alliance, 2022^[61]). Appropriately addressing the mental health needs of children remains a key challenge in Ireland, as it is also in most other OECD countries. It requires mobilising many actors to develop appropriate referral pathways, based on a good understanding of the different needs of children, including children with acute clinical needs, as well as identifying opportunities for earlier intervention to avert the need for more intensive or inpatient support.

Finally, the strong association between socio-economic disadvantage and the risk of children experiencing multiple forms of material deprivation and/or low social and emotional well-being highlights the need to develop an integrated data collection and monitoring system. Such an information system should make it possible to assess children's needs across all these areas, as well as to monitor children's access to different services and to complement information on income supports families may be receiving. Strengthening the data collection and monitoring system in this direction is crucial, to steer policies in such a way that they can better address the cross-cutting well-being issues facing socio-economically disadvantaged children.

Youth well-being outcomes

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 2, over the past three decades, Ireland has introduced significant policy, legislative and organisational reforms to reduce child poverty and promote better outcomes for children and young people under the age of 25. In the context of these reforms, this section on youth outcomes compares the situation in Ireland with those in other OECD countries across a range of policy areas and indicators: education, employment, social inclusion and health, relationship with public institutions, participation in public and political life, and representation in the central government workforce and state institutions. The purpose of the comparison is not to be exhaustive – the Children and Young People's indicator set, previously called the BOBF indicator set (DCEDIY, 2022^[62]), already provides a very comprehensive picture of youth outcomes in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2023^[63]) – but rather to put Ireland in an international context on a selected number of indicators. This overview follows the structure of the OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People, which was adopted in June 2022 (OECD, 2022^[64]). This legal instrument – adhered to by all OECD countries – outlines how countries can implement government-wide strategies to support young people, including through skills, education, employment, social policies, effective public governance arrangements for strengthening the relationship between young people and government, and addressing age-based inequalities. It builds on the Updated OECD Youth Action Plan

(OECD, 2021^[65]), and draws on the perspectives raised by young people themselves in a youth consultation (OECD, 2021^[66]).

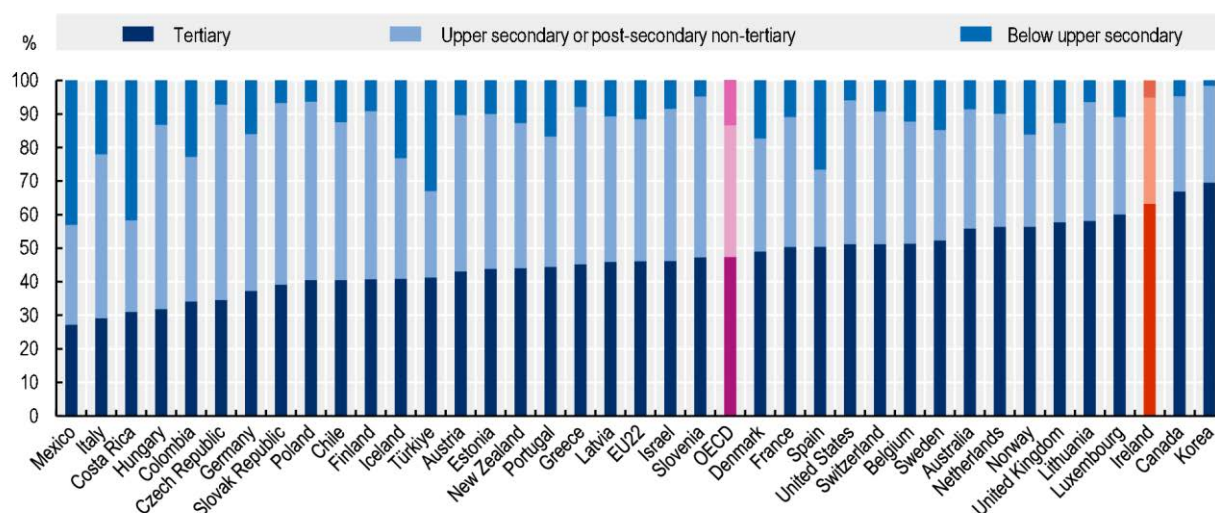
Selected socio-economic outcomes of young people in Ireland and the OECD

Youth education outcomes

Ireland is a top performer among OECD countries regarding educational attainment of young people. At 63%, Ireland has one of the highest shares of young people holding a tertiary degree in 2022, well above the OECD average of 47% (see Figure 3.8). A decade before, in 2011, these figures stood at 47% and 38% respectively, reflecting not only a positive return on Ireland's efforts to improve educational attainment, but also an evolution that is happening at a considerably faster pace than in other OECD countries. Such efforts have been taking place while Ireland has been investing heavily in skill-intensive sectors related to technology, evidenced by indicators such as the Digital Economy and Society Index that ranked Ireland as the leading country in the EU on the integration of digital technology in 2019 (European Commission, 2019^[67]).

Figure 3.8. Ireland's educational attainment record is among the best in the OECD

Educational attainment of 25–34-year-olds, by level of education, 2022



Notes: The year of reference for Chile is 2021. For the United Kingdom, data for upper secondary attainment include completion of a sufficient volume and standard of programmes that would be classified individually as completion of intermediate upper secondary programmes (11% of adults aged 25-64 are in this group).

Source: OECD (2023^[68]) Education at a Glance 2023, Indicator A1. To what level have adults studied? - Trends in educational attainment, by educational attainment and age group, [Education and earnings : Trends in relative earnings, by educational attainment \(oecd.org\)](https://www.oecd.org/education/indicators/education-at-a-glance-2023/).

However, certain groups are still underrepresented within higher education, in particular young Irish Travellers and Roma, socio-economically disadvantaged adolescents, and young people with a disability (Department of Education Ireland, 2021^[69]) (Higher Education Authority and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022^[70]). The government's new national policy framework for children and young people, *Young Ireland* (DCEDIY, 2023^[63]) acknowledges the priority to work on inclusion in education and highlights the steps the government is taking through the fourth National Access Plan to increase the participation and success for students in vulnerable situations, in particular those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, students with a disability, and students from the

Traveller and Roma communities (Higher Education Authority and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022^[70]).

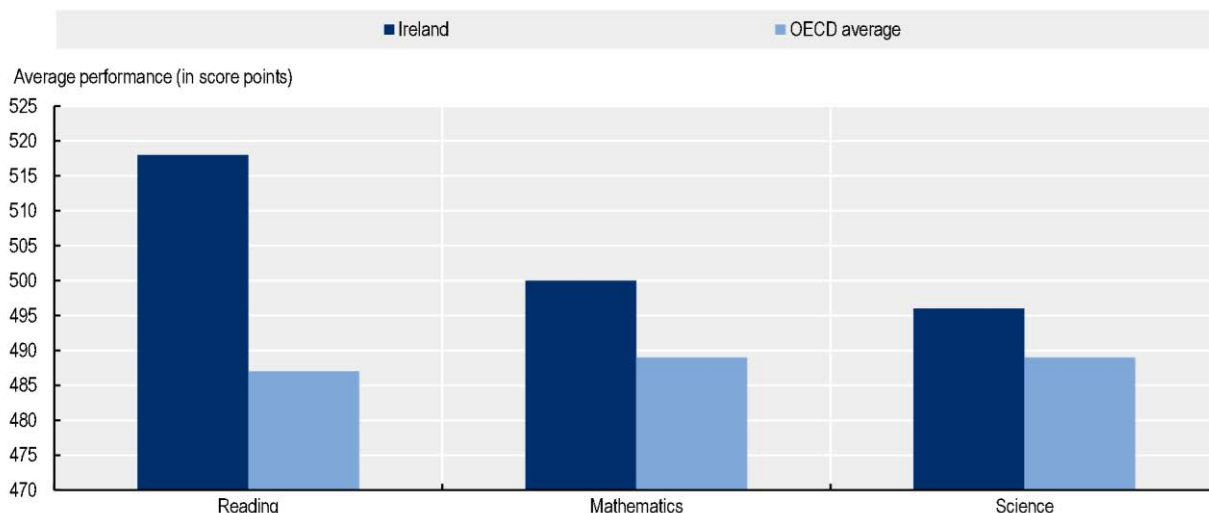
Ireland has a very low share (5%) of young people with below upper secondary qualifications, significantly lower than the OECD average (14%) (see Figure 3.8). In 2011, the shares were respectively 15% and 19%, implying a particularly steep improvement for Ireland and reflecting a successful implementation of multiple policy efforts targeting early school leaving (Department of Education, 2017^[71]). This outcome is important, as data from across OECD countries show that people who did not complete upper secondary education by their late twenties face a higher likelihood of becoming unemployed or inactive than those who did complete it (OECD, 2019^[72]).

In line with the good performance in educational attainment, Ireland scores above the OECD average in the International Student Assessment (PISA) for reading, mathematics and science, and the reading skills of 15-year-olds in Ireland rank among the highest in the OECD (see Figure 3.9). Ireland is also the only OECD country where PISA reading performance improved significantly for both advantaged and disadvantaged students between 2008 and 2018 (OECD, 2019^[73]).

Young Ireland underpins BOBF's Aim 2.4 "Achieving in education" that education is not just about knowledge acquisition but also about learning critical skills that can be applied across all life and career domains. The current reform of the Senior Cycle in Ireland acknowledges the role of education systems in strengthening such skills (Department of Education, 2022^[74]). Securing balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills is also a priority in the OECD Skills Strategy for Ireland, which was developed together with key stakeholders in Ireland (OECD, 2023^[75]).

Figure 3.9. The reading skills of 15-year-olds in Ireland rank among the highest in the OECD

Performance in reading, science, and mathematics for 15-year-olds in Ireland and the OECD on average, 2018



Source: OECD (2022^[76]), PISA 2018 Results, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19963777>.

Unlike in most OECD countries, all upper secondary (ISCED 3) and 96% of post-secondary non-tertiary (ISCED 4) students in vocational education and training (VET) in Ireland participate in combined school-and-work based programmes (OECD, 2020^[77]). On average in other OECD countries, only 30% of upper secondary VET students are enrolled in combined school-and-work based programmes, as school-based programmes are more common (see Figure 3.10). VET in Ireland is usually not offered within the second level system, while VET programmes within post-secondary non-tertiary Further Education and Training

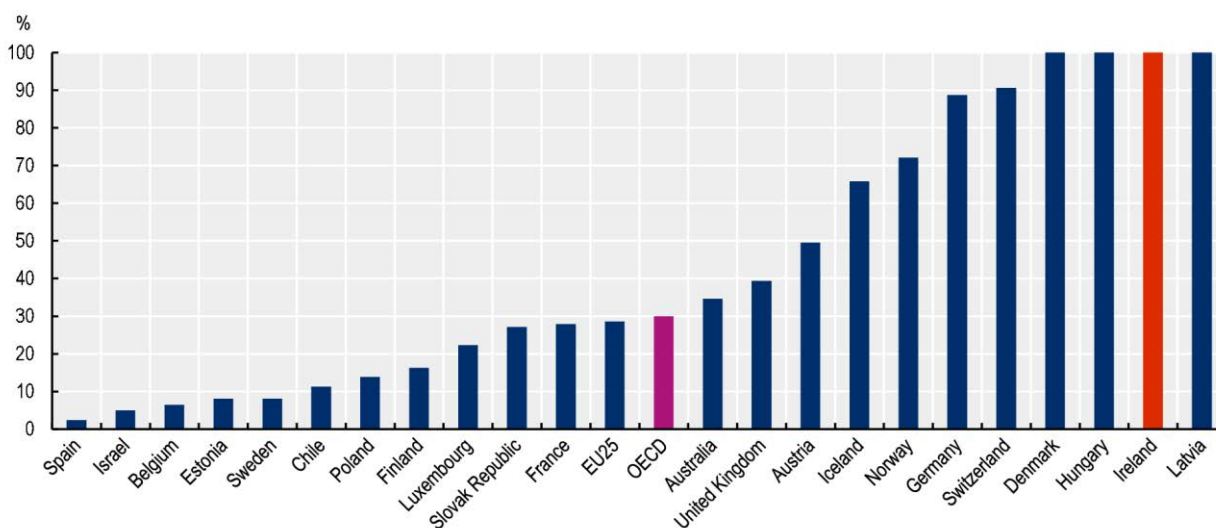
(FET) include apprenticeships, traineeships combining learning in an education/training setting and the workplace, and post leaving certificate courses (PLC) (Cedefop, 2021^[78]). Work-based learning is often seen as a powerful vehicle for developing workplace skills and promoting productivity of the labour force. However, such programmes can face challenges in engaging employers to provide work placements, in making apprenticeship attractive to young people who might otherwise pursue academic studies, and in delivering skills that are not only immediately valuable but support career development (Musset, 2019^[79]).

Nevertheless, the attractiveness of VET has been traditionally low in Ireland, with only a small number of upper secondary VET learners, in part because many learners prefer continuing higher education upon leaving compulsory education. In 2018, the share of Irish upper secondary students (aged 15-19) who opted for VET after graduation was only 10.7%, over three times smaller than the OECD average of 36.7% (OECD, 2020^[77]).

Moderate exposure to the labour market is another way to smoothen the school-to-work transition. Ireland has a higher share of young people (aged 15-24) combining work and studies (25.5%) than OECD countries on average (16.9%) (see Figure 3.11). However, three quarters of this group in Ireland work on a part-time basis (76.1%), thus lowering the potentially negative impact of combining work and studies on school performance. Studies have indeed suggested that work experience while studying can not only improve young people's prospects of graduating through newly acquired skills, but it might also help them to decide what to do after graduation (Quintini, 2015^[80]). At a more general level, promoting a combination of work and study can help create a link between the labour market and the education system in a country where young people have a clear preference for prolonged higher education, like in Ireland.

Figure 3.10. Enrolment in combined school-and-work based programmes is much higher in Ireland than in other OECD countries

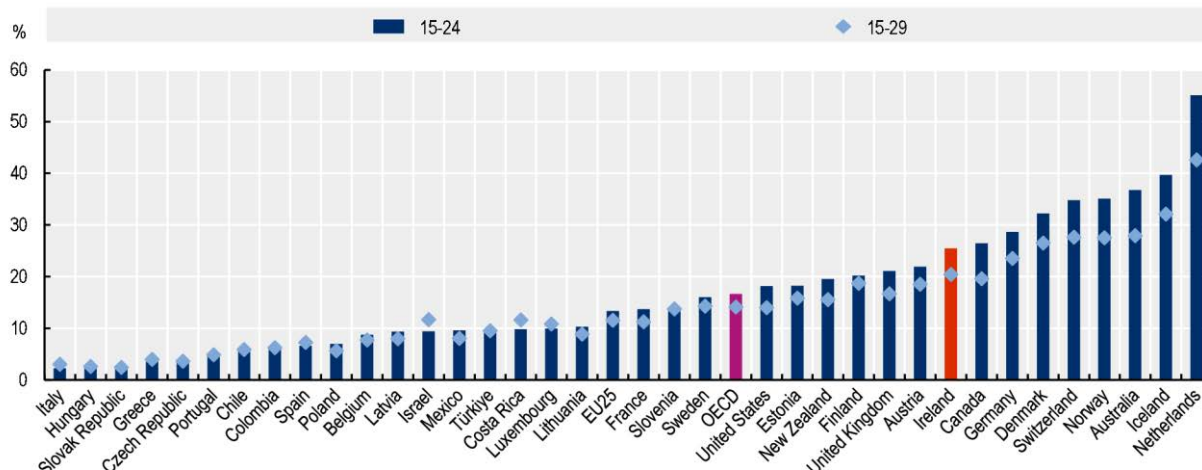
Share of upper secondary VET students enrolled in combined school-and work-based programmes, 2021



Source: OECD.Stat, Students, access to education and participation, Enrolment by gender, programme orientation, mode of study and type of institution, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EAG_ENRL_SHARE_CATEGORY.

Figure 3.11. Combining school and work is more common in Ireland than in the OECD

Share of young people who are employed while in education, by age cohort, 2022



Note: The year of reference for Chile is 2020.

Source: OECD (2023^[68]), Education at a Glance 2023, Indicator A2. Transition from school to work, Table A2.1

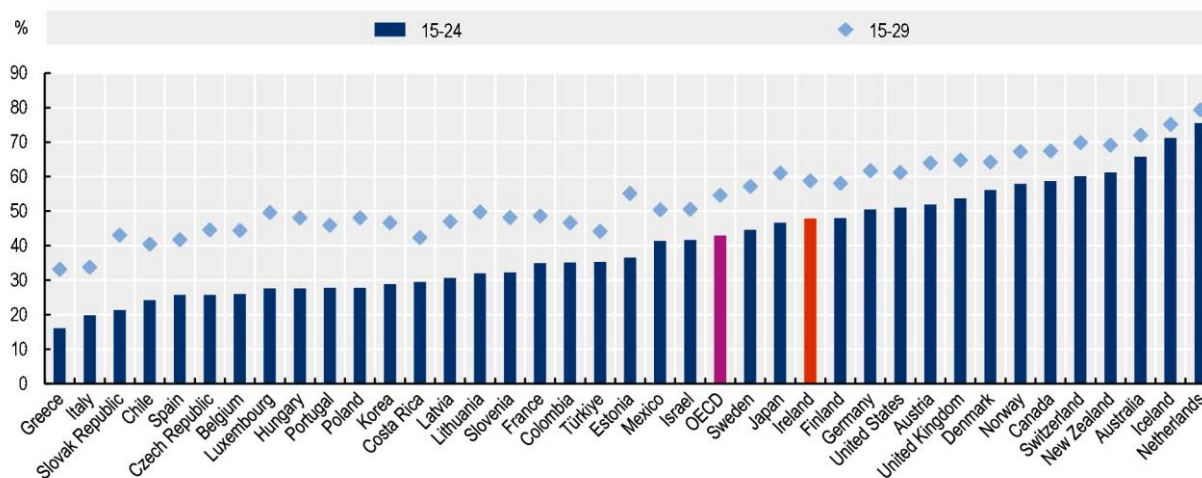
https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EAG_TRANS.

Youth employment outcomes

About half of all young people aged 15 to 24 in Ireland are employed. At 47.8% in 2022, Ireland’s youth employment rate is higher than the OECD average of 42.9% (Figure 3.12). Gender differences in the employment rate are minimal: 48.0% for men and 47.6% for women. The employment rates are higher in Ireland than the OECD average for all youth age cohorts: 15–19-year-olds (28.3% in Ireland versus 24.9% in the OECD); 20–24-year-olds (68.2% versus 59.5% respectively); and 25–29-year-olds (82.3% versus 76.3% respectively).

Figure 3.12. Youth employment rates in Ireland are higher than the OECD average

Employment/population ratio for 15-24- and 15–29-year-olds, 2022



Source: OECD Stat, LFS by sex and age.

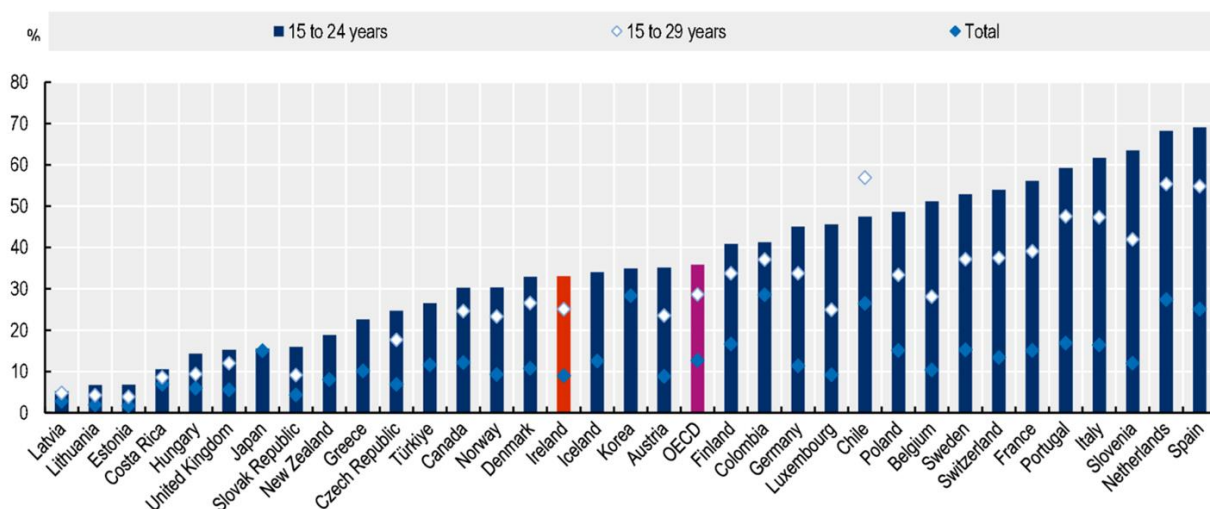
Among those in dependent employment, Ireland has a slightly lower share of 15–24-year-olds employed under temporary contracts than OECD countries on average (33.0% compared to 35.8% respectively) (see Figure 3.13). Even so, the share is nearly four times higher than the temporary employment share for the total workforce in Ireland (9%). The considerable disparity between age cohorts and the rapid increase in the share of temporary contracts among young people (up from 22% in 2008) suggests that temporary contracts are becoming a standard part of early careers, with new entrants to the job market expected to work on a temporary basis initially (McGinnity et al., 2021^[81]).

For the first time since the global financial crisis of 2008, youth unemployment in Ireland was below the OECD average in 2022, at 9.8% among 15–24-year-olds compared with 10.9% in the OECD. While Ireland's youth unemployment rate was nearly double the OECD's average in 2012 – at 30.8% and 16.5% respectively – and the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic took longer – Ireland's rate stood at 14.5% in 2021 compared with 12.8% in the OECD – youth unemployment in Ireland has finally dropped below the OECD and EU-27 averages. The drop in unemployment was noticeable among both young women and young men, as well as among older youth (20-24- and 25–29-year-olds), with the exception of the youngest cohort (15–19-year-olds), where the Irish unemployment rate remained above the OECD average in 2022.

Ireland also has a relatively low share of young people who are neither in employment, education, or training (NEETs) compared with other OECD countries, at 11.8% among 15–29-year-olds in 2021 compared to 14.8% in the OECD on average. Among those who are neither in employment, education, or training in Ireland, about two-thirds are inactive (i.e., not in the labour market) and the remaining third are unemployed (i.e., actively looking for a job). Young women account for 49% of the NEETs in Ireland, compared to 46% in the OECD on average. Looking at the reasons, 56% of female NEETs in Ireland say they are inactive for caring/family reasons (compared to 52% in the OECD on average) while 16% are ill or disabled. Among inactive male NEETs, 38% are ill or disabled, 27% are in informal education or training and 11% are discouraged i.e., they believe no work is available (OECD calculations based on labour force survey data).

Figure 3.13. Temporary employment is less frequent among young people in Ireland than among their peers in the OECD

Share of temporary employment in dependent employment, by age group, 2021



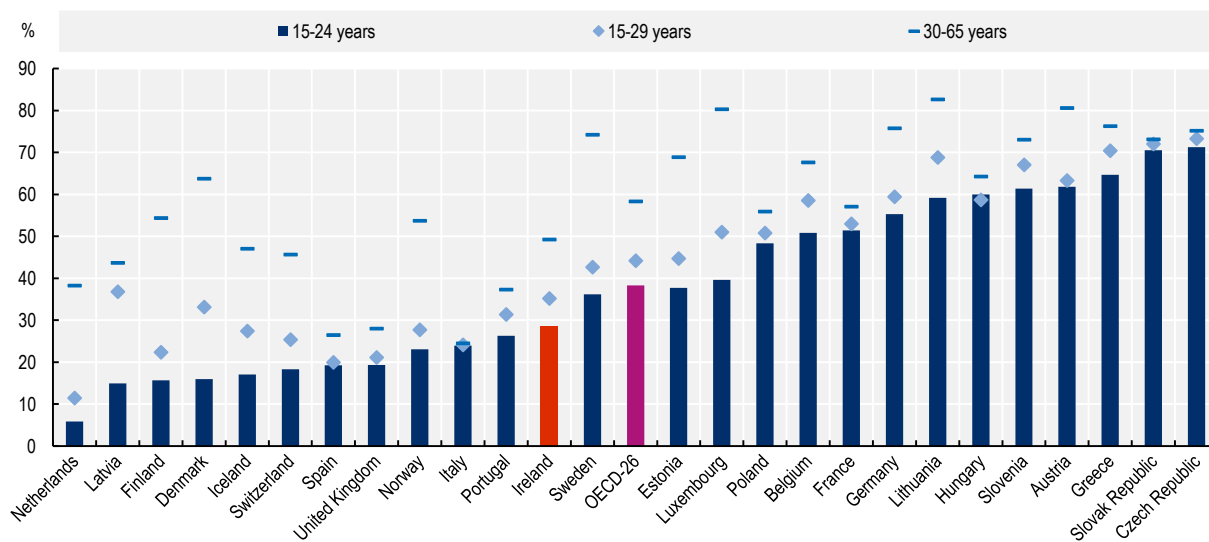
Source: OECD. Stat, Incidence of temporary employment.

While public employment services in Ireland have been given more resources in recent years and have been reorganised to help workers into employment more effectively (OECD, 2022^[82]), support for young jobseekers can be further improved. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, less than one third (28.6%) of young jobseekers (aged 15 to 24) relied on the public employment services in Ireland as one of the methods for their job search, a share well below the OECD average (38.3%) and the average for the 30-65 age cohort in Ireland (58.3%) (see Figure 3.14). Furthermore, data for 2018 reveal that 57.1% of those registered in the Youth Guarantee scheme at any point during the year had been waiting for a job or training offer for more than four months, well above the EU average of 48.6% (European Commission, 2020^[83]). The same report shows that around two-thirds (67.9%) of those leaving the Youth Guarantee scheme in 2018 were known to be in a positive situation (i.e., employed or in training/education) six months later, significantly above the EU average of 50.3%.

Ireland's national employment services strategy, *Pathways to Work 2021-2025*, aims to improve support for young people through increased engagement with young jobseekers who are most distant from the labour market and a focused service to young jobseekers who are more job ready (Government of Ireland, 2021^[84]). However, the first Progress Report of the strategy shows that several of the measures for young people are unlikely to be met (Labour Market Advisory Council, 2023^[85]).

Figure 3.14. The share of young jobseekers in Ireland who contact the public employment services for support is lower than in many other OECD countries

Share of unemployed people who contacted the public employment service for support during the prior four weeks, by age cohort, 2019



Source: OECD calculations based on labour force surveys.

Social inclusion and health outcomes of young people

Nearly two in three young people aged 20 to 29 years in Ireland continue living with their parents. At 63%, this share is much higher than in OECD countries on average (49%) (see Figure 3.15), and it has been increasing faster during the last decade (OECD, 2021^[86]). While the share of young people aged 20 to 29 living in rental housing in Ireland (47%) is just above the OECD average (45%), the gap between young people who rent and the general renting population is particularly wide in Ireland (19 percentage points compared to 10 percentage points for the OECD average) (OECD, 2021^[86]). Whilst more than 70% of 35–65-year-olds own their home, only 30% of 16–34-year-olds do so.

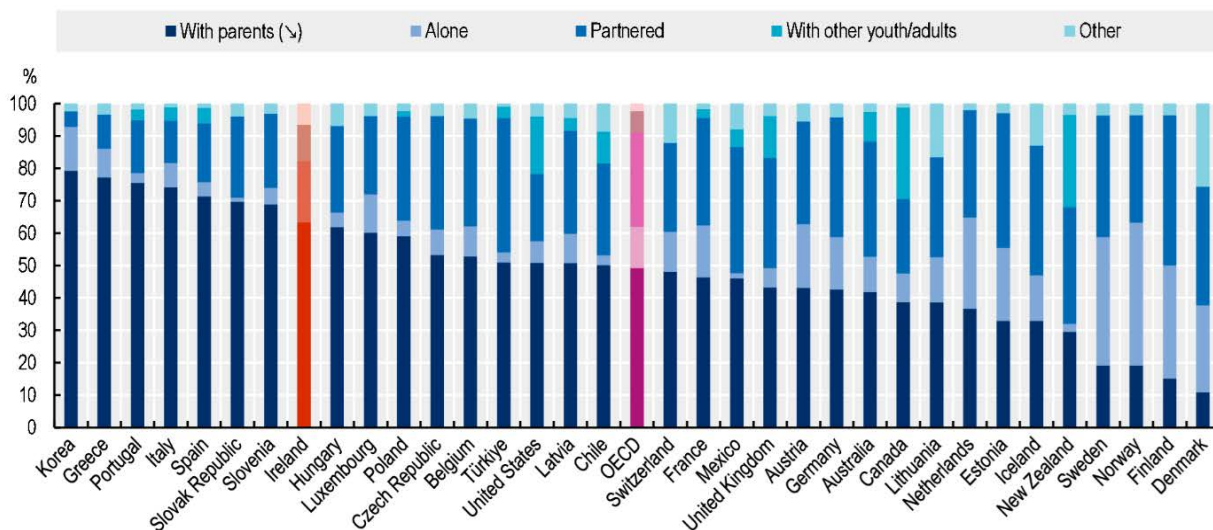
Housing is indeed a complex issue that disproportionately challenges young people. Availability and finance-related issues, such as inability to afford a deposit to buy a home or to qualify for a mortgage, tend to be the most significant reasons for the large share of young people in the rental market, or for living with their parents/together with other young people (OECD, 2021^[86]). According to the 2020 OECD Risks that Matter survey, three quarters of young people in Ireland (75.0%) report that securing or maintaining affordable housing is a major long-term concern, compared to 60.5% in the OECD on average (OECD, 2021^[87]).

Social housing is therefore an important source of affordable housing for young people. In a handful OECD countries for which data is available (including Ireland), over 15% of young people live in social housing. However, social housing is in short supply in most countries, representing around 7% of the total housing stock on average across the OECD. In the case of Ireland, the share of social rental dwellings in the total housing stock did not grow at all between 2010 and 2018, stagnating around 12.7% (OECD, 2021^[86]). This stagnation was partially compensated by schemes such as the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). The number of households (of any age) in HAP tenancies rose from 420 in 2014 to more than 60 000 by the end of 2021 (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2020^[88]; Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2022^[89]).

Moreover, high, and rising rents put additional pressure on young people to save up for a deposit, which might worsen their overrepresentation in the rental market. While rent prices increased at a faster pace than general inflation between 2006 and 2020 in many OECD countries, Ireland is one of the most affected countries, where the increase of rent prices was more than a third faster than consumer price inflation (OECD, 2021^[86]).

Figure 3.15. Nearly two in three young people in Ireland live with their parents, a share that is considerably higher than the OECD average

Distribution of young people (20–29-year-olds), by household type, 2020 or latest year available



Source: OECD Affordable Housing Database, <https://www.oecd.org/housing/no-home-for-the-young.pdf>.

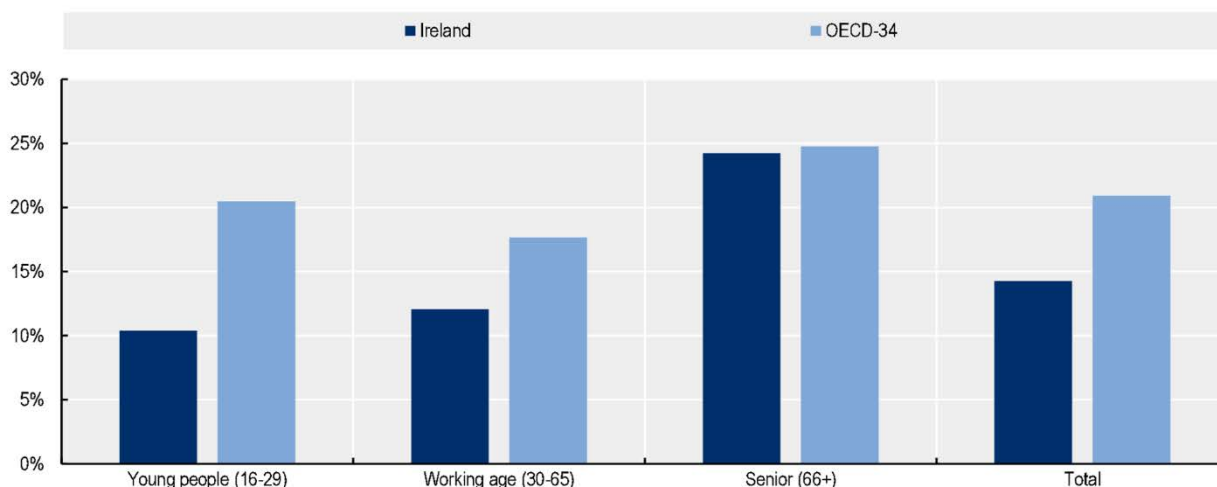
Young people (18-24 years) are overrepresented in the homeless population in Ireland, accounting for 17% of all adults accessing emergency accommodation (July 2022) and 12.2% of total homelessness (December 2021), while data from the 2016 census indicate that they only account for about 11% of adults nationally (Government of Ireland, 2023^[90]). Moreover, there has been a rapid deterioration in recent years, with the number of emergency accommodation requests among young people increasing by 70% between December 2020 to July 2022, compared to only 26.5% for the total population. Six cohorts have been

identified as being of heightened vulnerability: care leavers, people with disabilities, young (single) parents, members of the Traveller community and the LGBTI+ community, and individuals leaving prison services. There is also a pronounced gender split when disaggregated by household type: 65% of singles are male, while 65% of those in families are female (Government of Ireland, 2023^[90]).

Overall, poverty among young people in Ireland is considerably below the OECD average (see Figure 3.16). In 2019, 10.4% of the 16-29-year-olds living in Ireland had incomes below 60% of the mean equalised income, commonly defined as the threshold for low income or relative poverty. This share is around half of the OECD average for this age group, which equals 20.5%. Unlike the average pattern in OECD countries where the working-age population generally records the lowest poverty rate of all age cohorts, Ireland's poverty rate increases with age, being 12.1% for the working-age population and 14.2% for senior citizens. While disposable income of young people and single person households are especially affected by recent inflationary pressures (Central Bank of Ireland, 2022^[91]; McQuinn et al., 2022^[92]), recent data from the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) show that the risk of poverty among young people in Ireland, aged 18 to 34, decreased between 2020 and 2022 (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2023^[93]).

Figure 3.16. Youth poverty in Ireland is considerably below the OECD average

Share of population at risk of poverty, by age cohort, 2019



Notes: The cut-off point is 60% of mean equalised income. OECD-34 does not include Colombia, Israel, Japan, and New Zealand; Year of the data differs from 2019: 2017 for Chile and 2018 for Canada, Iceland, and Mexico.

Source: OECD calculations based on household surveys: EUSILC, HILDA, CASEN, CPS, CIS, GEIH, ENAHO, KLIPS, ENIGH.

Nearly one in four young persons in Ireland receive out-of-work benefits – such as unemployment benefits, social assistance, or disability benefits – placing Ireland eight highest in the OECD ranking (see Figure 3.17). In 2019, around 23.3% of the Irish youth population (aged 16-29) received some type of out-of-work benefit, nearly double the OECD average of 12.7%. The shares of young people on unemployment benefits (13%) and on incapacity-related benefits (8.2%) are both high compared with OECD countries on average. The share of young people receiving unemployment benefits in Ireland rose steeply after the global financial crisis, from 10% in 2007 to 28% in 2012. This figure has been steadily declining with the Irish economic recovery (13% in 2019), but it remains considerably above the OECD average (4%). Relatively high rates of youth unemployment, temporary work contracts, and part-time workers all contribute to the high share of young people receiving unemployment-related benefits. In addition, low levels of education among people with disabilities, insufficient activation for people on disability benefits,

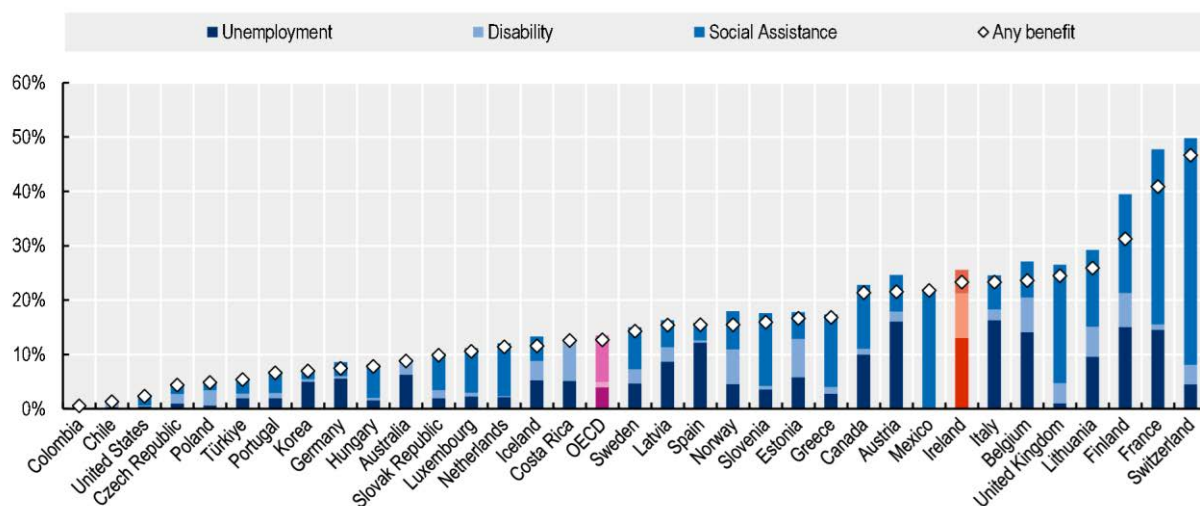
as well as a fragmented disability benefit system and widespread stigma on their capacity to engage in the labour market all contribute to one of the OECD’s highest shares of young people receiving disability benefits (OECD, 2021^[94]).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to contain it have had wide-reaching implications for both the physical and mental health of young people in Ireland as in the OECD overall. Fear, uncertainty, school closures and prolonged periods of social isolation seriously disrupted the lives and routines of young people at a critical time of their physical and social development. Available evidence for EU countries suggests that symptoms of depression amongst young people more than doubled in many European countries (OECD/European Union, 2022^[95]). In virtually all European countries for which data are available, young people reported poorer mental health than older age groups in 2021, which is a reversal of the pre-pandemic situation when the share of young people reporting symptoms of depression was typically lower than the population average.

Data for Ireland confirm the worsening mental health trend for young people: while in 2016, 8% of young men and 17% of young women aged 15 to 24 were considered as having a probable mental health problem (as measured by the Mental Health Inventory-5), these figures rose to 13% and 27% respectively by 2021 (Department of Health, 2021^[96]). At the same time, the share of 15–24-year-olds displaying optimal levels of mental health (measured by the Energy and Vitality Index) dropped sharply, down from 21% in 2012 to 12% in 2021. Ireland also ranks amongst the countries with the highest suicide rates among 15–19-year-olds (7.7 per 100 000 in 2015-17, compared to 4.3 per 100 000 on average in the EU-27) (OECD/European Union, 2020^[97]).

Figure 3.17. Receipt of unemployment and disability benefits are both high in Ireland, compared with the OECD average

Receipt of income-replacement benefits among young people (aged 16-29), in percentages, 2019



Notes: Income replacement benefits (also called out-of-work benefits) include unemployment benefits, disability benefits and social assistance. Some people receive multiple benefits, so the category ‘Any benefit’ is slightly lower than the sum of the three separate categories. Year of reference differs from 2019 for Canada, Iceland, Hungary, Mexico, UK (2018); and for Chile (2017).
 Source: OECD calculations based on household surveys: EUSILC, HILDA, CASEN, CPS, CIS, GEIH, ENAHO, KLIPS, ENIGH.

Youth mental health is a Spotlight” (see Chapters 4 and 8) in the new national policy framework for children and young people, *Young Ireland*, which will provide a further opportunity to progress collaborative working in this area (DCEDIY, 2023^[98]). In particular the policy framework “Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health

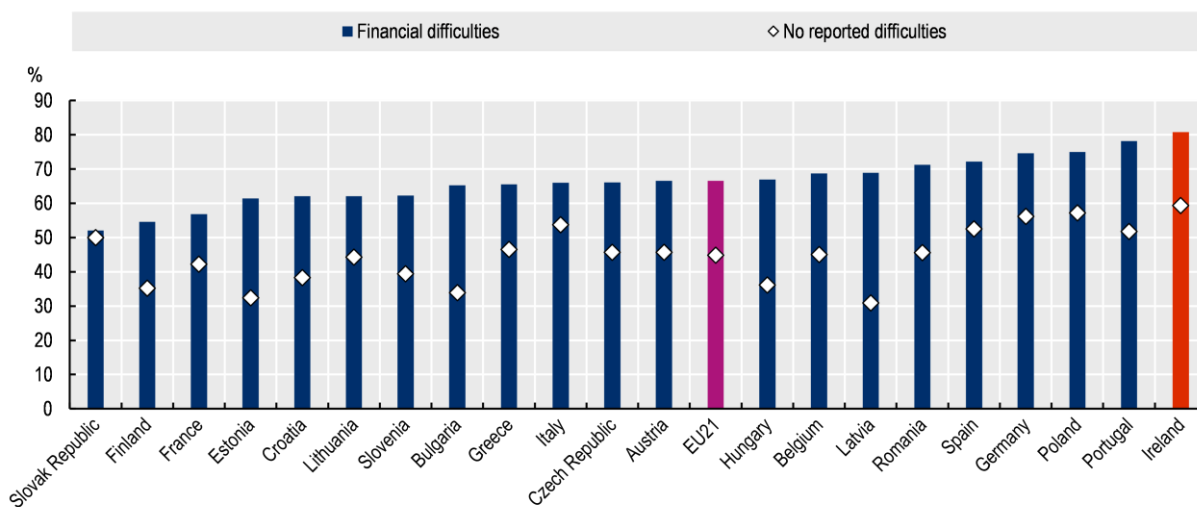
Policy for Everyone” published in 2020 aims to enhance the provision of mental health services and supports across a broad continuum, from mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention to acute and specialist mental health service delivery (HSE, 2020^[99]).

Moreover, the risk of poor mental health has a social gradient, being higher for young people in precarious financial circumstances and at risk of exclusion. Data from Eurofound’s *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey* found that young people aged 18-29 who perceived their household to have financial difficulties were significantly more likely to be at risk of depression (WHO-5 mental well-being score) over the course of the pandemic. The share was particularly high in Ireland, reaching 81% for those who reported financial difficulties and 59% for those who did not (see Figure 3.18).

Physical and mental health are closely related; physical activity is a protective factor for good mental health, and low physical activity can contribute to mental health issues in children and adolescents. About one in two 15-year-old girls and one in three 15-year-old boys in Ireland experienced multiple health complaints in 2018, such as feeling “low” or irritable, experiencing headaches, stomach aches or backaches, or having difficulties falling asleep (see Figure 3.19). The rates in Ireland are close or equal to the EU average. Overweight and obesity is less an issue in Ireland, which has one of the lowest rates among EU countries, even amongst the least affluent families where obesity rates usually tend to be significantly higher (OECD/European Union, 2020^[97]). Tobacco smoking rates and heavy drinking, two other important risk factors to health, are also relatively low among adolescents in Ireland compared to their peers in other EU countries.

Figure 3.18. The share of young people at risk of depression in Ireland is the highest among EU countries

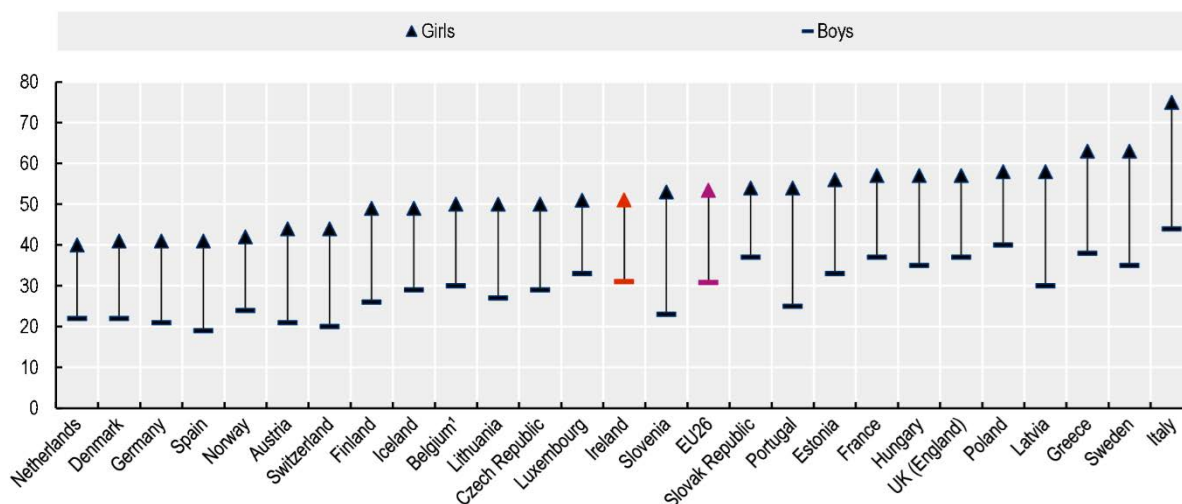
Share of young people aged 18-29 at risk of depression (WHO-5 score <50 out of 100), by self-perceived difficulty to make ends meet, 2020-2021



Source: OECD/European Union (2022^[95]), Health at a Glance: Europe 2022, Figure 1.5, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-europe-2022_507433b0-en.

Figure 3.19. About one in two girls and one in three boys in Ireland report multiple health complaints, close to the EU average

Share of 11- and 15-year-olds reporting multiple health complaints, 2018



Notes: Differences across countries, and especially in Italy, may reflect a different understanding and interpretation of the questions. The EU average is unweighted. The rate for 11-year-old boys is higher than the rate for the 15-year-olds in Romania, Austria, and Lithuania. 1. Belgium is the unweighted average of the Flanders region and the French region.

Source: OECD/European Union (2020^[97]), Health at a Glance: Europe 2020, Figure 3.18, <https://doi.org/10.1787/82129230-en>.

Youth outcomes from a public governance perspective

Relationship between public institutions and young people

Young people's trust in public institutions and government compared to other age groups.

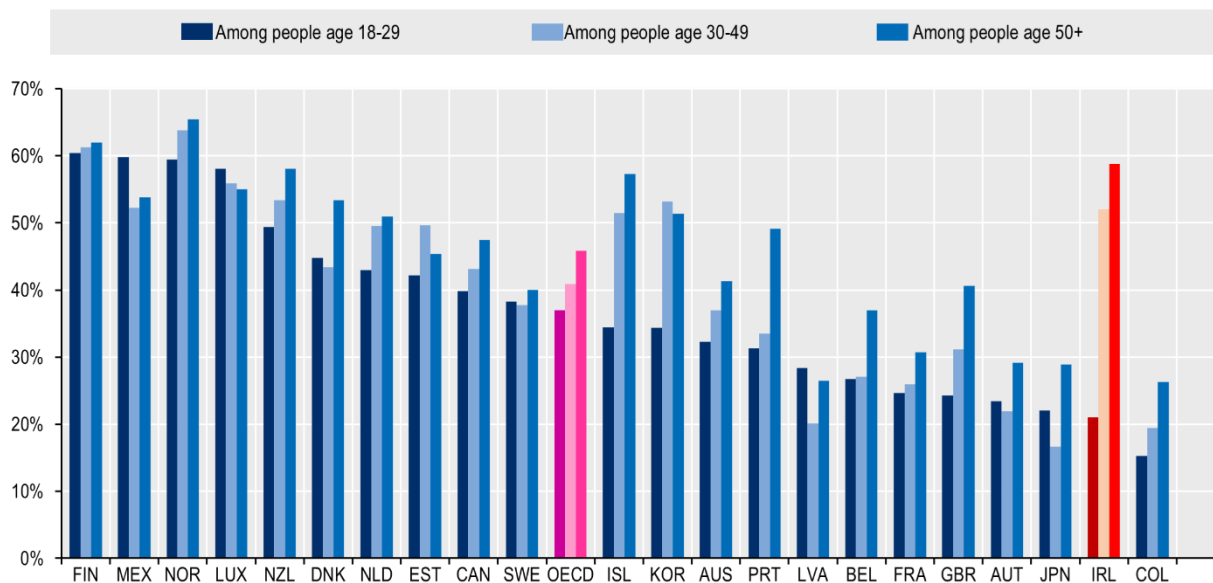
According to the 2021 OECD Trust Survey, few young people trust their government in Ireland. Only 2 in 10 (or 21%) young people (aged 18-34) surveyed reported trusting their government, placing Ireland significantly below the OECD average (37%) (Figure 3.20). Further, while young people across OECD countries tend to trust their government less than older age groups, Ireland shows the widest disparities. The biggest gap is shown between young people (18-29) and those over 50, with a 38-percentage point (p.p.) difference, compared to a gap of 9 p.p. on average between both age groups across OECD countries (OECD, 2022^[100]).

In 2016, the Growing Up In Ireland longitudinal study posed a question on trust in public institutions to 17- to 18-year-olds in the Cohort of '98³ (ESRI, 2018^[101]). Results on self-reported data showed that respondents placed high trust in the Gardai (74% of respondents reported high trust), and relatively high trust in the healthcare system, the education system, and the courts (between 61% to 68%). A majority also expressed trust in Ireland's social welfare system (53%). In turn, only 13% of respondents expressed trust in politicians. Young women tended to express higher confidence in the Gardai (78% vs. 70% expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence) but had lower confidence in the courts system than young men (57% vs. 64%). Young people in the lowest income quintile were also more likely to distrust An Garda Síochána (by 18 p.p.), the courts system (by 16 p.p.), and politicians (by 9 p.p.) than those in the highest income quintile. Further, telling differences exist across age groups regarding experiences of discrimination when accessing public services. In 2019, the percentage of young people aged 18-24

reporting experiences of discrimination when accessing public services was 19%, compared to 13.5% for those aged 25-44, 8.5% for ages 45-64, and 7.9% for those aged 65 and above (DCEDIY, 2022_[102]).

Drivers of trust in government are varied and complex, but data across OECD countries shows that access to and representation in decision-making processes, satisfaction with public services, being able to obtain reliable information, low political polarisation and lower inequalities across age groups are all conducive to higher trust (OECD, 2022_[100]).

Figure 3.20. Young people’s trust in government in Ireland ranks below the OECD average, with important differences compared to other age groups (2021)



Notes: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses by age group to the question “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely, how much do you trust each of the following? The national government”. “Younger age group” in Ireland is defined as 18-34 due to statistical disclosure measures. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>. Source: OECD Trust Survey 2021.

Young people’s satisfaction with democracy, compared to other age groups or relative to total population

Latest data available from the European Social Survey (2018) shows that young people (15-29) in Ireland ranked their satisfaction with democracy (on a scale of 0=extremely dissatisfied to 10=extremely satisfied) at par with the OECD average of 6 (European Social Survey, 2018_[103]). The OECD countries with highest averages of satisfaction with democracy among young people are Switzerland (average rate of 8), Denmark (8) and Norway (7). While satisfaction with democracy does not differ significantly across age groups in Ireland, significant differences can be observed across young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Those reporting they considered that their household income permitted them to ‘live comfortably’ had a mean satisfaction with democracy of 6.35 compared to a mean of 3.9 among young people reporting that it was “very difficult” to live on their current household income (European Social Survey, 2018_[103]).

Participation of young people in public and political life

Voting and running for office in national and subnational elections by age group

On average, young people in Ireland tend to see voting as an important way to exercise their civic rights. When asked their views on how important it was to vote to be a good citizen, young people in Ireland predominantly said it was important, scoring a mean rate of 7.5 on a scale of 0 being “extremely unimportant” to 10 being “extremely important”, close to the average across OECD countries in the European Union (7.7) (Eurobarometer, 2021_[104]).

Longitudinal data from the Growing Up In Ireland study shows that 35% of surveyed young people in the Cohort of 98’ were eligible to vote in the 2016 national election but only half of those (51%) registered to vote. Of those eligible, 35% cast their vote, representing only 12% of surveyed 20-year-olds (ESRI, 2021_[105]). By 2019, the proportion of voter registrations had increased to 72% among surveyed young people, but differences were shown depending on their socioeconomic background (ESRI, 2021_[105]). Young people whose parents had received lower secondary education or below were less likely to be registered to vote (62%) compared to those whose parent had received a tertiary education (78%). Young adults in education and training were more likely to be registered (77%) than those in employment (63%) or those who were not in employment, educating or training (NEET) (46%) (ESRI, 2021_[105]).

Lower participation in elections among young people of voting age also may point to age-specific barriers. Among 18- to 30-year-olds in Ireland, the most cited barriers to voting in local and national elections included a lack of understanding of political issues (17% of participants cited this reason), challenges to understand jargon or political speak (17%), not feeling confident to express their opinions (14%), not feeling heard by decision-makers (13%) and not having the time to vote (13%).⁴ In comparison, the top three reasons that were cited on average across European OECD countries included not being interested (15%), not feeling heard by decision-makers (13%), and not having a good enough understanding of issues (11%) (Eurobarometer, 2021_[104]).

Political party membership by age group

Most major political parties in Ireland have a youth branch. These bodies enable young people to take part in party politics and provide a platform for younger voices to inform political debate. Findings from 2018 show that 4% of young people in Ireland (ages 15-29) were members in a political party (OECD average: 4%), compared to 3% for ages 30-49 (OECD average 4%): and 5% for people aged 50 and over (OECD average: 5%) (European Social Survey, 2018_[103]). In Iceland (11%), Spain (8%), France (6%) and Norway (6%) the share of young people who are member of a political party is highest. In line with much of the evidence discussed above, important differences in young people’s political party membership can be observed depending on their household income. Young people self-reporting that they lived ‘comfortably’ in their current household income were 9 p.p. more likely to have worked in a political party than those finding it ‘very difficult’ (European Social Survey, 2018_[103]).

Young people’s participation in civic activities compared to other age groups or relative to total population

For many young people, participating in volunteering activities and joining youth organisations offers a way to avoid social exclusion, practice active citizenship, and boost their skills and competences (OECD, 2020_[106]). Several youth organisations supported by the State provide opportunities for young people to volunteer and to take part in leisure-time youth activities in their communities and internationally. These organisations deliver services for young people within their communities to support the development of their personal and social skills and provide safe spaces to connect with peers and mentors. Ireland also has a national youth award programme, Gaisce – the President’s Award, which supports young people aged 14 – 25 to develop their personal skills and active citizenship.

Data from 2021 shows that 23% of 16- to 30-year-olds in Ireland report having joined a youth organisation, compared to 14% across the EU. Differences regarding participation in youth organisations were observed across several dimensions. For instance, 31% of young people from small or mid-size towns reported taking part in a youth organisation in 2017, compared to 24% in rural villages and 21% in large towns. Those in the most difficult financial situations were also 17 p.p. more likely to take part in youth organisations than those who were most financially secure, underlining their critical importance for social cohesion and participation. Differences across other factors including gender, disability and migrant background were less statistically significant (DCEDIY, 2023^[107]).

Regarding volunteering participation more broadly, in 2021, Ireland had one of the highest youth (ages 15 to 29) volunteering participation rates of OECD countries⁵ with 29% of respondents reporting having recently partaken in volunteering activities, compared to an OECD average of 23%. However, vis-a-vis other age groups in the country, young people in Ireland were slightly less likely to participate in volunteering activities than older people, with the biggest gap (by -5 p.p.) being observed with people in the 30-49 age bracket (Gallup World Poll, 2022^[108]).

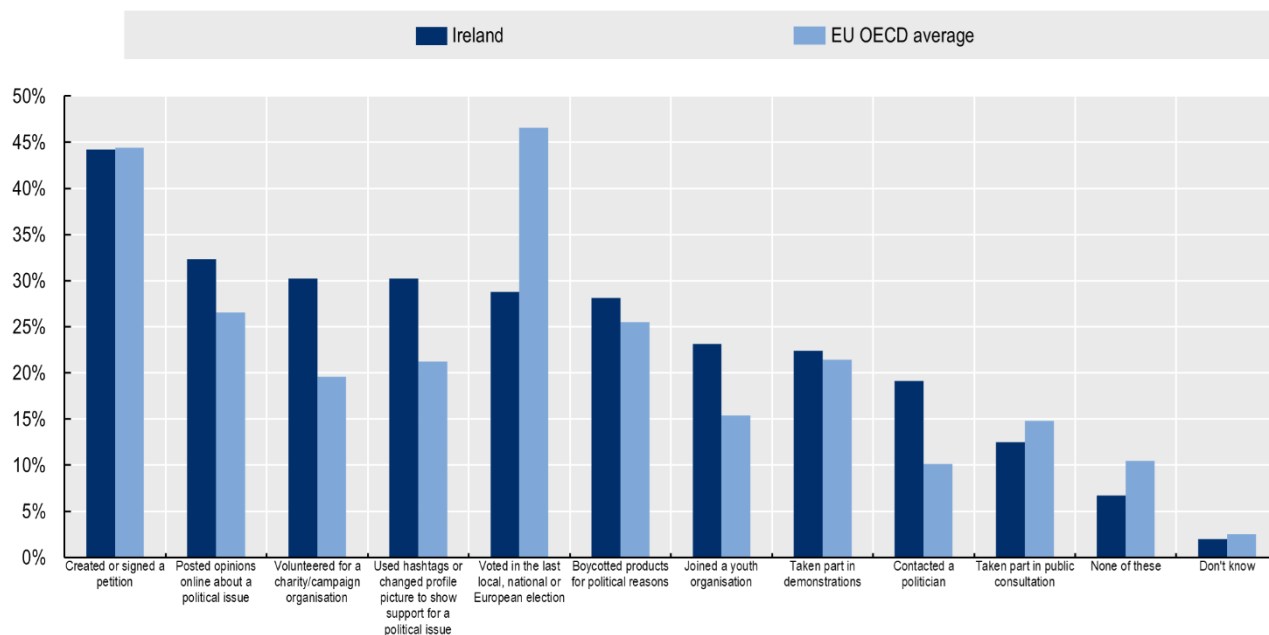
Longitudinal data of young people in Ireland shows that self-reported volunteer participation rates among 20-year-olds rise to 34% (ESRI, 2021^[105]). Further, important differences were observed depending on young peoples' socio-economic background. For instance, youth with a parent with a higher level of education were more likely to have volunteered (41% tertiary education level versus 27% secondary education level or less) in the last six months. Similarly, only 30% of young people whose family was in the lowest income quintile had volunteered, compared to 40% in the highest income quintile. Finally, 20-year-olds in education or training were more likely to volunteer (37%) compared to those in employment (27%) or those who were NEET (26%).

Among the most cited barriers to volunteering, young people pointed to a lack of confidence to express opinions (cited by 19% of 15–29-year-olds), not being asked or invited to volunteer (17%), not having a good enough understanding of the issues for which they could volunteer (16%), and not having the time to volunteer (15%) (Eurobarometer, 2021^[104]).

Young people's participation in non-institutionalised channels of political life

Young people in Ireland tend to prefer using non-institutionalised⁶ over institutionalised channels to take part in public and political life (See Figure 3.21). According to the 2021 Flash Eurobarometer Youth Survey, the most popular forms of participation among Irish youth included creating or signing petitions (which 44% of respondents had reportedly engaged in during 2022), posting opinions online or on social media about political issues (32%), volunteering for charities or campaigning (30%), and using hashtags or changing profile pictures to show support for a political issue (30%). In contrast, more institutionalised forms of engagement received lower participation scores, with less than 1 in 3 young respondents mentioning they had voted (29%), contacted politicians (19%) and taken part in public consultations (13%) (Eurobarometer, 2021^[104]). That is despite some of the actions considered by young people to be most effective (namely voting and contacting a politician) were also among those that young people least tended to engage in.

Figure 3.21. Young people in Ireland tend to participate more in non-institutionalised public and political activities



Note: Young people are here considered to include the ages 16 – 30.

Source: Flash Eurobarometer Youth Survey 2021.

Data from 2018 on similar indicators shows that wide age-based differences exist in Ireland in terms of engagement through non-institutionalised channels, particularly between those aged 15 to 29 and those aged 50 and above (European Social Survey, 2018_[103]). For instance, young people were more likely than people aged 50 and above to post or share political content online (by 13 p.p.), wear or display political badges (8 p.p.), take part in public demonstrations (8 p.p.) and sign online petitions (8 p.p.). In contrast, differences across age groups were less pronounced on average across OECD countries in the EU (12 p.p. gap for posting online, 3 p.p. for wearing a badge, 4 p.p. for taking part in demonstrations, 6 p.p. for signing a petition).

Preferences for non-institutionalised over institutionalised channels for political engagement also differ between young women and men. The Growing Up in Ireland study shows that young women (aged 20) were more likely to take part in non-institutionalised forms of political engagement than young men of the same age (ESRI, 2021_[105]; ESRI, 2018_[101]). For instance, 66% of young women expressed they were politically active through non-institutionalised means, compared to 52% of young men.

Moreover, the level of political engagement, both through institutionalised and non-institutionalised means, differs across young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. 64% of young people reporting 'living comfortably' on their current household income felt 'quite' to 'completely' able to take part in political activities compared to only 21% of young people that reported it was 'very difficult' to live on their current household income (European Social Survey, 2018_[103]). Young people reporting it was "very difficult" to live on their current household income were also less likely to have signed a petition (by -13 p.p.), boycotted a product (-12 p.p.), posted about politics online (-7 p.p.), or taken part in public demonstrations (-2 p.p.) in the last 12 months compared to their better-off peers.

Representation of young people in the government workforce and state institutions

Share of central government employees aged 18-34 years old

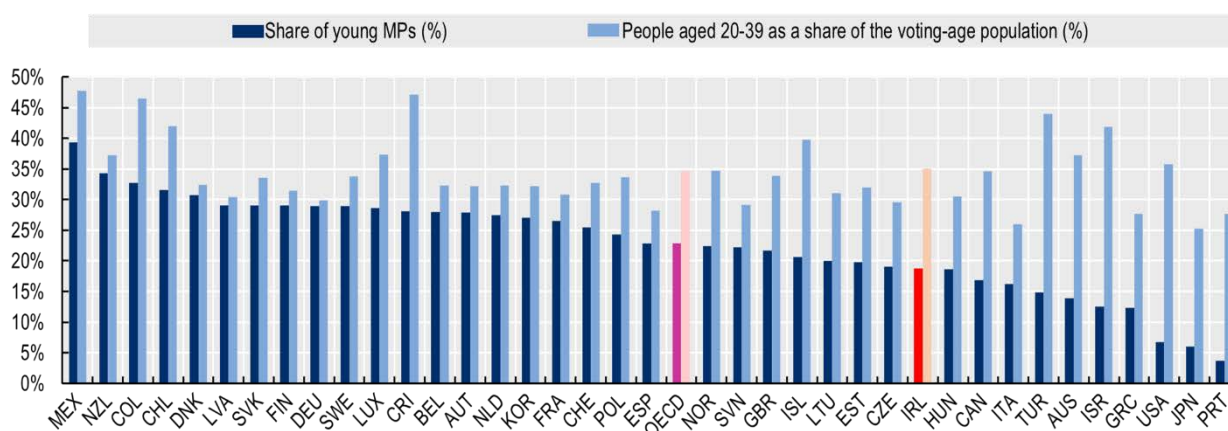
In 2020, only 16% of employees in central government in Ireland were younger than 35 years, up from 13% in 2015, but below the OECD average of 19% in 2020. Across the OECD, large differences can be observed for this indicator, with the highest proportion of central government employees aged 18-34 in Israel (33%) and the lowest in Greece (2%) (OECD, 2021_[109]).

While some of the observed differences across countries can be explained by their respective demographics, the age profile of central government employees can be an important indicator to determine if the civil service is considered an attractive employer. Governments where older age groups are over-represented, as is the case for Ireland, may have a wealth of experience, but could face challenges related to building the next generation of public servants. A multi-generational public service workforce enables better knowledge-sharing between long-serving staff and younger employees and ensures that a diversity of perspectives is considered when developing government programmes, plans and services (OECD, 2021_[109]).

Representation of young people in parliament

As in many OECD countries, younger people in Ireland tend to be under-represented in parliament. In 2022, only 19% of Irish members of parliament (MPs) were aged 20-39, below the OECD average of 23% (see Figure 3.22). This points to a representation gap of roughly 16 p.p. when compared to the actual proportion of 18–39-year-olds in Ireland (35%). By comparison, the countries with the largest representation gaps across OECD include Israel (-29 p.p.) and Türkiye (-29 p.p.), and the narrowest include Germany, Latvia (by -1 p.p. each), and Denmark (-2 p.p.). It is worth noting that this gap in Ireland has become narrower since 2020 (by 3 p.p.) but this is attributed more importantly to ageing population trends, as the proportion of MPs aged 20-39 has remained relatively stable (18% in 2020) (OECD, 2023_[110]).

Figure 3.22. Ireland ranks below the OECD average regarding the representation of people aged 20-39 in Parliament



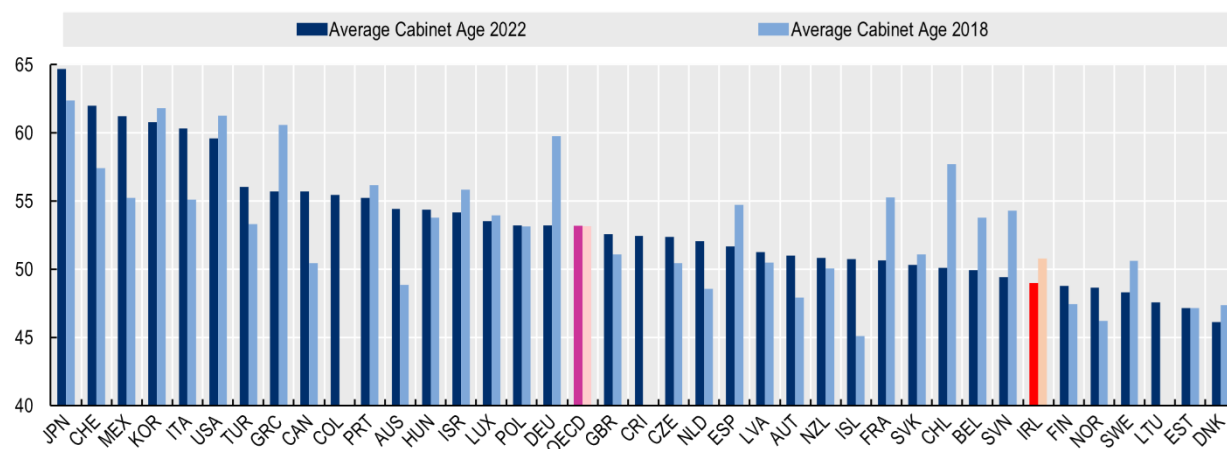
Notes: Data on the share of young people as a share of the voting-age population is from 2021. National Parliament average age data is from 2022, except for Australia and Colombia, which dates from 2021.

Source: OECD calculations based on OECD Demography and Population (database), and Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Parline database on national parliaments.

Representation of young people in cabinet

Cabinet members in Ireland tend to be, on average, younger than in most OECD countries (OECD, 2023^[110]). In 2022, the average age of cabinet members in Ireland was 49 compared to the OECD average of 53. Earlier data from 2018 shows similar trends, with Ireland cabinet members averaging 51 years compared to the OECD average of 53 (see Figure 3.23).

Figure 3.23. On average, cabinet members in Ireland are younger than in most other OECD countries



Notes: Data for one member of cabinet in Canada, one member of cabinet in Bulgaria, one member of cabinet in Greece, and one member of cabinet in Mexico could not be found. Representatives were selected based on the list of members of cabinet published on official government websites. 2018 data for Colombia, Costa Rica and Lithuania was not available.

Source: OECD calculations based on publicly available data on official government websites as of 20 December 2022.

Conclusion

The educational attainment record of young people in Ireland is among the best in the OECD, with a high share of tertiary degrees and low rates of early school leaving. Ireland also scores above the OECD average in the International Student Assessment (PISA) for mathematics and science, and the reading skills of 15-year-olds in Ireland rank among the highest in the OECD. Young people in Ireland tend to have a relatively good exposure to the labour market during their education compared to their peers in other OECD countries, through a strong focus on combined school-and-work based programmes in vocational education and training and work experience opportunities during their studies, which can help to smoothen the school-to-work transition.

In terms of youth employment outcomes, both youth employment and unemployment rates are close to the OECD averages, while temporary employment is less frequent than in the OECD. Ireland also has a relatively low share of young people who are neither in employment, education or training compared with other OECD countries. Nevertheless, less than one out of three young jobseekers contact the public employment service when looking for work and those who do have to wait longer than their peers in other OECD countries to get support.

Social indicators illustrate that housing is a complex issue that disproportionately challenges young people in Ireland, where a high share of them continues living with their parents due to rapidly rising rent prices, difficult access to home ownership, and limited social housing. Youth poverty in Ireland is considerably below the OECD average, yet a relatively high share of young people receives income-replacement benefits. The COVID-19 pandemic had wide-reaching implications for the mental health of young people,

both in Ireland and the OECD overall, and mental health care needs remain often unmet. Ireland scores better than many other OECD countries on a range of physical health indicators, like overweight and obesity rates or tobacco smoking and heavy drinking rates.

The government has put in place several provisions to enable children and young people in Ireland to engage with government. Yet, Ireland has the widest age-based differences in terms of trust in government across OECD countries, with young people trusting their government significantly less than other age groups and in comparison, with young people across OECD countries on average. When accounting for socioeconomic background, data shows that young people reporting to live comfortably tend to feel comparatively more satisfied with democracy, and more able to have a say in government processes, than those struggling to make ends meet. Such gaps point to the need for government bodies in Ireland to strengthen relationships with young people, in particular young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

Despite the government's strong public consultation culture, young people in Ireland tend to prefer non-institutionalised forms of civic and political engagement (e.g., signing petitions, posting political opinions online, volunteering) to institutionalised forms (e.g., voting, taking part in public consultations). Further, for young people struggling to make ends meet, civic and political engagement rates were far lower than for better-off counterparts. Available data shows important accessibility barriers, including a lack of understanding of issues, lack of knowledge about opportunities to engage, and low perceptions of being able to impact policy.

While Ireland has well-developed mechanisms to inform decision-makers on the perspectives of young people, including through youth councils and a National Youth Assembly, younger people are under-represented in the government workforce and state institutions.

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Notes

¹ The consistent poverty measure in Ireland is based on the number of households both at risk of poverty (as measured as living on less than 60% of the median income) and experiencing enforced deprivation (as defined as lacking two or more items from an 11 item deprivation index).

² "Severe housing deprivation" is defined and measured in line with the Eurostat definition. Under the Eurostat definition, a household experiencing "severe housing deprivation" is one that is both overcrowded and experiencing one or more of the following: The dwelling has a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundation, or rot in window frames or floor; The dwelling has neither a bath nor a shower; The dwelling has no flushing toilet for exclusive use of the household; The dwelling is considered too dark.

³ Growing Up in Ireland is the national longitudinal study of children and young people, a joint project of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The study started in 2006 and follows the progress of two groups of children: 8,000 9-year-olds (Cohort '98) and 10,000 9-month-olds (Cohort '08). The members of Cohort '98 are now aged about 24 years and those of Cohort '08 are around 14 years old.

⁴ The 2021 Flash Eurobarometer Youth Survey asked young people between the ages 18 to 30 to identify the most important barrier to participating in elections among a set of 11 options, these being: 'I don't have time', 'I'm just not interested', 'I don't think decision-makers listen to people like me', 'I don't understand the issues enough', 'I don't feel confident expressing my opinions', 'I think it would be too difficult to understand the jargon/political speak', 'Nobody has ever asked me to or invited me', 'I was not old enough to vote', 'Something else', 'Nothing, you are already an active citizen', 'Don't know'.

⁵ Ireland only ranks behind the United States (43%), Australia (32%), Norway (32%), Slovenia (31%), and Canada (30%), according to responses submitted by 15- to 29-year-old respondents to the 2021 Gallup World Poll survey question "Have you done any of the following in the past month? How about volunteered your time to an organization?".

⁶ Institutionalised forms of political participation refer to activities led, funded and/or designed by public institutions with the specific purpose of enabling the political participation of constituents (e.g., voting at a national and local level, public consultations and referendums, town hall meetings organised by local councils). In comparison, non-institutionalised forms of political participation refers to political engagement that is led by constituents outside of the framework of public institutions (e.g., organising a protest, posting political content online, signing a petition).

4 Inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination in the delivery of policies and services for children and young people in Ireland

This chapter maps and assesses the effectiveness of mechanisms created to coordinate policies and services for children and young people in Ireland. It discusses existing structures to pursue a whole-of-government approach to child and youth policy by bringing together relevant departments, agencies, and other stakeholders to address complex policy challenges, notably child poverty and mental health. It also discusses ongoing legal and institutional reforms to strengthen cross-cutting approaches, including through improved multi-stakeholder co-ordination at national and sub-national level.

Setting the Scene

A key aim of Ireland's first National Children's Strategy ("Our Children - their Lives") adopted in 2000 was to put in place structures to enable a more coordinated approach to policymaking and implementation. Since 2000, Ireland has implemented a series of reforms which have transformed the institutional landscape for policy development and service delivery both at national and sub-national levels. Interviews conducted by the OECD confirm that a whole-of-government approach to addressing complex policy challenges, such as child poverty and mental health, remains a significant challenge. This section examines the structures currently in place and ongoing legal and institutional reforms to encourage cross-sectoral approaches to child and youth policy and service provision.

Section one of this chapter discusses the structures to support co-ordination of child and youth policy at national level including the structures that will support *Young Ireland*, the national policy framework for children and young people 2023-28. It also deals with the 'spotlight' approach of *Young Ireland* : the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (0-24) 2023-2028, the successor framework to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-20* (BOBF 2014-20) and how it is envisaged to support cross-government co-ordination to address complex policy challenges, notably child poverty, mental health and disability services, as well as the role of the new Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, established in the Department of the Taoiseach in Spring 2023.

Section two focuses on the challenges of coordinating strategic and operational goals and activities in child and youth policy, addressing the relationship between the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and issues in respect of inter-agency co-ordination with a focus on Tusla and the Health Service Executive (HSE). Additionally, it delves into proposed amendments and review of the Child Care Act 1991 captured in the Child Care (Amendment Bill) 2023 as they pertain to interagency working.

Turning to the sub-national level, Section three provides an overview of the various structures in place to support coordinated approaches to policy implementation and service delivery targeting children and young people. With a particular focus on Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) and Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC), this section reviews their organisation, remit and resourcing, their various roles in supporting national policy frameworks focused on children and young people, and their mutual relationship in support of interagency working. It also discusses the proposed reforms set out under the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 in this regard.

Child and youth policy co-ordination structures in Ireland

In 2011, the Department of Child and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established with the mission to lead efforts to improve the outcomes for children and young people (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012^[1]). The responsibility of DCYA expanded significantly following the implementation of the Child and Family Agency Act 2014, and the establishment of Tusla, Ireland's Child and Family Agency. Under the aegis of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Tusla was mandated to deliver child protection and family support services, transferring these responsibilities from the country's health service, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Family Support Agency. In 2020, the Department's remit has been significantly expanded by the Government to cover responsibility for integration, equality, and disability, which were previously led by the Department of Justice and the Department of Health. Along this increase in remit, there has been a notable increase in public spending on children in Ireland over the past decade. Although available comparative data does not encompass all spending related to child-focused initiatives, data on social spending for families and child education suggest that, on average, spending per child in the Irish population has risen by 12% since 2011. Such increase in spending and remit, however, has not always

been matched with efforts to build administrative capacities to oversee a growing number of projects and initiatives. (OECD, 2023^[2]).

OECD evidence demonstrates that common barriers in relation to cross-government collaboration include siloed working practices, cultures, and budgets (OECD, 2024^[3]). Lack of recognition for interdepartmental initiatives, inadequate leadership engagement, and limited accountability of cross-departmental working groups can impede effective collaboration beyond administrative silos (OECD, 2023^[4]). Conversely, successful co-ordination and collaboration is associated with strong leadership at multiple levels, including at the political level; clear shared purpose; decentralised control; and thorough understanding of the policy context and architecture within which cross-departmental initiatives operate (Carey, G., & Crammond, B, 2015^[5]). Additionally, adequate resourcing, supportive Information Communication and Technology (ICT) systems and measures to promote ownership and accountability, such as joint targets, underpinned by policy narratives promulgating a collective understanding of the issues and how they can most effectively be addressed are critical.

OECD countries have established various mechanisms to coordinate child and youth policy across the whole-of-government. These mechanisms typically take the form of inter-ministerial or inter-departmental co-ordination bodies, working groups or focal points (OECD, 2018^[6]; OECD, 2024^[3]). Box 4.1 discusses practices from New Zealand (from the Centre of Government) and Finland (pooled funding pilots) as well as their strengths in convening relevant stakeholders around a joint vision and targets to improve policy outcomes for children and youth.

Box 4.1. Mechanisms to foster a whole-of-government approach to child and youth policy

New Zealand's Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group at the Centre of Government

New Zealand's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy includes a vision to make New Zealand "the best place in the world for children and young people". It is coordinated by the Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group (CWPRG), which includes 12 Ministers with 15 portfolios including Social Development, Children, Education, Health, Police, Justice, Prevention of Family Violence, Māori Development, Pacific Peoples, Youth, Employment, and others. The CWPRG and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) act as the convener of the strategy (DPMC, 2023^[7]).

OECD interviews suggest that having the DPMC as the convening body, backed by strong commitment from the highest political level, has facilitated cross-sectoral implementation following the adoption of the strategy. Continued political buy-in, also in times of a change in government, was considered crucial for the Centre of Government to exert its convening power, which was regarded as the most significant value added of placing child and youth policy outside of a dedicated line ministry (OECD, 2024^[3]).

Since the CWPRG was established in 2018, five out of the nine measures used to monitor child poverty in New Zealand have statistically significantly decreased. The CWPRG has been crucial to drive a whole-of-government approach to addressing child poverty, bringing transparency and accountability for reporting on child wellbeing outcomes across government and to the Parliament, and evaluating the impacts of policies on children and youth (DPMC, 2023^[8]).

Finland's pooled funding pilots

Finland's Child Strategy Unit, first established in 2023 under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, received a budget of EUR 0.5 million to drive cross-governmental co-ordination to deliver for children. Discretionary budget to co-fund projects delivered in co-operation with different Departments was initially piloted but scaled back by 2023.

Among others, this co-funding model supported a pilot to implement a civic education programme in schools, co-led by the Ministries of Justice and Education. According to OECD interviews, this approach was considered effective in promoting cross-sectoral co-ordination, but also required the Child Strategy Unit to engage significantly in project management, contrary to its original focus on exercising strategic oversight. For this reason, and in the context of operating at reduced capacity following a change in government in 2023, the work of the Unit is being reviewed and is expected to be more oriented towards overseeing the implementation of strategic deliverables. Still, the Unit continues to provide seed funding to drive cross-sectoral co-ordination at a smaller scale.

Sources: (BOE, 2008^[9]) (Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2008^[10]) (Expenses and Secretary of State for Budgets and Expenses, 2012^[11]) (Finland, 2022^[12]); OECD interviews in September 2023.

In Ireland, the mid-term review of BOBF 2014-20 underlined that effective cross-departmental working depends not just on reform of organisational structures but on promoting a collaborative culture (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018^[13]). A lack of incentives for cross-departmental working was reiterated in the OECD interviews as an important impediment to improved collaboration beyond administrative silos and was raised as a factor impacting on “ownership” of issues, in particular for complex policy challenges (e.g., child poverty, mental health), and consequently on “buy-in” in respect of collaborative action.

The mid-term review and OECD interviews also highlighted that the commitments in BOBF 2014-20 were regarded as too numerous and too “vague”, and that accompanying actions often involved too many stakeholders, supporting findings in previous mid-term reports conducted by Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018^[13]; DCEDIY, 2022^[14]). OECD interviewees also cited “overly complex” and resource-intensive implementation structures as an obstacle to effective cross-departmental collaboration in the roll out of child and youth policy.

Cross-departmental collaboration under BOBF 2014-20 and Young Ireland

The implementation structures established under BOBF 2014-20 were intended to streamline existing mechanisms for political oversight, interdepartmental working, and stakeholder engagement into one consolidated framework with clear lines of communication and accountability (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014^[15]). As for changes in *Young Ireland*, the successor framework, a brief discussion here is further analysed in Chapter 8.

Responsibility for oversight of BOBF 2014-20 was vested in the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy, while day-to-day implementation was coordinated by the Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium. Established to support cross-sectoral engagement, the Consortium was made up of senior representatives from relevant government departments and agencies. A sub-group of the Consortium, the Sponsor’s Group, comprised the departments with lead responsibility for implementation.¹ The Sponsors’ Group model was not replicated in *Young Ireland*.

Feeding into the work of the Sponsors’ Group and the Consortium under the BOBF 2014-20 structures were the Children’s and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC) National Steering Group² and the National Advisory Council. The chair of the CYPSC National Steering Group and representatives of the National Advisory Council were also part of the Consortium. While a reconstituted Advisory Council forms part of the implementation structures for *Young Ireland*, the CYPSC National Steering Group was disbanded in 2020, despite the final report referring to the formal linkage between CYPSC and the BOBF 2014-20 implementation structures as “allowing multidirectional information flow and minimising implementation impediments” (DCEDIY, 2022^[14]).

The National Advisory Council was established to facilitate input from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and academia. A reconstituted advisory council (to include no more than 16 members) forms part of *Young Ireland*. The previous structure involved representation from the pillars of early years, children, and youth. Given that children and young people protected on equality grounds – including race, ethnicity and disability – are at higher risk of poorer outcomes, it is noteworthy that membership of the new advisory council will provide for wider representation, including experts and spokespeople for key issues (e.g., mental health, disability, child poverty, housing).

There were two mechanisms for participation of children and young people under BOBF 2014-20 – the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive³ and the Structured Dialogue Working Group. Representatives from each of these bodies also sat on the Consortium. Under the revised structures for *Young Ireland*, the forum for child and youth participation is the National Youth Assembly of Ireland. Comhairlí na nÓg, DCYA and the EU Youth Dialogue are represented on the Assembly, which also included delegates from youth organisations and “guest delegates”. While not directly represented in the Consortium, the Assembly will continue to act as an advisory body under *Young Ireland* (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Finally, an implementation team was established in DCYA to steer the implementation of BOBF 2014-20. The implementation team played an important role as a conduit for communication and for coordinating activity within and across the different bodies involved (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018_[13]). It supported the development of work plans for the various stakeholders and identified “cross-sectoral priorities” to guide the work of the Sponsors’ Group. The team also led on reporting and coordinated the mid-term review of BOBF 2014-20. The implementation structures for *Young Ireland* envisage an implementation team within DCEDIY along similar lines. One key lesson highlighted in the final annual report for BOBF 2014-20 was the impact of insufficient resources on the implementation team’s effectiveness (DCEDIY, 2022_[14]).

The following sections discuss the implementation arrangements set up under BOBF 2014-20 and replicated or modified under *Young Ireland* in greater detail to discuss their respective strengths and challenges. By doing so, it points to important learnings for promoting a whole-of-government approach to child and youth policy in Ireland in the context of the new policy framework and to inform future strategies.

Political steer and oversight: The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education

The number and respective remits of cabinet committees in Ireland varies by administration, in line with shifting priorities and emerging issues such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (Connaughton, 2022_[16]). As of Spring 2024, ten cabinet committees operate under the 33rd Government of Ireland, including for the first time a committee with a specific remit regarding children. The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, created in January 2023, has oversight of these two broad policy areas, ‘with a specific focus on child poverty and well-being’ (The Taoiseach, 2023_[17]). The new Committee forms part of the implementation structures for *Young Ireland*.

In addition to the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Tánaiste (Vice-Prime Minister) and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (CEDIY) and Education Ministers, membership of the Committee on Children and Education includes a further eight ministers covering the briefs of Environment, Climate and Communications and Transport; Health; Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; Finance; Social Protection; Rural and Community Development; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. While the membership of the committee is broad, its oversight role is restricted to two of these domains and does not include health policy for which there is a dedicated cabinet committee. As this committee oversees the implementation of *Young Ireland*, and given that health intersects with almost all policy issues, a coordinated approach at the political level to the implementation of shared commitments across child and youth and health strategies is crucial, in particular to achieve strategic objectives related to mental health and child poverty.

The Minister for CEDYI sits on several cabinet committees including the Health Committee, the Committee on Social Affairs and Public Services, and the Committee on the Humanitarian Response to Ukraine. While the committees for the Economy and Investment; Housing; and the Environment and Climate Change deal with issues of relevance to children and young people (the first two are especially pertinent to child poverty), the Minister does not sit on these committees. As discussed further in Chapter 8, while more streamlined membership may have advantages in terms of efficiency, it gives rise to concerns that consideration of the interests and rights of children and youth are confined to a limited number of policy domains.

The frequency of cabinet committee meetings varies considerably, potentially affecting their effectiveness, although the quality of engagement within committees is likely a more important factor for successful cross-departmental co-ordination (Connaughton, 2022^[16]). Recent research carried out in the Irish context found that opportunities for discussion can be limited in some committees, with meetings instead serving mainly as conduits for information-sharing (Connaughton, 2022^[16]). Established in the first quarter of 2023, the new committee on Children and Education was viewed in OECD interviews as an opportunity for DCEDIY to progress on cross-cutting issues of relevance to children and youth provided that the work was driven by action-oriented agendas and the prioritisation of addressing cross-sectoral challenges.

Inter-departmental co-ordination: The Children and Young People’s Policy Forum and Senior Officials Group on Children and Education

Under the structures for BOBF 2014-20, the Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium brought together senior-level representatives from relevant government departments and agencies including Tusla, the HSE and An Garda Síochána, Ireland’s national police and security service. Membership also included representatives of the National Advisory Council, the Chair of the Children and Young People’s Services Committees National Steering Group, and a representative of local authority managers.

The Policy Consortium under BOBF 2014-20 was chaired by the Secretary-General of DCYA and co-chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach. This co-chairing arrangement was reported in OECD interviews to have been successful, in particular due to the convening power of the Taoiseach’s Department, which helped promote engagement of other departments with cross-departmental structures (see Chapter 8).

Other aspects of the Policy Consortium viewed as having been successful were the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders, including representation of CYPSC and the National Advisory Council. The development of collaborative relationships with CSOs was identified in OECD interviews as an area in which DCEDIY serves as an exemplar of good practice. Similarly, the National Advisory Council representatives were described by an official from the Taoiseach’s Department as bringing a “problem solving and collaborative attitude” to the work of the Policy Consortium. At the same time, the National Advisory Council highlighted in its submission to the BOBF 2014-20 mid-term review that opportunities to engage varied significantly across government departments (National Advisory Council, 2018^[18]). Moreover, OECD interviews support claims made by the mid-term review and final annual report, which suggest that while viewed positively, the Policy Consortium was not necessarily an effective vehicle for driving activity due to its lack of “action-focus”.

Under the structures for BOBF 2014-20, the Sponsors Group (a sub-group of the Policy Consortium) brought together representatives of DCYA and the departments of Education; Health; Social Protection; Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Each of these ‘sponsor’ departments, was charged with leading efforts in respect of one of the five national outcomes for children and youth, with support from the Implementation Team in DCYA/DCEDIY (DCEDIY, 2022^[14]). The mid-term review noted that the Sponsors Group was broadly seen as effective but referred to the view of the National Advisory Council regarding the absence of the Departments of the Taoiseach and Tánaiste in this structure, which meant that the smallest Department (DCYA/DCEDIY) was responsible for coordinating “the whole government system” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018^[13]).

To support the implementation of *Young Ireland*, the Policy Consortium and Sponsors' group were disbanded and replaced by the Children and Young People's Policy Forum, which replicates pre-existing co-chairing arrangement between the Department of the Taoiseach and DCEDIY (see Chapter 8). The Senior Officials Group (SOG) supporting the work of the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education is also given a more prominent role under *Young Ireland*. The work of the Committee, comprised of eleven Ministers⁴, with the possibility of inviting other government departments where appropriate, is to oversee the implementation of the Programme for Government commitments, including *Young Ireland*, with a specific focus on child poverty and well-being. The SOG therefore brings a higher-level, more strategic perspective to child and youth policy co-ordination than previous structures under BOBF 2014-20. Questions remain, however, over the breadth of membership in this group, as well as the competing interests and priorities which may pose challenges in respect of action-focused engagement. OECD findings show that, across OECD countries, there is a risk of excessive use or proliferation of inter-ministerial taskforces and committees, pointing to the importance of setting out clear mandates, roles, and responsibilities through legislation or otherwise to avoid overlaps and ensure that these groups remain "action focused" (OECD, 2024^[3]).

OECD interviews supported findings in the BOBF 2014-20 mid-term review, pointing to varying levels of engagement and "buy-in" across departments in the Policy Consortium. Related to this was a perception of decreasing senior-level engagement and that slippage in senior-level representation in inter-departmental meetings inhibited effective action, which further weakened engagement. The lengthy implementation span of BOBF 2014-20 was identified as a factor for waning engagement over time, as it increased the likelihood of personnel changes in key roles. The most significant factors to address though seem to be the related issues of *action-focus* and *accountability* (see also Chapter 7).

Findings from progress reports and OECD interviews strongly suggest that what was described as "co-ordination fatigue" and lack of accountability for policy outcomes should be reduced by the tighter focus on high-level priority issues identified by *Young Ireland*. Another factor related to "co-ordination fatigue" OECD interviewee alluded to was the high number of cross-governmental structures relevant to child and youth policy beyond those directly related to DCEDIY-led policy frameworks (see Table 4.1). DCEDIY leads, or is represented in, multiple structures, some of which may have representation from more than one unit from across the eight DCEDIY divisions. According to DCEDIY, as of 2023, units from the Child Policy and Tusla Governance Division participate in 43 interdepartmental or agency structures (11 led by DCEDIY). Units from the Early Learning & Care and School-Age Childcare Division participate in 49 interdepartmental/agency structures (26 led by DCEDIY). The lack of a "common framework" for interdepartmental groups was raised by DCEDIY officials as an important challenge, as was the extensive time commitment involved for officials with concerns about duplication of effort and inefficiencies.

Table 4.1. Participation of DCEDIY divisions in cross-governmental structures 2023

	DCEDIY-led or co-led	DCEDIY-represented	Total
Child Policy and Tusla Governance Division	11	32	43
Early Learning & Care and School-Age Childcare Division	26	24	50
Disability and Youth Division	8	13	21
Adoption, Mother and Baby Homes and Research Division	6	29	35
Office of the Secretary General Division	3	17	20
Ukraine Programme Management Office	4	5	9
Corporate & Business Support Division	3	17	20
International Protection, Integration and Equality Division	5	19	24
Total	66	156	222

Source: OECD based on information provided by DCEDIY, 2023.

Spotlights Initiative

There is broad consensus that the effectiveness of BOBF 2014-20 was inhibited by an overly broad focus, with too many commitments many of which lacked precision and were not amenable to measurement (DCEDIY, 2022^[14]). Key to the more streamlined under *Young Ireland* are “Spotlights” - high-level priorities with dedicated structures to support cross-departmental, cross-sectoral, and interagency activity. As discussed further in Chapter 8, *Young Ireland* identifies three spotlights – child poverty, mental health and well-being, and disability – with the possibility of new spotlights being identified during the duration of the framework. Each Spotlight area and their respective requirements in terms of cross-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination is discussed in the next sections.

Spotlight 1: Child poverty

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 6, there is now an extensive body of literature evidencing the negative effects of poverty and material deprivation on outcomes for children across a range of dimensions including education, health, and social participation.

Poverty has been addressed as a “cross-cutting” policy issue in Ireland since the adoption of the first national anti-poverty strategy (NAPS) in 1997, which set out a national poverty reduction target and structural arrangements to promote partnership and collaboration across and beyond government departments and agencies (Adshead and Millar, 2008^[19]). Progress on poverty reduction throughout the 2000s was achieved in the context of record levels of economic growth and relied heavily on income transfers. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008-09, bodies with an anti-poverty remit were shut down as part of public sector reforms (Family Resource Centre National Forum, 2020^[20]). Measures introduced in response to deteriorating economic and fiscal indicators had a particularly serious impact on households with children (Cantillon, B., Chzhen, Y., Handa, S., & Nolan, B., 2017^[21]).

Various factors were identified in OECD interviews as inhibiting progress on child poverty targets (see Chapters 3 and 6) including gaps in knowledge and understanding of “what works”, but perhaps the factor viewed as most significant was the lack of policy “ownership”. There was a strong view among line departments and CSO stakeholders that addressing poverty required cross-departmental working but that clarity on (departmental) leadership and accountability was lacking. OECD evidence points to challenges in securing ‘ownership’ among Government Departments over complex cross-sectoral challenges is not uncommon, pointing to a need to ensure taskforces and co-ordination groups establish defined goals and targets, and that these are reflected in vertical accountability structures within Departments (OECD, 2024^[3]).

From the CSO sector, as well as from the Ombudsman for Children, was the view that leadership from the Department of the Taoiseach would enhance cross-governmental accountability to address child poverty. Findings from the OECD consistently point to the crucial role that strong political leadership plays in steering cross-cutting priorities (OECD, 2020^[22]; OECD, 2024^[31]).

The establishment of the new Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach signals a strong commitment at the Centre of Government to prioritise addressing child poverty and is the first ‘Spotlight’ of *Young Ireland*. The new Programme Office has been welcomed in OECD interviews as a mechanism to bring heightened visibility of the issue of child poverty, greater political attention and to drive more effective co-ordination across government departments. Housed within the Social Policy and Public Service Reform Division, it reflects the more “hands-on” role the Department of the Taoiseach has adopted during Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to address the housing crisis. The new Programme Office aims to drive stronger accountability of relevant departments to place child poverty at the centre of their respective policy agendas. It has a wide focus to reflect the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty, which, however, also brings potential challenges in terms of prioritisation. The range of issues, as captured in the Office’s Programme Plan: “From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025”, encompasses income supports and joblessness; early learning and childcare; reducing the cost of education; family homelessness; service integration; and enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty (Department of the Taoiseach, 2023^[23]). By listing service integration as priority, the Programme Office recognises that further efforts are needed to enhance a national approach to service integration and the identification of an integrated service model for children and young people.

While broadly welcomed, interviews conducted by the OECD show mixed reactions on the increasingly operational role of the Department of the Taoiseach in leading rather than coordinating on cross-cutting policy issues. Those concerned considered that the value of leadership from the Taoiseach’s Department is inversely related to the number of cross-cutting issues for which DCEDIY is responsible. On the other hand, it was emphasised that addressing child poverty was “beyond ownership” in that ongoing and meaningful engagement from multiple departments, and hence leadership from the Taoiseach, is required. Learnings from other OECD countries (see Box 4.1) also underscore the importance of implementing measures to mitigate the negative effects of shifts in political priorities resulting from changes in government. Policies spearheaded by the centre of government are particularly susceptible to shifts in the political agenda between government terms.

Spotlight 2: Mental health and well-being

In comparison to child poverty, there is greater clarity in respect of “ownership” of mental health policy, with lead responsibility for policy falling to the Department of Health and operational responsibility for services resting with the HSE. Nonetheless, fragmented planning and service delivery was regarded in OECD interviews as a significant and urgent issue to be addressed, due to the complex landscape of stakeholders providing services relevant to mental health for children and young people. Co-ordination of the various mental health services falling under the HSE, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the Primary Care Child Psychology Service, is regarded as challenging considering fragmentation within HSE, which also has responsibility for disability services. Moreover, important providers include Tusla, the National Educational Psychological Service and other school-based services (under the remit of the Department of Education) in addition to various voluntary and community agencies.

The implications of these co-ordination challenges have been set out in the interim report of the Independent Review on CAMHS published by the Mental Health Commission in January 2023. The Inspector of Mental Health Services found that lack of co-ordination of waiting lists and “poor relationships” were impediments to integration of key services such as CAMHS, Community Disability Network Teams and primary care, and commented that “joint working was not always in place”, also highlighting deficits in

CAMHS teams in relation to risk management, resourcing, staffing and capacity as well as disparities in care across teams and a lack of a “child-centred” approach to provision (Mental Health Commission, 2023^[24]). The Independent Review was carried out in the wake of the Maskey Review, which examined the operation of South Kerry CAMHS between 2016 and 2021. The findings of the Maskey report revealed low standards of care, “risky practice” and resulting “significant harm” to several young people (Maskey S, 2022^[25]).

There has been a significant increase in demand for child and adolescent mental health services, as discussed in Chapter 3, which has also been reflected by a rise in referrals to CAMHS. Statistics presented on foot of parliamentary questions in 2023 indicate that the number of referrals to CAMHS grew by 33% between 2020 and 2021 and have continued to increase subsequently (Minister of State at the Department of Health, 2023^[26]). Numbers on waiting lists for CAMHS services have also increased significantly and there are wide disparities in waiting times (Mental Health Commission, 2023^[24]). Beyond increased demand, among the factors impacting access to CAMHS identified by the Minister of State at the Department of Health are staffing shortages within CAMHS but also capacity issues in related services (Minister of State at the Department of Health, 2023^[26]).

OECD interviews reflect concern about the impact of fragmentation on responses to complex needs such as the mental health needs of children in alternative care or of children with a disability (whether in alternative care or not). Another issue raised was “duplication of effort” given the range of agencies delivering services on the ground and reportedly “operating in siloes” according to stakeholders in the mental health sector. The need to ensure that the most vulnerable children and young people do not fall through the cracks and that resources are used efficiently provide very strong rationales for enhancing co-ordination at policy and operational levels.

The Department of Health and Children adopted the first national strategy on mental health *A Vision for Change* in 2006, and the successor *Sharing the Vision* was published in 2020. Several commitments under Outcome 1 (Active and Healthy) of BOBF 2014-20 were concerned with implementation of the aspects of *A Vision for Change* pertaining to children and youth. While BOBF 2014-20 is not referenced in *Sharing the Vision*, Objective 6 (Infant mental health) of *First 5*, DCEDIY’s Early Years strategy, is referenced. *Sharing the Vision* promises particular attention to support the needs of children impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In many cases, these needs are likely to be complex and to necessitate a multi-agency and interdisciplinary response. As noted in Chapter 5, information on the prevalence of ACEs in Ireland has been identified as a data gap in consultations carried out by the Children’s Rights Alliance to support the development of *Young Ireland*. Work carried out by the Centre for Effective Services (Morgan, M., Rochford, S., and Sheehan, A, 2016^[27]) and by (Smith, K., 2021^[28]) for Barnardos provide some indication of the numbers affected, suggesting significant unmet need.

The National Suicide Prevention Strategy - *Connecting for Life* (2015-2020) - was developed by the Department of Health and the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP), with the latter responsible for driving implementation. DCEDIY and Tusla have been allocated lead responsibility for five commitments under *Connecting for Life* related to prevention of suicide of children and young people and are supporting partners for three further relevant commitments and report to the Connecting for Life Implementation Oversight Group.⁵ OECD interviews show mixed results regarding the engagement by DCEDIY and Tusla in the implementation of *Connecting for Life* and limited progress was reported in respect of commitments related to youth suicide prevention.

As noted above, the Youth Mental Health Pathfinder Project is an inter-departmental initiative to draw a process designed to strengthen collaboration on addressing cross-sectoral challenges. It was selected as a topic by the Government as part of one of three projects initiated under the Civil Service Renewal Plan of 2014 (National Youth Mental Health Task Force, 2017^[29]). Using Section 12 of the Public Service Management Act 1997, a key focus of this initiative was the establishment of an interdepartmental Youth Mental Health Pathfinder Unit, which was expected to gather staff of the departments of Health, DCEDIY,

and Education. The unit was approved by the then Minister for Health and forms part of the current Programme for Government agreed in 2020. In interviews conducted by the OECD, it was suggested that the limited progress to date in establishing the unit reflects lack of “buy-in” from relevant departments. Responses to parliamentary questions instead attribute delays mainly to the complexity of the “administrative, budgetary, governance and legal arrangements” which need to be put in place for a unit to be established under Section 12 of the Public Service Management Act 1997, the powers under which have not been used to date. Relevant findings from the OECD show that the Centre of Government can leverage its convening power to support Units such as the one leading the Mental Health Pathfinder example to secure buy-in from departments and cultivating an environment to foster co-operation and policy engagement among relevant stakeholders (OECD, 2024^[31]).

The mental health Spotlight in *Young Ireland* plans to build on existing structures driving the implementation of *Sharing the Vision* to embed youth mental health priorities across relevant policies, initiatives, and service development plans of a wide number of departments and agencies (DCEDIY, 2023^[30]). The spotlight will monitor the activities of departments and agencies on existing commitments (early intervention, access to services, family support, digital mental health) with the stated objective to break down silos and facilitate cross-working between these.

Spotlight 3: Disability services

OECD interviews also pointed to significant unmet needs in disability services, among others due to long waiting times, staff shortages, and a high staff turnover rate. To address the disproportionate impact of these challenges on children and young people with disabilities, *Young Ireland* includes a Spotlight focusing on addressing challenges to the effective provision of disability services.

This Spotlight will focus on the needs and experiences of service users, seeking to track success through improved outcomes of children and young people. It operates within the context of the (forthcoming) *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026*, which aims to reduce waiting lists, increase capacities to enhance service delivery, tackle demand for assessment of needs in a timely manner, support children in care, provide disability education services, promote social inclusion, facilitate pathways for school leavers, and enable the participation of young people with disabilities in participation structures (DCEDIY, 2023^[30]).

Planning and delivery of child, youth, and family services: issues and challenges in co-ordination

From 1971 until 2005, responsibility for statutory child and family services in Ireland was vested in regional health boards. In 2005, as part of a wider transfer of responsibility for health and social care services, the operation of child and family services passed to the newly established Health Service Executive (HSE), created as an independent agency under the aegis of the Department of Health. The establishment of Tusla in 2014, under the aegis of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, was the culmination of a reform process prompted by long-standing concerns regarding the capacity of the HSE to effectively discharge the state’s responsibilities in respect of children in need of protection, care and/or support (Institute of Public Administration, 2017^[31]).

In 2010, a Directorate for Child and Family Services had been established within the HSE. This unit, with about 4000 staff and an annual budget at that time of around €600 million, became the core of Tusla, the new dedicated statutory agency created under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. Proposals to also transfer a proportion of staff from HSE services such as public health nursing and psychology, which play a significant role in supporting children and families were not progressed at that time, due to the practical difficulties involved (Institute of Public Administration, 2017^[31]). Interviews conducted by the OECD suggest

that co-ordination challenges, which pre-existed the creation of Tusla due to the fragmented nature of HSE services, have in some respects been heightened.

Tusla was also given responsibility for funding and oversight of Family Resource Centres (FRC), which until 2014 had been administered by the Family Support Agency attached to what was then the Department of Social and Family Affairs, now the Department of Social Protection (Institute of Public Administration, 2017^[31]). Additional responsibilities transferred to Tusla included several educational welfare services and programmes from the Department of Education as well as services on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence from the Department of Justice, which for the most part are delivered by civil society organisations (CSOs).

The various elements brought together to form Tusla were thus diverse in function and orientation. These encompassed services fulfilling statutory responsibilities in relation to child protection and school attendance provided by state and non-state providers, as well as family support services provided by a variety of local and national CSOs. In addition, elements included the community-development and social inclusion-oriented Family Resource Centres, and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services.

Tusla governance and responsibilities

Tusla was created as an independent statutory body under the aegis of the Minister for CEDIY, who is responsible for providing policy direction and oversight in respect of the agency's core child welfare and protection functions. Funding for the services, which fulfil these functions, is allocated through DCEDIY.

The functions, responsibilities and powers of the agency are set out in various pieces of legislation but of particular significance to the services for children, young people, and families under the direction of the Minister are the Child Care Act 1991, the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 and the Children First Act 2015. Under the Child Care Act 1991 as amended⁶, Tusla is obliged "to promote the welfare of children [...] who are not receiving adequate care and protection" (Law Reform Commission, 2022^[32]). This entails a duty to identify such children and to "co-ordinate information from all relevant sources relating to children". Tusla is charged with responsibility for instigating proceedings where necessary to ensure a child's care and protection needs are met. Other duties under the 1991 Act now vested in Tusla include provision of alternative care and family support services in addition to provision of adoption services, provide accommodation for children who are out of home and oversight and inspection of pre-school services. The Act also introduced a duty to make active efforts to "identify children who are not receiving adequate care and protection", as well as a statutory basis for the provision of family support services. A mandatory reporting requirement in the statutory framework for child protection was introduced in the Children First Act 2015.

The Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and Alternative Education Assessment and Regulation Service (AEARS) administer services under the Educational Welfare Act 2000 in respect of support and regulation of school attendance and home education, which were formerly under the remit of the National Education Welfare Board. TESS also has responsibility for delivering the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). From 2020, the functions of TESS and AEARS have once more been guided and overseen by the Minister for Education and these services are now funded through the Department of Education. From 2023, functions of Tusla in respect of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV) are expected to transfer to a planned new Government agency for DSGBV, which will be directed and overseen by the Department of Justice (Tusla, 2022^[33]).

Alignment of strategic policy (DCEDIY) and operational (Tusla) objectives

The establishment of Tusla was predicated on a formal demarcation between strategic and operational functions. While the operational/strategic relations within which Tusla is embedded encompass the Departments of Education, Health, and Justice in addition to DCEDIY, the discussion in this section centres

mainly on the relationship between Tusla and its “parent department” (DCEDIY) in the context of the statutory framework for guidance and oversight of the Child and Family Welfare Agency.

How to align strategic and operational functions most effectively was an important consideration for the Task Force, which advised on the establishment of Tusla. In the final report of the Task Force, it was noted that the tasks involved in establishing an agency should not be viewed as a simple matter of “separating policy design from implementation”. For the new agency to be fit for purpose it was cautioned that questions of “autonomy, control, accountability, and relationship management” required careful consideration in the design phase (Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2012^[34]).

Based on the recommendations of the Task Force, the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 sets out procedures for policy alignment and accountability based on a performance framework. The 2013 Act obliges Tusla to produce corporate plans every three years. The corporate plans are to be informed by a Performance Framework produced by the DCEDIY Minister, which provides the “policy guidance, direction and prioritisation parameters” for the work of the agency over that three-year period. The Act provides that the Minister may consult with the Ministers for Health and Education in preparation of the Performance Framework. The production of the corporate plan is followed by a process of consultation (“performance dialogues”) between DCEDIY and Tusla to support the finalisation of the plan.

To date, the Tusla Oversight Unit of DCEDIY has prepared three performance frameworks, which have been presented by the Minister to the Child and Family Agency with the most recent covering the 2021-23 period. The performance frameworks have been aligned with the five national outcomes for children and young people set out in BOBF 2014-20 and *Young Ireland*, but the vague nature of the commitments have inhibited meaningful alignment of policy and operational goals to date (see Chapters 7 and 8). Interviews conducted by the OECD indicate that disparities between strategic policy aspirations and operational realities exist. This divergence relates to the long-standing concern around the bias towards “protection” over “prevention” in the Irish child welfare system and the wider issue of prioritising of prevention and early intervention, which is reflected in relevant national policy frameworks. Addressing this divergence was identified as a priority for DCEDIY and something to be addressed in *Young Ireland*.

Tusla services for children and families are conceptualised and organised along a “continuum of care” from low to medium to high prevention, with corresponding thresholds for referral to each of the different types of support needed (Malone and Canavan, 2018^[35]). Under the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (PPFS), new local area pathways to Tusla services were developed for those with low or medium support needs with the aim of providing an integrated approach to service delivery centred around the child and family and reorienting service provision towards prevention and early intervention (Tusla, n.d.). For instance, Meitheal is a Tusla-led Early Intervention Practice Model developed to identify the needs of children and their families so that these can access the support they need. It is a voluntary process focused on early intervention and developing multi-agency (when necessary) responses. The support includes community-based approaches and collaboration between services in Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN) for a ‘no wrong door’ approach to accessing services and support. The Meitheal process and CFSN are supported by the Child and Family Support Network Coordinators.

Allocation of financial and human resources within the agency is heavily weighted towards the highest support needs (Shaw, A. and Canavan, J., 2018^[36]). Alternative care and child protection accounts for the vast majority of pay expenditure and the bulk of non-pay expenditure. Expenditure on family support and early intervention services - payments to services commissioned from CSOs under the 2013 Act, Family Resources Centres, and family counselling supports - amounted to roughly 30% of non-pay expenditure in 2021. A key challenge is that services are not always available to meet the needs of families dealt with under the Meitheal and CFSP pathways. For instance, there are recognised challenges in respect of access to disability services and child and adolescent mental health services as well as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services (Shaw, A. and Canavan, J., 2018^[36]).

Several factors underly the disjunction between the strategic emphasis on prevention and early intervention and the operational emphasis on protection and care. An issue raised in OECD interviews was that the background of many senior personnel in Tusla is in care and protection, which was viewed as a factor in the organisational culture and orientation within the agency. There are however broader issues which must be considered. Of importance here are the legacy of decades of under-resourcing of the child welfare system, as well as the succession of child welfare “scandals” and associated inquiries. In interviews conducted by the OECD, it was reported that responding to the immediate needs of children experiencing abuse or in the care system while advancing the prevention and early intervention agenda represented an ongoing challenge for Tusla. For this reason, a need was identified for “a mandate around early intervention”, which would support “ring-fenced budgeting” to address child poverty and disadvantage and compel interagency co-operation.

Tusla has a clear mandate in respect of provision of child protection and alternative care services set out in legislation and judicial case law, while the duty in relation to family support services is less clearly defined. The Child Care Act 1991 sets out a statutory duty to ensure provision of family support services, a duty transferred to Tusla under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. The 2013 Act further provides that the agency has a duty to support and encourage the effective functioning of families” and to “maintain and develop support services, including support services in local communities” (Government of Ireland, 2013^[37]). In addition, Tusla must ensure provision of “preventative family support services aimed at promoting the welfare of children”. There are no specific services which must be provided and the threshold to access family support services in practice can be quite high. There is also significant variation geographically in availability of services (Government of Ireland, 2013^[37]).

Reform of the Child Care Act 1991 is anticipated to bring further clarity in respect of family support. The new requirement under Head 4 (“Guiding Principles”) of the Child Care Amendment Bill 2023 would oblige the agency to “have regard to the benefits of providing family support services, or other activities to support and encourage the effective functioning of families, as soon as reasonably practicable”. This means that in cases coming to the attention of Tusla where there is a child welfare and protection concern there would be clearer direction than currently in relation to provision of family support services where appropriate. In OECD interviews, there were issues raised in relation to provision for children with complex needs in families who needed support but where there were no child welfare concerns. It remains to be seen whether the proposed amendments will increase the likelihood of such families receiving adequate support.

Resources are a key challenge in relation to prevention, early intervention, and family support. The gap between funding to commissioned services and the actual cost of providing those services is an issue frequently raised by community and voluntary providers. In interviews conducted by the OECD, the view from CSOs was that the agency has never been adequately funded. A suggestion related to the more effective use of business cases to enhance alignment between national policy and agency objectives. This, it was argued, would serve as a lever to unlock funding for “complex issues like child poverty”.

Interagency co-ordination and collaboration: The 2023 Child Care Amendment Bill

Whether categorised as low, medium, or high, meeting the support needs of children and families requires interdisciplinary and interprofessional working and co-operation between the various agencies with responsibility for welfare, social care, health, and educational services. For instance, “prevention and early intervention” encompasses an extensive array of services and programmes, some directly provided or commissioned by Tusla, while others come under the remit of various other government departments and agencies, including and in particular, the Department of Health and the HSE (for example, post-natal visits and developmental checks through the public health nurse service and disability assessments/supports), and the Department of Education and the National Educational Psychological Service. These departments and agencies also play an important role in relation to child protection and in meeting the needs of children in alternative care. Failures in respect of interagency co-operation and unmet needs have been evidenced

in various reports on the Irish child welfare system (McGuinness, C., 1993^[38]; Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009^[39]). Highlighted in OECD interviews were children with care and protection needs who also have needs related to disability and/or mental health, for which an effective response requires coordinated activity between Tusla and the HSE.

Interagency co-operation can occur at the level of planning and/or service delivery. It can be limited to information and knowledge exchange or involve “joined up working”, including sharing of staff and financial resources. (Devaney, C., Kealy, K., Canavan, J. and McGregor, 2021^[40]) draw on the distinction made by Himmelman (1992) between four “accumulative levels of interagency co-operation”. These are “networking (information exchange); co-ordination (information exchange and altering activities); co-operation (the above two combined with sharing resources) and collaboration (all the above plus the active enhancing of other agencies for mutual benefit, i.e., accruing of benefit to each of the agencies involved)”. Several factors have been identified as having an impact on the effectiveness of interagency co-operation. These include the legal and policy frameworks at national level; policies and procedures at agency/interagency level including the quality and clarity of joint protocols for co-ordination of service delivery; organisational culture; human and financial resources; relationships between agencies and respective personnel; training/capacity building; leadership and accountability; and monitoring and evaluation (ibid.).

Under the current legal framework for child welfare and protection, Tusla has a statutory duty to “facilitate and promote enhanced inter-agency co-operation” but there is no reciprocal duty on other agencies to cooperate (Devaney, C., Kealy, K., Canavan, J. and McGregor, 2021^[40]). This issue is addressed in the Child Care Amendment Bill 2023. Head 10 in the Bill sets out provisions under “Duty of relevant bodies to cooperate” for “relevant bodies”, which include, among others, Tusla, the HSE, An Garda Síochána, government departments, schools and early years services. There is also provision for the Minister to designate others as “relevant bodies” under the legislation.

The ongoing legislative reform will provide clarity on sharing of information requiring “relevant bodies” to comply with requests from another “relevant body” for information, “which is of relevance to the functions of the requesting body and where it is for the purpose of safeguarding or promoting the development, welfare and protection of a child, or an eligible adult”. There is an explicit statement that this obligation applies to information protected under data protection law. In interviews carried out by the OECD, uncertainty about the implications of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was identified as a barrier to effective co-operation and a significant factor inhibiting professionals in reporting child protection concerns to Tusla despite the mandate under the Children First Act 2015. A statutory duty to cooperate and clarity in relation to sharing of information were viewed as essential in creating a shift in culture across organisations to the effect that “child protection is everyone’s business”.

Currently, co-operation between Tusla and other agencies is facilitated by Joint Protocols, which are in place between Tusla and An Garda Síochána and between Tusla and the HSE (Devaney, C., Kealy, K., Canavan, J. and McGregor, 2021^[40]). The latter was updated in 2020 following the reports by the Ombudsman for Children in respect of two cases (“Molly” and “Jack”) involving systemic failures in respect of children with complex support needs. The development of referral pathways for children with a disability was referred to in OECD interviews as a positive outcome from the Tusla-HSE Joint Protocol. Overall, however, views expressed cast doubt on the effectiveness of existing protocols between Tusla and the HSE in supporting interagency co-operation in either planning or delivery of services and emphasised the need for a statutory duty. It was noted that there was a lack of clarity in relation to responsibilities for meeting needs of children in care with disability and/or with a mental health need and that “joint protocols and procedures are not consistently applied by either agency”. Without a statutory duty to cooperate, it was noted that inter-agency co-operation between HSE and Tusla was funding dependent. These findings are consistent with ongoing reports conducted since 2018 by the Child Care Law Reporting Project (CCLRP), which provide evidence on young people ‘falling through the cracks’ of different services and systems due to inadequate co-ordination mechanisms to deliver for children with complex needs (Corbett and Coulter, 2021^[41]).

Another significant area of change in the 2023 Bill is the introduction of a principle on children’s participation to decision-making processes, to strengthen the voice of the child both court proceedings and in decisions taken outside the court setting. The establishment of a national oversight group, referred to as National Child Care Act Committee, is another significant area of change in the new Bill. This Committee, comprising of relevant Government Departments and Agencies, is expected to provide high-level support for the duty to cooperate, foster knowledge exchange, and develop shared strategies to address issues arising the implementation of the Child Care Act.

Beyond setting out a general duty to cooperate, the 2023 Bill does not specifically address aspects of interagency co-operation other than information-sharing but empowers the Minister to issue guidelines. The approach to interagency co-operation under the Bill is permissive rather than prescriptive - “a relevant body [...] *may* cooperate with another relevant body for the purpose of promoting the development, welfare and protection of children, or eligible adults to whom this section applies, and such co-operation may include the sharing of relevant information” (emphasis added). The lack of a clear mandate to cooperate was a source of criticism during pre-legislative scrutiny of the 2023 Bill carried out by the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Strengthening the duty to cooperate set out under Head 10 was a key recommendation in the report published by the Joint Committee in June 2023, which argued that there should be “a duty, rather than an option to cooperate on relevant bodies” and that relevant bodies should be “obliged to collaborate on the planning, delivery and funding of services and activities, not just on information sharing” (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability,, 2023^[42]). The Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill 2023 and the General Scheme of the Health Information Bill 2023 were provided by the Ombudsman for Children as examples of legislation with more effective provision for interagency co-operation (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability,, 2023^[42]).

It was recognised by the Joint Committee that mandating a duty to cooperate raised important considerations in relation to “leadership, resourcing and culture change” (ibid.). This reflected comments made in OECD interviews to the effect that reforms to the legal framework are necessary but not sufficient to support interagency co-operation. Clear policy direction was deemed needed to create the structures and processes necessary to support joint working, including measures to incentivise shared budgets, employment of liaison personnel and to develop a “map for integrated services”. Of key concern was that structures would support an approach to planning and delivery of services with the child at the centre in contrast to the current model, which was perceived as service-led with limited interagency collaboration in practice. At the same time, it was also noted that sharing of either budgets or staff is difficult in a context where the respective agencies are operating under resource constraints and struggling to meet demands for services.

Another factor hindering effective co-operation in interagency co-operation at the planning and operational levels relates to the geographical division of administrative units. Different agencies and bodies (including for example health services, child welfare services, schools, and youth services) often operate across incongruent administrative areas at regional and local level. Reforms in train of HSE administrative divisions, including the creation of six regional divisions, is intended to promote integrated service delivery across the agency (HSE, n.d.^[43]). The reform process set out in Tusla’s current corporate plan involves a new regional administrative structure aligned with that of the HSE, schools and youth services. However, it is not clear whether there is an intention to align the administrative boundaries of the two agencies at local level with local government divisions.

These observations reflect common challenges related to the translation of strategic into operational priorities and effective inter-agency co-operation in the delivery of support to children and young people among OECD countries. New Zealand, Finland and Spain have established distinct models to devolve responsibility to the sub-national government level when delivering services for children and young people (see Box 4.2). Relevance to the Irish landscape is noted in, for instance, how different administrations ensure clear allocation of responsibilities, enhance local level co-ordination and establishing a duty to cooperate as currently envisaged in Ireland.

Box 4.2. Mobilising national and sub-national stakeholders to improve policy outcomes for children and young people

Finland's 1972 Youth Act sets a duty to cooperate in the delivery of youth services

Finland's Youth Act of 1972 delineates the responsibilities of municipalities in providing youth services and underscores the significance of local autonomy to tailor support to the specific needs and challenges of young people from different communities. The Ministry of Education and Culture is mandated as the principal state authority to oversee, coordinate, and advance national youth policy, in collaboration with other ministries, central government agencies, designated local authorities and youth associations.

As reported in OECD interviews, the Youth Act has enabled Finland's local and national government to better coordinate their interventions and avoid duplication of effort by clearly allocating responsibilities and setting a duty to cooperate across the national and the sub-national level. Particularly, the Act stipulates the following duties to cooperate:

- Article 4: In carrying out its duties, the state (through the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Regional State Administrative Agencies) must cooperate with municipalities, youth organisations and other communities as well as young people, as necessary.
- Article 8: [...] municipalities shall, where necessary, cooperate with other authorities providing services for young people, young people, their families, youth sector organisations, parishes and other parties engaged in youth work.
- Article 9: For the general planning and development of the implementation of multidisciplinary co-operation between local authorities, the municipality must have a guidance and service network, or other similar co-operation group, aimed at all young people living in the municipality. The network or other co-operation group must interact with youth organisations, parishes and other communities providing services for young people.

New Zealand's Oranga Tamariki Action Plan and Guide to Advancing Child and Youth Wellbeing in Local Government

In New Zealand, the Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children) Action Plan ("Action Plan") serves as a tool for enhancing the co-ordination of public services for children and young people in, at risk of entering, or transitioning out of the care and protection system. It sets out how children's agencies will work together to achieve the outcomes set by *the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*.

Oranga Tamariki is tasked with leading processes so that government agencies work together to develop actions, including to meet children's and young people's needs and build whānau⁷ resilience, and to support community-led, regionally enabled, centrally supported prevention. The Action Plan is supported by an Implementation Plan and gives the Children's agencies collective responsibility for monitoring and evaluating progress. The Action Plan is jointly monitored and evaluated by the Social Wellbeing Board, a group of chief executives of social sector and children's agencies, and the Child and Youth Wellbeing Ministers. The Chief Executives of the Ministries of Children, Health, Education, Social Development and Justice as well as the New Zealand Police are accountable to the Minister for the Action Plan. Other Departments (named agencies in the New Zealand context) can be involved, including Te Puni Kokiri (Ministry of Māori Development), the Department of Corrections and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

Vertical co-ordination mechanisms are established through agency structures. Alongside this, agencies link with Regional Public Service Commissioners – leaders with responsibility for convening public services at a regional level (e.g., local government, government agencies and iwi/Māori tribes). Regional Public Service Commissioners can help drive support for, and engagement with the Action Plan through regional leadership.

Another tool used in New Zealand to coordinate child and youth wellbeing policies between the national and subnational level is the *Guide to Advancing Child and Youth Wellbeing in Local Government. Prepared by the Child Wellbeing Unit* in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in collaboration with local council staff, it supports local governments incorporate national priorities for child and youth wellbeing into local government plans. The guide includes orientation on the relevance of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to local government work areas (transport, parks, and community spaces, etc.) and planning (e.g., long-term plans, spatial planning, resource and management planning, investment planning).

Sources: (Commission, 2017^[44]); (New Zealand, 2022^[45]); (Oranga Tamariki, 2022^[46]); (DPMC, 2021^[47]).

Subnational structures

The establishment of an independent statutory agency for coordinating the delivery of child and family services reflects the highly centralised approach to policymaking and implementation in Ireland in comparison to other jurisdictions.

Local authorities and LCDC

Local authorities at city and county level, comprising representative and executive branches, have relatively weak powers and limited revenue-generating capacity in Ireland. Except for housing, the role of local authorities in planning, oversight and delivery of social services has traditionally been somewhat limited. Instead, there are variety of different agencies and mechanisms implementing policy at local level.

In an effort to address co-ordination challenges at subnational level, various reforms to local government structures have been carried out under the Local Government Reform Act 2014 in line with recommendations set out in *Putting People First: Action Programme for Effective Local Government* (Department of the Environment, Community and Local, 2012^[48]). The vision for local government set out in *Putting People First* centred on a more strategic and coordinated approach to economic and social development involving a strengthened role for local government in “promoting economic development” in addition to co-ordination, oversight, and delivery of services (ibid.). To this end, local authorities are required to prepare a Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) for its area every six years.

Responsibility for developing and overseeing the social/community elements of LECPs rests with Local Community Development Committees (LCDC), which must be established in every local authority area. Membership includes elected representatives and staff from local authorities in addition to representation from public bodies, community interests, local development agencies and members of the community (Minister for Housing, Planning, Community, 2016^[49]). LCDC are expressly intended to facilitate a “bottom-up” approach to decision-making at local level so there is a strong emphasis on community participation. Among other functions, the LCDC are also charged with promoting a more “joined-up approach” to implementation and a more “integrated approach” to delivery of services (ibid.).

The measures undertaken under the Local Government Reform Act 2014 formed an important part of the policy context in which BOBF 2014-20 was developed. Notably, BOBF 2014-20 identified Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC) (previously Children’s Services Committees) as a

mechanism for “local county-level implementation and monitoring” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014_[15]). Alignment of CYPSC activities with LCDC was also an explicit commitment under the previous national policy framework for children and youth.

Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC)

Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC) bring together representatives of the various state and non-state agencies involved at local level in services for children, families, and young people. The main function of CYPSC is to support co-ordination and collaboration between local bodies involved in planning and delivering services. While these structures are at the core of providing specialised support for local services to collaborate for children and young people, they continue to face barriers in relation to funding, alignment with other local co-ordination structures in terms of strategic planning, and challenges to include CYPSC perspectives in national-level policy planning as discussed in following sections.

Its predecessor, Children’s Services Committees (serving the 0-18 population) were introduced on a pilot basis on foot of the *Agenda for Children’s Services* produced by the Office for the Minister for Children and the Department of Health in 2007 (DCYA, 2019_[50]). Full national coverage was attained by 2017, by which time the remit had broadened to encompass services for young people up to 24 and responsibility for child and family services and the employment and oversight of CYPSC local and national coordinators had passed to Tusla. There are now 27 Children and Young People’s Service Committees (CYPSC) nationally, serving the 31 local authority areas, with 27 coordinators employed currently according to information provided in OECD interviews.

Mechanisms at national level to support co-ordination and learning across CYPSC include the role of a national coordinator employed by Tusla and a national network of CYPSC coordinators, which provides a forum for knowledge-exchange. The National Steering Group for CYPSC, which as noted above was disbanded in 2020, formed part of the implementation structures for BOBF 2014-20. As reported in interviews conducted by the OECD, the steering group was reconfigured for this purpose and the membership widened considerably bringing together relevant government departments and agencies along with the national coordinator, chairs, and coordinator of local CYPSC. The inclusion of the Department of Rural and Community Development was seen as important in OECD interviews to facilitate the preparation of a guidance document for aligning the work of CYPSC and LCDC.

CYPSC were established on an administrative basis and the question of whether they should be placed on a statutory footing has been a matter of some debate following the publication of the review of the Child Care Act 1991. Draft texts proposing reforms on the Act initially contained, and then discarded, a recommendation to this effect. Interviews carried out with the OECD demonstrate diverging views on this matter. On the one hand, the current structure of CYPSC was represented as “fragile” and in need of strengthening to address variation across CYPSC in terms of effectiveness and stakeholder engagement. On the other hand, several concerns were raised in relation to resourcing of CYPSC, including a perceived mismatch of responsibilities and funding, and insufficient administrative support to local coordinators in the preparation of three-year planning and to implement projects in an increasingly complex environment. There was also a view that placing CYPSC on a statutory footing could inhibit “flexibility”. The argument made was that because there was already in place a local-level coordinating mechanism with statutory functions in the form of LCDC, it would be preferable to instead ensure that the work of CYPSC fed into that of LCDC. As of March 2024, it is unlikely that the Child Care Act review will result in CYPSC being put on a statutory footing before the completion of an ongoing review of CYPSC capacities by DCEDIY (see Chapter 8 and the ‘Resourcing’ section of this chapter).

In respect of membership of CYPSC, the provisions set out in the 2023 Bill broadly reflect existing guidelines. Bodies which *must* be represented under the 2023 Bill (directly or through a “body under their remit”) are Education and Training Boards; the HSE; An Garda Síochána; the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media; the Department of Education; the Department of Justice; and

the Department of Social Protection. This is in addition to a representative from Tusla and from the relevant local authority, who serve as chair and vice-chair respectively. Seeking nominees to the committee is the responsibility of the local CYPSC coordinator. Representation from community and voluntary service provider, groups and organisations and other public bodies may be included at the discretion of the Committee. The reforms under the 2023 Bill do not specify the level of seniority of the representation on CYPSC, although this was raised as an important issue in the OECD interviews. It was noted that there was variation across CYPSC in respect of whether representatives on CYPSC were “sufficiently high up the chain” to exercise the decision-making power necessary to carry out their functions effectively.

Under the proposed 2023 Bill, the obligation of CYPSC to report on the performance of its functions to Tusla annually (and on ministerial request) are to be placed on a statutory footing. The committees have responsibility for preparing a Children and Young Person’s Plan (CYPP) for their respective areas, based on a needs assessment, and must report on implementation of the plan. In addition, CYPSC have a role in local-level planning, delivery, and oversight of programmes for children and young people under various initiatives.

Currently, Children and Young People’s Plans (CYPPs) are to be produced every three years. That the planning cycle at CYPSC level is not aligned with that of local authorities and LCDC was identified as a concern in OECD interviews. If the provisions set out in the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 are enacted this will change to every six years, with a review (and amendment if necessary), at least every three years. Although the 2023 Bill does not contain provision for formal linkage of CYPPs and LECPs, the shift to a six-year planning cycle would bring the CYPP planning cycle more into line with that of LECPs.

The needs assessment to establish CYPP priorities must be conducted every three years under the provisions of the 2023 Bill. The needs assessment draws on available data and evidence, including socio-demographic data and mapping of services - a complex task given the extent and diversity of services at local level and heavy reliance on voluntary and community providers to deliver services for children and families. The provisions of the 2023 Bill also include a proposal to implement a statutory requirement to consult with children and young people as part of the needs assessment.

OECD interviews identified some issues currently inhibiting effective planning and reporting by CYPSC. Chief among these were data and evidence gaps at the local level. The delay in the national Census due to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted access to up-to-date demographic data. Considering this, it was reported in interviews that DCEDIY have agreed that development of further plans should be paused until new Census data is released. A further issue raised in interviews related to availability of area-level data. Needs identified were for disaggregation of national-level data to the local level and for “upward aggregation” of administrative data from local service providers. Two DCEDIY initiatives, the *Outcomes for Children National Data and Information Hub* and the *What Works* evidence hub, address challenges but, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, there remain data and evidence gaps and barriers faced by organisations in accessing, collecting, and analysing data and evidence.

By design, all CYPSC have the same capacities in terms of staffing and resources available and are provided with tools and templates to develop and implement the CYPP. As part of CYPPs, each CYPSC is required to prepare an annual progress report. These serve to analyse the priority needs for children and young people, the strengths of CYPSC, and the operational challenges experienced by CYPSC. CYPSC are also required to prepare an Annual Programme of Work derived from their CYPP, which serves to set strategic directions for the year and monitor the performance of CYPSC yearly.

Perhaps in contradiction of the above existing mechanisms, several OECD interviews have referred to the “cumbersome” nature of existing planning and reporting processes that CYPSC are to deliver on. Some interviewees also pointed to the fact that, despite these mechanisms, there was a perceived variance across CYPSC on how responsive some local plans were to the needs of local constituents. As stated by a CYPSC representative, all CYPSC that do not have a current CYPP published in the official CYPSC website have a plan in development. As of February 2024, 23 out of 27 CYPSC plans were still in

development, with plans to be finalised following the release of 2022 Census data made available in September 2023. Among the reasons for this delay, beyond census data availability, evidence received by the OECD pointed that local CYPSC considered the task to be disproportionate to the resources of the local CYPSC coordinator and suggested poor response rate to tender documents seeking expert support to develop CYPPs. The CYPSC also produce an Annual Programme of Work, which are submitted to the CYPSC National Office and published online.

More broadly, factors identified in OECD interviews as impacting CYPSC in effective performance of their functions included issues around stakeholder buy-in and varying levels of engagement in CYPSC structures and an overall need to increase human and financial capacities. Other issues identified included the need for more effective alignment of national and sub-national priorities and processes, hampered most significantly by resource and capacity concerns, and the challenges associated with the multiple co-ordination entities in place at local level.

Stakeholder engagement and accountability

While the current CYPSC membership structures involve the government departments and agencies with statutory responsibilities in respect of services for children and young people, meaningful participation of stakeholders in the work of CYPSC is not guaranteed. The perceived need to strengthen engagement and accountability was identified in OECD interviews as an important argument for those in favour of placing CYPSC on a statutory footing.

As discussed above, the 2023 Bill sets out the membership structure for CYPSC. In addition, CYPSC are specified as one of the entities to which “the duty to cooperate” applies while the various departments and agencies represented on CYPSC are each individually mandated to cooperate. As noted above, the only aspect of interagency co-operation specifically addressed in the 2023 Bill is information-sharing, but there is provision for the Minister to issue guidelines in respect of co-operation more broadly.

The provisions of the 2023 Bill allow for representation of non-statutory community and voluntary organisations. A point made in interviews with the OECD was that “community and voluntary sector [organisations] are hugely significant partners”. The burden which participation could place on such organisations was raised in pre-legislative scrutiny of the legislation with a recommendation made that funding should be made available to facilitate their engagement in CYPSC structures (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability,, 2023^[42]).

Resourcing

Core funding for CYPSC is provided from DCEDIY and Tusla under a joint funding model which encompasses staffing and programme costs. CYPSC have a full-time coordinator employed by Tusla, but no other staff are employed. Core programme funding allocated to each CYPSC from DCEDIY currently amounts to €28,000 annually. DCEDIY also provides funding to the amount of €130,000 to support the office of the national coordinator and a further €69,000 at this level towards projects and “emerging needs”. Salary costs of local coordinators are funded jointly by DCEDIY and Tusla. In 2024, DCEDIY also secured funding for Tusla to begin the recruitment of project support workers for each CYPSC to support the work of local CYPSC Co-ordinators. In addition, CYPSC received increases for 2024 in their programme funding (from the DCEDIY) and Healthy Ireland funding (from the Department of Health). This was represented in interviews conducted by the OECD as a successful example of interagency collaboration, although it was noted that it was important for funding to be utilised to support action on local health priorities set out in the relevant CYPP and not result in a “separate health plan”. The remit of CYPSC is broad and there are a diverse range of stakeholders represented, necessitating the use of various sub-groups. While the Healthy Ireland initiative has made funding available for the activities of health sub-groups of CYPSC, as reported in OECD interviews, the work of other sub-groups is entirely reliant on the relatively small pot of core programme funding.

There was a strong view among some stakeholders that while the work carried out by CYPSC was increasing, reflecting the growing number of policies which utilise CYPSC structures, allocation of resources had not increased to reflect this. There was concern that CYPSC are not a high priority for Tusla due to under-resourcing of its core child welfare and protection functions. Among the issues raised in OECD interviews was the need for business/administrative support for local CYPSC coordinators who were described as “quite isolated” and stretched in their roles. The work of supporting interagency collaboration was described as “time-consuming and slow” and thus placing high demands on coordinators. Limited staff resources was seen as a factor inhibiting the work of CYPSC sub-groups to the extent that they could not address issues in depth.

While there seemed to be broad agreement on the need for increased funding to support the *co-ordination function* of CYPSC, the views on *programme funding* were more nuanced. Some OECD interviewees identified a need for additional funding to support project implementation. There was concern that regardless of the size of the population served, each CYPSC received the same amount of funding and that the potential of CYPSC to deliver on programmes was not being utilised due to resourcing issues. According to one CYPSC coordinator, additional programme funding could affect the “dynamic around the table” impeding collaboration if stakeholders were placed in competition for a larger pot of funding directly administered by CYPSC.

It was reported in interviews that the current level of programme funding restricted the direct activities of CYPSC in that only pilot initiatives were deemed possible. There was reference to pilot initiatives, which had subsequently received funding from central government. The role played by CYPSC in advancing projects which could then be scaled up using mainstream funding was seen by some stakeholders as an effective way of using the limited resources available to CYPSC.

In addition to resource needs at local level, OECD interviewees referred to a need to enhance resources to strengthen co-ordination of CYPSC activity at the national level. The network of local CYPSC coordinators was viewed as successful, but there was a perceived need for additional resources to support its effective functioning. There was also concern that placing CYPSC on a statutory footing might have resource implications at the national co-ordination level.

Alignment of policy and implementation

The work of CYPSC is intended to support implementation of national strategic policy objectives in a manner which aligns with local needs. CYPSC have been positioned by DCEDIY as a key mechanism for implementing child and youth policy and facilitating a more coordinated and integrated approach to service provision. In fact, in 2017, the DCYA and Tusla established a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to provide a basis for coordinating the CYPSC initiative between both entities. The MoU established that the policy direction of the DCYA would be informed by the CYPSC National Steering Group. Further, it was established that Tusla would actively support the management and oversight of CYPSC through ongoing engagement with the DCYA and the CYPSC National Coordinator.

Yet, OECD interviews reflect concern from stakeholders that central government departments - including DCEDIY - do not always give sufficient regard to CYPPs or the CYPSC National Steering Group when policy is implemented at local level. It was suggested that there might be “a lack of confidence” in CYPSC as a mechanism for supporting policy implementation but there was also a sense that government departments were insufficiently attentive to the local priorities and objectives set out in the CYPPs. It was noted that CYPSC were involved in implementing a variety of policies which typically had very small amounts of funding attached, and that such funding was not necessarily related to the objectives set out in local CYPPs. OECD interviews also point to challenges to maintain the ongoing engagement of the CYPSC National Steering Group under BOBF 2014-20. Evidence as of February 2024 points to their representation under the *Young Ireland* Children and Young People’s Policy Forum, but it is unclear how

this implementation structure will link national strategic policy objectives to local-level planning, implementation and reporting systematically.

Echoing these concerns were views captured by OECD interviews from those working in CYPSC structures that policy development at the central level was insufficiently attuned to local needs and issues and that there was a greater need for national policy to be informed by the extensive body of data generated by CYPSC. OECD interviewees also recognised that CYPPs represent an important source of data and information for national planning purposes, however as discussed in Chapter 5, there were concerns about the quality and accessibility of data produced through CYPSC in addition to challenges for CYPSC in accessing data and evidence required to support their functions. A point raised in relation to the “What Works” initiative was that it is a stand-alone project within DCEDIY which is “not linked to CYPSC planning”.

Finally, there was a view that local-level CYPSC coordinators should be more directly involved in the development of national policy. While DCEDIY consulted with CYPSC coordinators as part of the process in developing BOBF 2014-20 and *Young Ireland*, there appears to be an appetite among at least some local coordinators for more in-depth involvement. It was commented in OECD interviews that involvement of CYPSC coordinators should be factored in from the outset of the design process rather than “just a consultation towards the end”, with interviewees pointing to useful learning from the local level that should be mobilised - including from local level consultations with children and young people. The envisaged inclusion of CYPSC and Local Authorities among the governance structures of *Young Ireland*, specifically the Policy Forum, sets out to address these concerns, although their effective participation will need to be supported by resources and wider strategic alignment of planning and reporting cycles.

Proliferation of co-ordination mechanisms at local level

Various strategies and initiatives directly or indirectly related to child and youth policy have led to a proliferation of co-ordination mechanisms at local level, which was described as problematic in OECD interviews. The policy context in which CYPSC operate is complex and the work of CYPSC intersects with various other entities established to coordinate policy implementation locally under health, education, equality and inclusion strategies and initiatives. For instance, the sixteen Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) have a statutory role in the co-ordination of youth work in their local areas. CYPSC are represented on various area-based co-ordination bodies, including LCDC/LECP sub-groups and committees as well as interagency groups.

The need for more streamlined and integrated local structures, which operate through rather than parallel to local government, was identified in OECD interviews. There were references to structures for community justice and community health projects, with a concern expressed by an official that funding was generally not channelled through local authorities and LCDC. The view here was that there was a need to streamline the mechanisms in place for local planning and co-ordination and to utilise the existing statutory structure more effectively.

Alignment of CYPSC/CYPPs with LCDC/LECPs

There has been a guidance document available since 2016 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016^[51]) (DCYA, 2019^[50]), which provides direction on the alignment of the activities of LCDC and CYPSC towards the end of creating more formalised relations. This document sets out the parameters of engagement between the two committees with a particular focus on a coordinated approach to priority-setting and planning through the LECP and CYPP processes. The guidance document clarifies that the preparation of LECPs should involve consultation with CYPSC to establish “priorities and actions for children and young people” while CYPPs should be informed by the LECP, setting out in greater depth how the priorities and actions relating to children and young people will be progressed. The guidance document further provides that CYPSC should report to LCDC on the LECP actions for which they have been allocated responsibility. Evidence provided to the OECD on this subject underscores the need to

better aligning planning, delivery, and reporting cycles across CYPSC and Local Community Development Committees (LCDC), including by ensuring that CYPSC are represented on LCDC and ensuring that both inform each other's strategic plans.

Interviews carried out by the OECD suggest that despite the existence of the guidance document, progress on aligning LCDC and CYPSC activities has been uneven, suggesting that the needs of children and youth (and the five national outcomes) are not reflected consistently in LECPs. There were however reports of “a change of culture” in this regard in at least some local authority areas, in the sense of greater engagement by LCDC with CYPSC as part of preparations for the LECP.

Several factors were identified in OECD interviews as inhibiting effective alignment between the activities of LCDC and CYPSC. Among these were widespread lack of awareness among staff in local authorities about the existence of the guidance document. Another issue mentioned was that Tusla is not represented on all LCDC. It was noted that LCDC predate the creation of Tusla and therefore the agency was not initially considered in membership structures. The guidance document notes that CYPSC are generally not represented on the LCDC structures and that the expected conduit for communication between the two committees is through the local authority representative who is the vice-chair of the CYPSC. However, it was suggested in OECD interviews that local authority representatives may not always have a thorough understanding of CYPSC and their functions.

Other factors identified in OECD interviews as impacting effective alignment included area divisions and diverging planning cycles. While CYPSC are aligned with local authority geographical divisions, it was noted that currently there are 27 CYPSC and 31 local authority areas. Therefore, some CYPSC serve more than one local authority area, although DCEDIY has launched a plan to address this through a review of CYPSC capacities and resource co-ordination as established in *Young Ireland*. That LECPs are produced in six-year cycles while CYPSCs are produced in three-year cycles creates a co-ordination challenge. As noted above, the reforms set out under the 2023 Bill include a shift to a six-year planning cycle for CYPSCs. Finally, varying levels of “commitment and capacity” among CYPSC to engage with the LECP process was also identified as a factor in interviews.

Perspectives on the most appropriate approach to align LCDC and CYPSC more closely and improve inter-agency co-ordination varied across OECD interviewees, with different views on whether placing CYPSC on a statutory footing would achieve this. For instance, rather than placing CYPSC on a statutory footing, an argument made was that it would be preferable to strengthen the linkage between the work of CYPSC and LCDC by formally integrating CYPSCs into LECPs.

The argument that CYPSCs should be more formally aligned with LECPs is persuasive considering concerns raised in interviews regarding the lack of focus on children and youth in local government planning and lack of capacity to engage with children and youth within local authorities and LCDC. There does not appear to be an inherent conflict between placing CYPSC on a statutory footing and enhancing integration between local authorities/LCDC and CYPSC including integration of CYPSCs with LECPs. The planned legislative reforms do not include a reporting requirement from CYPSC to LCDC. While the guidance document refers to CYPSC reporting obligations to LCDC in respect of LECP actions, the lack of a *formal* reporting obligation currently was raised as an issue in OECD interviews. As of March 2024, the DCEDIY set out to begin the process of aligning the 27 CYPSC areas with the 31 LCDC areas. This will involve recruiting additional CYPSC local Co-ordinators and establishing new CYPSC entities.

CYPSC, CFSNS and Family Resource Centres

While CYPSC operate under the aegis of Tusla, their existence predated the establishment of the Child and Family Agency. Interviews conducted by the OECD suggest that the relationship of CYPSC to the co-ordination mechanisms created under local-area pathways to Tusla services is to some extent still being worked out.

Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN) were established under the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme to support integrated service delivery. All local services (not just those provided by Tusla) relevant to children and families are supposed to form part of the network and to coordinate with each other to ensure that children and families are accessing the appropriate services. Each network is supported by a Child and Family Support Network Coordinator. The role of the coordinator includes responsibility for managing the Meitheal process. The geographical boundaries of CFSNs do not coincide with CYPSC as CFSNs generally serve smaller areas. The structure and approach to provision and practice also varies. It was reported in OECD interviews that the number of CFSNs nationally can vary (with 131 reportedly in place as of 2022) and that it has not yet been decided how many CFSNs are required to effectively meet needs.

A point raised in interviews was that CYPSC (“creature of DCEDIY”) and CFSNs (“grew from within Tusla”) were developed based on very different policy goals and orientations. CYPSC originated through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and were reinforced with BOBF 2014-20. On the other hand, CFSNs were developed as part of the Prevention Partnership and Family Support programme of work in Tusla for local area pathways and the ‘no wrong door’ model to improve access to services and supports in the community. This arguably resulted in a “tension of philosophy”.

Also operating at the local level with a remit around co-ordination of services are Family Resource Centres. Family Resource Centres operate under the aegis of Tusla but previously were overseen by the Family Support Agency attached to what is now the Department of Social Protection. The Family Resource Centres, constituted as limited companies, are independent from Tusla and are commissioned by the agency to provide services. The centres were established with an explicit anti-poverty/social inclusion remit informed by a community development practice model and provide a range of services to local communities and support provision of services by other local organisations and groups. The view from Family Resource Centre stakeholders is that its programme is a “low priority” for Tusla and its parent department (Family Resource Centre National Forum, 2020^[20]).

There are 121 Family Resource Centres nationally, but their distribution is not even, and the areas served do not necessarily coincide with Tusla area management divisions or local authority areas. Family Resource Centres are generally represented on CYPSC and CFSN structures. In some areas the Family Resource Centre could be the central plank of the CFSN. The work of the centres is guided by a planning process in which members of the communities served can participate. The Family Resource Centre National Forum (FRCNF) reports that most centres work on the basis of three-year plans implemented through annual work plans (FRCNF).

In a recent publication, the FRCNF commented on the limited input of Family Resource Centres into national policy frameworks (Family Resource Centre National Forum, 2020^[20]). The remit of the resource centres in relation to child poverty and disadvantage would suggest they may be useful repositories of local knowledge and expertise which could help inform local and national-level planning and priority-setting.

Examples of area-based multiagency initiatives relevant to child poverty and disadvantage

The following examples are selected to discuss are-based initiatives relevant to child poverty given their noted multiagency approach.

Sláintecare Healthy Communities (SHC) Programme

The Sláintecare Healthy Communities (SHC) programme established and funded by the Department of Health (under the Healthy Ireland initiative) has been in operation since 2021 (Sláintecare Healthy Communities, 2023^[52]) and represents an important example of interagency working. The focus of the

programme is on addressing health inequalities, which is also a theme of direct relevance to the child poverty and mental health Spotlights under *Young Ireland*. Funding under the programme supports improvements to the built environment in addition to local projects and programmes.

The “place-based approach” utilised in the SHC programme involved selection of 19 communities characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage across 14 local authority areas. Implementation of the SHC programme at local level is led jointly by the HSE (who have employed dedicated SHC coordinators in nine Community Health Organisations to support implementation of the programme) and the relevant local authority in conjunction with the LCDC (each participating local authority has employed a Local Development Officer to support and oversee the programme) and supported by various local partners, including Family Resource Centres.

Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs)

Youth Diversion Projects (YDPs) can be understood as a “prevention” initiative oriented towards diverting young people away from criminal activity and the criminal justice system (Department of Justice/Research Matters, 2023^[53]). The focus of the programmes is on young people aged 12-17 who have been engaged in offending behaviour or who are deemed to be “at risk of offending”. Under the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 there has been a broadening of the focus to include “early intervention” with 8-11-year-olds identified as “at risk” in addition to family support; school retention and engaging with “hard to reach young people” (Department of Justice, 2022^[54]). The Irish government funds the YDP programme with co-funding from the European Union under the European Social Fund.

YDPs are delivered by Community Based Organisations (CBOs) - typically youth work organisations - who employ youth justice workers, but the projects have multi-agency advisory and governance structures (Department of Justice/Research Matters, 2023^[53]). At national level, the Department of Justice (Youth Justice Service) and the Garda Diversion Bureau have chief responsibility for oversight. At project level, the YDP is implemented by a Project Committee (chaired by An Garda Síochána with membership from a wide range of statutory, voluntary and community agencies including Tusla) and a Referral Committee, which supports and oversees the work with participants including engagement with relevant agencies.

YDPs must produce an Annual Plan in collaboration between the CBO and the Project Committee (Department of Justice/Research Matters, 2023^[53]). These plans do not appear to be linked in with the local CYPP produced by CYPSC. In OECD interviews with DCEDIY officials it was noted that while youth justice projects had an “early intervention” role, the relationship between Tusla and YDPs had yet to be clearly defined.

The above discussed challenges and examples on efforts to strengthen sub-national level co-ordination in Ireland are in line with initiatives across OECD countries to strive for effective sub-national co-ordination. Box 4.3 discusses government initiatives in Spain and Finland to drive policy co-ordination, share good practices, strengthen governance capacities, and advocate for autonomous decision-making at the subnational level.

Box 4.3. Coordinating policies and services for children and young people at local level

Finland's Local Authority Committee

In Finland, the responsibility for providing services and policies for young people, as stipulated in the National Youth Act, rests at the local government level (municipalities). As municipalities perform functions they choose for themselves by virtue of their self-governing status, quality assurance parameters and targets are critical to ensure the coordinated provision of services at subnational level.

The Local Authority Audit Committee is tasked to assess the extent to which operating and financial targets set by local authorities have been achieved in each municipality, with a view to ensuring uniform service provision across regions. Further, the Government Decree on Youth Work and Youth Policy endows regional administrative agencies with the responsibility of ensuring coherence across municipalities in terms of service provision, mapping gaps across regions, and adequacy of these services to fulfil local needs, among others. They are tasked to produce periodic reports to evaluate youth services across municipalities against statutory requirements. The results of these reports are then used to inform budget negotiations between the central and subnational government level, as well as to promote coherence in the delivery of services.

Spain's Federation of Municipalities and Provinces

The Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces is an association of local entities in Spain tasked to preserve the autonomy of local entities, provide a platform for co-operation, and strengthen local-level governance capacities. The Federation includes a Commission of Childhood and Youth, composed of Mayoral representatives from across 22 cities.

The Commission coordinates local participation forums dedicated to youth, works on improving local services for children and youth, shares relevant local-level practices, promotes local employment initiatives for youth, and promotes the formation of youth associations at local level.

Sources: (Comunidad de Madrid, 2016^[55]) (The Southern Initiative, 2022^[56]) (FEMP, 2023^[57]); (Comunidad Madrid, 2023^[58]); (Government of Finland, 2017^[59]).

Conclusions

The findings from the OECD interviews suggest that the implementation structures for BOBF 2014-20 had both strengths and weaknesses in supporting collaboration and co-ordination across government departments and agencies, with stakeholders identifying insufficiently action-focused and resource-intensive national-level structures as a key challenge. The Spotlight approach of *Young Ireland*, as well as ongoing reflections on the renewal of governance structures, has the potential to address some of these concerns, but will require strong leadership and careful attention to co-ordination at and between political, civil service, agency, and sub-national levels to be successful.

Alignment of policy and operational priorities was reported to be an ongoing challenge for Departments (in setting joint priorities) and between Departments and agencies (to develop coherence between policy planning and implementation) as well as resourcing issues. There is also a continued proliferation of coordinating structures, and it is uncertain whether the implementation of new governance structures in *Young Ireland*, the proposal to launch a National Childcare Advisory Committee under the Review of the Child Care Act 1991, or the new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office will effectively address this challenge. There remain challenges in respect of interagency co-ordination. Reforms to the statutory

framework are pending but greater policy guidance and enhanced resources to develop a more effective enabling structures to support co-operation and joint working was considered critical in OECD interviews. The proliferation of co-ordination mechanisms also concerns the sub-national level. While progress has been made in relation to alignment of LCDC and CYPSC activity and the proposed legislation provides further clarity, additional challenges related to resourcing were raised in interviews.

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Notes

¹ Department of Health (Outcome 1), Department of Education and Skills (Outcome 2), Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Outcome 3), Department of Social Protection (Outcome 4), Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Outcome 5), Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014_[15]).

² Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) formed an integral part of the structures provided for in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020. and were accountable to the CYPSC National Steering Group and the DCEDIY, and in turn to the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium. The National Steering Group for CYPSC and the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium have since been stood down by DCEDIY.

³ One representative from each of the 31 Comhairlí na nÓg is elected to the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, which follows up on the recommendations from Dáil na nÓg to make changes for young people in those areas. The National Executive has a term of office of two years and meets once a month. The National Executive is facilitated and supported by the National Participation Office and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who ensure that they get the opportunity to engage with appropriate Ministers, policymakers, Oireachtas Committees and other decision-makers.

⁴ The Ministers attending meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education include the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence; Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Minister for Transport; Minister for Health, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Minister for Education; Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; Minister for Finance; Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and

Community Development; Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Other Ministers or Ministers of State may be invited to participate in Cabinet meetings as required.

⁵ These include commitments in relation to integrating suicide prevention into national and sub-national policy and planning, particularly in respect of children in receipt of Tusla services/vulnerable children and families as well as commitments in relation to information and data relevant to the discussion in Chapter 5.

⁶ The Child Care Act 1991 has been amended multiple times since it passed into law. The Law Reform Commission has produced consolidated texts of the Act incorporating various amendments, most recently in September 2022.

⁷ Whānau is a Māori word which translates to extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people - the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context, the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members (Te Aka, 2024_[61]).

5 Evidence-based approaches to policymaking and service delivery for children and young people in Ireland

This chapter discusses current practice and opportunities to strengthen evidence-based approaches to policymaking and service delivery for children and young people in Ireland. It analyses capacity among government departments and agencies to collect, utilise and share evidence that is disaggregated by age and other identity factors and coordinate research within the framework of the Children and Young People (CYP) Indicator Set, with a focus on mapping the needs of vulnerable groups of children and young people. It also discusses the collection of evidence through involving children, young people, and civil society in policymaking, as well as the development of regulatory impact assessments to anticipate child and youth outcomes *ex ante*.

Introduction

There is a broad consensus that understanding the needs, issues and challenges to which policymakers must respond, identifying appropriate responses, and measuring their effectiveness requires robust and up to date data and evidence. The benefits of using evidence to inform policy and service provision have been outlined in various publications over the last decades. These include benefits in relation to effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability (Nutley, S. M., Walter, I., & Davies, H. T., 2007^[1]).

The limitations of evidence, whether from research or other sources are also acknowledged. One cautionary observation is that evidence is always contextually contingent. There is no guarantee that results from an intervention will necessarily be replicated elsewhere in the future (Cartwright and Hardie, J., 2012^[2]). A related concern is that tentative or highly specific findings are seized upon too readily or applied too widely although the bigger concern is the limited use of even high-quality robust evidence to inform decision-making (OECD, 2020^[3]).

The implications are that policymakers, service-providers, funders, and practitioners require the skills to engage critically with evidence in order to use it effectively. This entails recognising the limitations of even the most robust research and evaluations and appreciating the importance of engaging with a variety of different - and sometimes conflicting - sources of evidence. This is reflected in the OECD definition of evidence-informed policymaking as “a process whereby multiple sources of information, including statistics, data and the best available research evidence and evaluations, are consulted before making a decision to plan, implement, and (where relevant) alter public policies and programmes” (OECD, 2020^[3]). This definition includes evidence drawn from original research but also points to the use of administrative data and statistics. It is also important that the evidence utilised captures the views and experiences of those directly affected by policy, including children and young people.

The OECD recognises that an evidence-informed approach to policymaking depends upon effective leadership, infrastructure, culture, capacity, and skills. Putting in place robust and sustainable structures and processes necessitates identification of “existing barriers and facilitators of evidence use within the system” (OECD, 2020^[3]). This includes factors related to the “local political and institutional context of research use” in addition to organisational factors and individual skills needs. The significance of administrative data as a useful and accessible source of information about needs and outcomes of service users and on the performance of services means that government departments and statutory and non-statutory agencies and bodies have an important role as producers as well as consumers of evidence (OECD, 2020^[3]).

The issues that this Chapter will discuss are pertinent to Ireland but, in many cases, mirror common trends across OECD countries. These include challenges to measuring the needs of children from precarious backgrounds and with complex needs, as well as to better connect data on the varied aspects of children’s economic and material well-being to identify drivers of child poverty. Barriers to improve data collection and sharing include narrow scope of datasets, irregular timing in the collection of data, lack of consistency of questionnaires, and low coverage of (and ability to identify) issues relevant to those most vulnerable (OECD, 2021^[4]). Box 5.1 outlines the legal and institutional initiatives and guidance material developed by Finland, New Zealand, and Spain to address such challenges.

Box 5.1. OECD country approaches to promote evidence-based child and youth policymaking

Finland: The Act on the Secondary Use of Health and Social Data

The Act on the Secondary Use of Health and Social Data, passed in 2019, seeks to support policymakers in processing sensitive data in the health and social sector in an effective and safe manner.

The Act enables policymakers to utilize data previously restricted to research and statistical purposes, specifically in health and social policy formulation. It establishes a data permit authority to grant permits to both governmental and non-governmental entities for accessing sensitive data. As reported by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, this system has reduced data access waiting times, enabled decision-makers to access and utilise more data, enhanced their confidence in data collection and sharing, all while adhering to individuals' privacy rights and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements.

New Zealand: Guidance material to share information on children's needs in a safe way

In New Zealand, Oranga Tamariki (Ministry of Children) has created guidance material for policymakers and practitioners to be aware of legislation in relation to sharing and requesting data (including personal data, case management data and aggregated anonymised data) among child welfare and protection agencies.

In 2022, Oranga Tamariki published "Frequently Asked Questions" on their website, factsheets on consultation and consent and the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, as well as infographics, reference cards, and hypothetical scenarios for policymakers, practitioners and children and young people to raise awareness about relevant legislation pertaining to sharing data on children and young people across departments.

Spain: The Childhood Observatory

The Childhood Observatory in Spain, headed by the Head of State Secretariat of the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, is composed of working group of high-level civil servants from the central administration (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030), autonomous communities (General Directors from Autonomous Communities), as well as civil society organisations and youth councils It was established in 1999 and works based on a centralised shared information system.

The Observatory's main purpose is to protect and promote the rights of children and adolescents by publishing data in the Ministry's website, issuing press releases on the challenges facing children in Spain and government action to address them, and corresponding with working group members and between agencies with a stake in addressing child poverty. An online 'data hub' compiles and presents academic research and data from government agencies working on child wellbeing.

The Childhood Observatory is complemented by the Childhood in Data initiative, which measures child wellbeing indicators more broadly. Childhood in Data is a dashboard of up-to-date information from a database managed by the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 to inform public policy, covering indicators in the field of education, health and safety, material well-being, family and social environment, leisure and free time, and subjective well-being, as well as data on vulnerable children.

Sources: (Spain, 2023^[5]); (Spain, 2020^[6]); (New Zealand Oranga Tamariki, 2022^[7]); (Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022^[8]).

The data and evidence base on children and young people in Ireland has grown significantly in the last two decades but there remain evidence gaps which inhibit knowledge and understanding of how policy and service provision can most effectively address disparities in outcomes.

The discussion below draws on findings from OECD interviews and existing reports on stakeholders' views on the most significant data and evidence gaps and weaknesses and the barriers identified as inhibiting effective collection, analysis, use and sharing of data by state and non-state agencies and organisations. The main focus of discussion is the Children and Young People Indicator Set, first developed as part of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* (BOBF 2014-20) given its importance for informing and monitoring implementation of policy frameworks led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

DCYA/DCEDIY-led actions to strengthening the evidence base

Since the adoption of the first national children's strategy *Our Children, Their Lives* in 2000, there have been systematic efforts to better map the needs of children in Ireland. Important measures were adopted under Goal 2 (children's lives will be better understood) of *Our Children, Their Lives*, which have been built on by subsequent policies including BOBF 2014-20 and its constituent strategies. Actions adopted have included initiatives and programmes aimed at supporting new research, measures in relation to collection and use of data and statistics, and enhancing capacity and building infrastructure for research, evaluation and data collection and analysis (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011^[9]). Increased government investment into research related to children and young people must be viewed in the context of a more generalised turn to research at the national and international levels (ibid.). Expenditure on research and development in Ireland increased three-fold between 2000-2010 and several strategic initiatives were adopted to enhance the enabling environment, build capacity, identify priorities, and strengthen the evidence and knowledge base (ibid.).

The National Children's Research Programme implemented on foot of Goal 2 of *Our Children, Their Lives* involved four strands (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011^[9]):

- Strand 1 "commissioned research studies": included the establishment of the first national longitudinal study on children's lives (see below) as well as a variety of smaller-scale studies on policy issues related to children and young people;
- Strand 2 "capacity building": included funding postgraduate research fellowships and work placements;
- Strand 3 "infrastructural developments": included the development of a set of child well-being indicators, which formed the basis of the information presented in the State of the Nation's Children reports produced on a biennial basis by DCYA/DCEDIY;
- Strand 4 "transfer of knowledge on data and research on children's lives": included the development of a database for research and data relevant to children's lives.

Another important development in this period was the Early Intervention Programme, developed through a partnership between DCYA and Atlantic Philanthropies and centred on evidence-based approaches to identifying and responding to need at the level of children, families, and communities - predicated on "robust" monitoring and evaluation practices to capture learning from interventions (ibid).

In the past decade, the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011-2016 was initially planned to be narrowly focused on data and statistics, as part of a wider initiative across government departments, but during the development process the scope of the strategy broadened to include research (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011^[9]). The approach to developing the strategy drew on the outcomes-based approach which had been set out in the Agenda for Children's Services (2007), narrowing the number of outcomes from seven to five, which would subsequently underpin BOBF 2014-20 and *Young*

Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011^[9]). A key aspect of the development process for the strategy was the identification of data and research gaps as well as sources of data and evidence in respect of each of these five outcomes. Four cross-cutting issues were identified as requiring attention: “the need to develop a national strategic approach to information around children’s lives; to improve administrative data systems; to build capacity across all areas of research and data development, particularly analytic capability; and to actively support evidence-informed policy and practice”. This informed the selection of the five overarching objectives of the strategy:

- To generate a comprehensive and coherent understanding of children’s development, needs and appropriate supports and services.
- To develop research capacity in the area of children’s research and data.
- To develop, support and promote good infrastructure on children’s research and data.
- To improve monitoring and evaluation of children’s services in Ireland at local and national level.
- To support a continuum of research and data use within policy and practice settings.

There have been important recent developments led by DCEDIY in respect of data and research, particularly in the context of developing *Young Ireland*. These include various programmes of commissioned research, of which the child-specific poverty programme (see below) is of particular relevance to this Chapter. There have also been initiatives in relation to dissemination and transfer of knowledge to support evidence-informed planning/policy and intervention.

‘What Works’ Ireland Evidence Hub

The What Works Ireland Evidence Hub is a repository of evidence on Prevention and Early Intervention Initiatives (PEI).¹ The Outcomes for Children National Data & Information Hub provides access to the most up-to-date data across a range of indicators of relevance to children and young people.² The Hub, which was developed by DCEDIY includes an interactive area-based geo-mapping system to inform policymakers’ decisions regarding service planning and delivery. Data and research have been identified as important in supporting the realisation of government commitments under *Young Ireland*. As discussed further in Chapter 8, the strategy identifies seven actions to strengthen data and research development, including to carry out a research exercise to map gaps in children and young people’s services and outcomes to inform the development of a “Cross Government Children and Young People’s Research Programme” (DCEDIY, 2023^[10]).

Research and Innovation Strategy Impact 2030 and National Equality Data Strategy

Relevant developments at the wider government level include the Research and Innovation Strategy Impact 2030, a strategy adopted in 2022 to progress objectives across the Irish research and innovation system to maximise impact on policymaking. Among the commitments in the Action Plan for Impact 2030 is one related to fore-sighting/horizon scanning, which may be useful in identifying future ‘Spotlights’ or areas of cross-sectoral focus and action under *Young Ireland*. Finally, in 2022, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth announced the development of a National Equality Data Strategy, led by the Central Statistics Office in conjunction with DCEDIY. The Strategy will take effect from 2023 to guide the identification of gaps in equality data and provide guidance on how to fill those gaps and develop standard practices in classification.

Box 5.2. The National Longitudinal Study: Growing Up in Ireland (GUI)

Among the most significant developments to date in respect of enhancing the research evidence base has been the establishment of the national longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), which commenced in 2006.

The study is funded and overseen by DCEDIY, which is responsible for high-level planning and performing needs analysis, including carrying out consultations with stakeholders. It is also responsible for conducting analysis and compiling reports based on the study's findings. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) has recently taken over operational responsibility for data collection for the study, which previously was administered by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). In terms of governance of GUI, there is a DCEDIY-CSO Bilateral Steering Group in place as well as two advisory groups. These include a GUI Policy Advisory Group comprising representatives from across government departments and agencies and a GUI Research and Practice Expert Advisory group comprising representatives from research/academia and CSOs.

The study recruited cohorts born in 1998 (at 9 years old) and 2008 (at 9 months old). Several waves of data collection have been conducted for each cohort including a special wave conducted in December 2020, focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the study launched a new third cohort of babies who will be 9 months old in 2024.

The study involves collection of quantitative and qualitative data involving multiple instruments and covering the range of domains of children's lives. Data is archived for use by external researchers. Beyond the official publications presenting the findings from each wave of the study, GUI data has been utilised in hundreds of reports and papers produced by external researchers. As of July 2023, 246 outputs by external researchers are hosted on the GUI website.

Source: (GUI, 2023^[11]).

The Children and Young People's Indicator Set

The Children and Young People's (CYP) Indicator Set was developed as part of BOBF 2014-20 to inform and support its implementation. Formerly known as the BOBF Indicator Set, it has since been expanded to support implementation of constituent strategies, including the early years strategy First 5, in addition to the national action plan adopted under the EU Child Guarantee (Government of Ireland, 2022^[12]). *Young Ireland* builds on this indicator set and uses it to set the direction of priorities for the duration of the Strategy.

Initially developed in 2017, the CYP indicator set was updated in 2021 (DCECIY, 2022^[13]) and 2023. The development of the indicator set involved a multi-stage process, involving seven phases. These included the initial preparatory phase which comprised "a review of literature and other indicator sets; the compilation of an indicator inventory; the identification of potential measures and data sources; and the grouping of indicators into indicator areas" (ibid.). This was followed by the convening of an expert panel whose advice informed the subsequent phases of development. Criteria were then developed - "policy relevance" and "technical merit" - and used to identify the indicator areas presented as part of a Delphi process undertaken with stakeholders to select "priority indicator areas" (ibid.). While children and young people were not directly consulted as part of the process, findings from previous consultations informed the selection of indicator areas. There was also a further process of consultation with government stakeholders and experts prior to the preparation of a draft set of indicators (ibid.).

The datasets used to compile the indicator set include Irish and international surveys (such as the Health Behaviour in School Children Survey and the Survey on Income and Living Conditions) and

administrative/performance data from government departments and agencies including Tusla, the HSE and the Department of Education. The data sets used vary considerably in terms of frequency of data collection/reporting and in the scope for disaggregation (DCECIY, 2022^[13]). This creates difficulties in identifying needs and measuring progress in that up-to-date data on certain issues may not be available at key points in the policy cycle. Further, lack of disaggregated data means that there are significant gaps in relation to the needs and outcomes of particular sub-groups of children and young people. This includes age-groupings, which are an important consideration given that the indicator set is intended to support implementation of the early years' strategy First 5. There are also significant gaps in relation to children from marginalised groups. This includes six sub-groups prioritised under the EU Guarantee for Children. The stated purpose of the indicator set was initially "to track progress for children and young people aged 0–24 across the five national outcomes outlined in BOBF 2014-20", and continues to serve this purpose under *Young Ireland* (DCECIY, 2022^[13]). The indicator set is intended to support policymaking and implementation by identifying trends and emerging issues and to facilitate international comparison "where possible" (ibid). As acknowledged in the report, indicators "can measure inputs, process, outputs, and outcomes" but, as they provide limited insight into cause and effect, these are best regarded as a starting point for further investigation into the efficacy of policy interventions in improving outcomes (ibid.). Further details on the main strengths and potential weaknesses in the Irish policy landscape in regard to the monitoring and evaluation of the national outcomes can be found in Chapters 6 and 8, as well as the OECD's Analysis of the Monitoring System for Child Policies and Outcomes (OECD, 2024^[14]).

The Indicator Set presents more than 100 indicators organised under 70 indicator areas grouped under each of the five national outcomes of *Young Ireland*. In addition, the Set includes 14 demographic indicators sourced, among others, from the CSO Census of Population 2022 (DCEDIY, 2023^[10]). Where relevant or regularly updated data is not available for a particular indicator, "placeholders" are used. The explanation provided in the indicator set report refers to three types of placeholders. Type 1 placeholders are those for which there is no available data. Type 2 placeholders are those for which "useful regular data" is available but "more appropriate or relevant data may be in development". Finally, Type 3 placeholders are those for which regular data is not available but there exists "useful data from once-off, infrequent or longitudinal surveys" (ibid). Use of the placeholders is important in that particular data gaps are clearly identified. In addition, to support more effective monitoring of national policy frameworks there may be a need to address additional data gaps beyond those for which placeholders have been utilised.

A large proportion of the indicator areas in the CYP indicator set are well-being measures, focused on experiences, behaviours, beliefs or attainments of children and young people. These include, for example, health behaviours, self-esteem measures, and perceptions of interpersonal relationships. There are some significant gaps in data on outcomes of particular relevance to children in the most vulnerable circumstances. For example, the indicator "number of children who receive direct support and/or accommodation from a domestic violence service each year" is a placeholder for "Households where domestic violence occurs" although evidence suggests that significantly higher numbers of children are exposed to domestic violence than access domestic violence services (Dodaj, 2020^[15]); (H.L., Feder, G., & Shaw, A., 2019^[16]).

Although not represented as a placeholder, the indicator for "abuse", which is "the total number of children at the end of the reporting period currently listed as ACTIVE (i.e. at ongoing risk of significant harm) on the Child Protection Notification System (CPNS)" is unlikely to provide an accurate representation of the scale of the issue or the extent of support needs (O'Leary, D. and Lyons, O., 2022^[17]). Included in the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child following Ireland's combined fifth and sixth periodic reports is a recommendation to "ensure the systematic collection and analysis of data on violence against children, including gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, and on cases that have been reported, investigated and prosecuted, to inform the implementation of the national strategy on violence" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023^[18]).

By design, relatively few (15/70) of the indicator areas are focused on access to, take-up, or quality of services. This means that there is limited insight provided into whether progress is being made in addressing support needs across the five outcome domains and thus on whether government commitments are being realised. For example, under Outcome 1 (Active and Healthy) Aim 1.3 “Positive and respectful approach to relationships and sexual health” has three indicator areas. None of the three - early sexual activity; teenage pregnancy; and knowledge about sexual health - are concerned with whether children and young people have access to relevant/appropriate services such as sex and relationship education or reproductive health services, although provision of these services was referenced in commitment (1.11) under BOBF and has been taken up again in *Young Ireland*.

There are just two examples of a service-level indicator related to Outcome 1 included in the data set, immunisation uptake and access to mental health services. The indicator used for the latter is “percentage waiting less than three months to be seen by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)”. There are no indicators in relation to general health services such as access to a General Practitioner (GP) or waiting lists for in-patient and out-patient consultations or procedures, although these are recognised policy challenges in the Irish context.

Both the BOBF 2014-20 framework and its successor, *Young Ireland*, are a key plank in Ireland’s efforts to fulfil its obligations under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (DCEDIY, 2022^[19]) “Children’s rights” are one of the guiding principles of both national policy frameworks, and the various articles of the UNCRC have been mapped on to the five national outcomes (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014^[20]); (DCECIY, 2022^[13]) While it is acknowledged that “the CYP indicator set is not a children’s rights indicator set per se”, there is an emphasis in the indicator set report document on “the important relationship between the indicators and the Convention”; (DCECIY, 2022^[13]). However, in its current formation the indicator set provides relatively little information relevant to how effectively the state is meeting its responsibilities to children under international human rights law. *Young Ireland* underlines the importance of data collection and analysis as an essential component to realising the rights of the child but does not revise the indicator set. Instead, measures to collect data on the individual dimensions of equality is cited in alignment with the country’s National Equality Data Strategy due to be published in 2024. This strategy was developed to advance the collection, standardisation, use and monitoring of equality data to highlight inequalities that may otherwise be hidden and to address these. The Cross-Government Children and Young People’s Research Programme will serve to map gaps on equality indicators for children and young people, and to set research priorities for 2024-28 (see Chapter 7).

There are important differences between rights-based monitoring and well-being monitoring in that the former “places the measurement of outcomes within the context of moral authority to entitlement and policies put into operation to ensure this entitlement” (Bray and Dawes, 2007^[21]) (Kennan, D., & Keenaghan, C., 2011^[22]). This means that indicators are not confined to those concerning the quality of life of children and young people but need to capture whether duty-bearers are effectively upholding rights (ibid.). A rights-based approach to monitoring is informed by the principles of accountability, participation, and non-discrimination (Kennan, D., & Keenaghan, C., 2011^[22]), which necessitates attentiveness to inequalities in relation to access to or quality of resources, supports and services. This can help to guard against tendency to view variation in outcomes in terms of “deficits” within sub-groups of the child population experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage rather than due to gaps and weaknesses in policy and provision.

Figure 5.1. Rights-Based Monitoring



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Well-designed evidenced-informed interventions and services for children, young people and parents are necessary and can promote better outcomes for those in adverse socioeconomic circumstances. There must however be at least equal attention paid to identifying, understanding, and addressing the systemic (political, economic, cultural, and social/affective) and policy factors which lead to differential access to rights and resources and ultimately to unequal outcomes (Baker, Lynch and Cantillon, 2009^[23]). Indicators capturing disparities between social groups in access to or engagement with services or differential access to resources can provide a useful starting point for investigation of the structural inequalities which shape differential outcomes. This depends on availability of the requisite equality data for children and young people, which as discussed further below, is an issue to be addressed in the Irish context. In addition, appropriately disaggregated data is required to capture the extent of geographical disparities and whether and to what extent these intersect with social inequalities. That many of the indicators used in the CYP indicator set are available only at national level was identified as a challenge by DCEDIY, and is also a driver to developing the Outcomes for Children Data Hub.

Strengthening the evidence-base by addressing data and evidence gaps and inconsistencies

Strengthening the evidence base necessitates efforts to identify data gaps and weaknesses with reference to the needs of stakeholders. Interviews conducted by the OECD and consultations carried out by the Children's Rights Alliance to inform *Young Ireland* provide useful insights on the most significant gaps and challenges to be addressed. The discussion below also draws on the audit of equality data carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2020. The audit of equality data involved 107 datasets (based on either survey or administrative data) and provides useful information on gaps and weaknesses to be addressed.

Identifying and addressing gaps in disaggregated data

Age

Gaps in respect of age-disaggregated data was identified as an issue in interviews conducted by the OECD. The CSO audit of equality data found that of the 107 datasets, 65 had data on age. Information on

how data on age had been collected was provided for just 26 of the datasets - 21 of the 26 allowed for disaggregation of any age in that either date of birth or age in years had been requested. That data was collected on the basis of age grouping in the remaining five datasets, for which this information was provided, was identified as a barrier to “meaningful analysis” (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2020^[24]).

Equality grounds other than age

The need to address gaps in equality data in respect of children and young people in Ireland has been identified as an issue by various human rights bodies including the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In its concluding observations following Ireland’s combined fifth and sixth report under the Convention on the Rights of the Child the Committee made several recommendations in respect of data collection (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023^[25]). This included a recommendation that the national equality strategy “includes the comprehensive and systematic collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative indicators encompassing all areas of the children’s rights under the Convention, disaggregated by age, sex, disability, geographical location, ethnic origin, nationality and socioeconomic background” (ibid.). The Committee further recommended that “the strategy is applied to all government entities with adequate human, financial and technical resources to implement it, as well as to non-State actors in the context of public procurement” and that data be made available in “accessible and age-appropriate formats” (ibid.). There was also a recommendation that the Irish state take action in relation to enhancing data collection and analysis in respect of specified disadvantaged sub-groups of children including “children with disabilities, children in alternative care, children experiencing homelessness, children without a regular residence status, migrant children and Roma children” (ibid.). While the Committee did not specify which government departments/agencies should have oversight of measures in this regard, DCEDIY would appear to be best placed to lead and oversee action on this recommendation.

The limited data available in relation to children and young people on the ground of race/ethnicity, including Traveller children and young people, is also regarded as one of the most important gaps to be addressed as highlighted in the Children’s Rights Alliance consultation to support *Young Ireland*, in OECD interviews, and the Roundtable on Data for Children and Young People Report 2022 (DCEDIY, 2022^[26]). The equality data audit carried out by the CSO found that two datasets contained data on race, while 24 contained data on either nationality or ethnicity and 12 contained data specifically on Traveller ethnicity. Nationality/country of birth is recognised as a limited indicator of migrant or minority status as it does not allow for tracking outcomes for second-generation migrants or (in the case of nationality) for first-generation migrants who have acquired citizenship.

Whether an ethnic identifier should be used in data collection was referred to in OECD interviews as a “conversation [which] is not finished yet”. This was due to perceived concerns on the part of minority communities in respect of how data collected would be used. In the consultations carried out by the CRA (Children’s Right Alliance, 2022^[27]) stakeholders noted that members of marginalised minority groups may not always wish to self-identify as such, a point echoed in interviews conducted by the OECD. Research commissioned by Tusla on the matter points to challenges to defining ethnic data identifiers and raises questions over the sensitivity of collecting ethnic data. Barriers to ethnic data collection are cited, including fear or suspicion from participants and the capacity of practitioners to collect data (Rooney and Canavan, 2019^[28]).

Children in vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances

In the CRA consultation, a need was identified for data in relation to children affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Issues categorised as ACEs include violence, neglect, parental abandonment, and parental imprisonment while child poverty is increasingly viewed not only as an underlying and exacerbating factor but as an ACE in its own right, given the impact of child poverty on outcomes in the

short and longer-term (Hughes, M., & Tucker, W, 2018^[29]) Data gaps in respect of children affected by parental imprisonment was raised as a particular concern in the CRA consultations impacting an effective response to support needs. It was reported that while the Irish Prison Service has been collecting data on children of prisoners since 2018, the data is based on self-reports and limited in scope (Children’s Right Alliance, 2022^[27]). Gaps were also identified in relation to “how many children are living in homes with a parent with a severe mental health condition, children living in homes with sexual/domestic abuse and violence” (ibid.).

Other gaps identified in the CRA consultation related to children in the care system, including children in informal/kinship care arrangements. A number of gaps were raised in relation to data collection by Tusla in respect of children in care and/or in receipt of other services. These included gaps in relation to ethnic minority status, children in care with a disability, Traveller children in the care system, and educational status of children in the care system. Participants in these consultations emphasised that efforts to strengthen data and research on children in the care system and other vulnerable sub-groups should be informed by the findings and recommendations of the Data Care Project undertaken by Eurochild³ and the “Guidance on statistics on children: spotlight on children exposed to violence, in alternative care, and with a disability” produced under the auspices of the Conference of European Statisticians (Conference of European Statisticians, 2022^[30]). Gaps in the knowledge base in relation to children in direct provision were also identified as an issue in the Data Roundtable discussion hosted by DCEDIY in 2022 (DCEDIY, 2022^[26]).

Data disaggregated to local level

As noted above, there is an identified need for data disaggregated to local level to facilitate planning and delivery of services. In interviews conducted by the OECD, the dearth of micro-data was referred to as a barrier to understanding and addressing problems. As noted above, the Outcomes for Children National Data & Information Hub established by DCEDIY and Tusla aims to address this challenge. The Hub, which has been in development since 2016, is now live and provides data disaggregated to the local level where available.⁴ The level can vary depending on the data set (e.g., county-level or Tusla area) and there is also significant variation in how recently data on particular indicators has been collected.

Promoting consistency in data collected

Lack of consistency across datasets (“different datasets that do not speak to each other”) was identified in OECD interviews as a challenge to cross-reference related data sets and enable cross-sectoral coordination. Among the key issues raised in the consultations carried out by the CRA was the wide variation in terminology and definitions of variables such as “homelessness” or “disability”, as well as challenges related to measuring challenges and impacts in a coordinated manner across departments and agencies. This concern was reflected in OECD interviews, for instance stakeholders referred to different definitions of “poverty” being used across CYPSC. Datasets can also vary significantly in the range of sociodemographic and other variables recorded, an issue raised by the CSO in the context of the audit of equality data in which efforts to promote “standard classifications at both the collection and dissemination phase of statistical production” was recommended (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2020^[24]).

Diverging data collection cycles were also identified in OECD interviews as a challenge which created difficulties in tracking trends across the five outcome areas. Timeliness and consistency of reporting across government departments was another important issue which was raised in the CRA consultation, creating challenges for effective planning and timely responses to identified need.

Data sets are also often based on different geographical units, which creates challenges in connecting data sets or in applying information to a particular location. That Tusla data is based on administrative areas, which do not coincide with the catchment areas of local authorities, was referred to in OECD

interviews as creating problems for CYPSC in developing and monitoring Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs).

Overcoming barriers to effective collection, use and sharing of data

Resource and capacity issues

Lack of capacity (at the local level) is considered a significant barrier to the systematic collection, use and sharing of data in the child and youth sector. OECD interviewees noted that community service organisations collect large quantities of potentially useful data but did not necessarily have the financial or human resources or “access to expertise” to carry out analysis or to make data accessible. Similarly, improving capacity in local authorities in relation to working with data and evidence was seen as critical to ensure that preparation of CYPPs is “evidence - based”.

Capacity issues were also identified in OECD interviews as a factor impacting the work of CYPSC in relation to collecting, analysing, using, reporting, and sharing data. CYPSC have an important role in compiling data for the assessments of needs which inform Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs). In some CYPSC, the preparation of CYPPs is outsourced to external consultants/organisations, pointing to possible gaps in capacities to develop these plans in-house. OECD findings also show that further resources may be needed to support CYPSC to effectively compile data from published sources to accurately report on the implementation CYPPs. Of note, CYPSC are important generators of administrative data (produced through annual reporting and work programmes) and qualitative data (produced through local consultations), an instrumental aspect to informing policymaking. The Reform of the Child Care Act 1991 has potential implications for CYPSC regarding reporting and data-sharing, which arguably strengthens the case for enhancing capacity and aligning with standards regarding evidence collection and sharing.

Standardising the collection and reporting of administrative data

Improving and standardising processes for the collection of administrative data across state agencies and various organisations serving children, young people and families was raised in the consultation carried out by the Children's Rights Alliance and OECD interviews as an area requiring further efforts. It was recommended that “all organisations for children and family should have one set of data to report on” and should have an obligation to collect this data. While buy-in across government departments was considered crucial in this regard, OECD interviewees also underlined the importance of effective leadership from DCEDIY to streamline reporting requirements.

Although the process to develop Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs) includes a standardised process to compile data to inform planning and publish administrative information, OECD interviews point to the need to strengthen data compilation and sharing among CYPSC. Further, there was also an identified need to strengthen human and financial capacities to report between CYPSC and LCDC.

Data protection considerations

Another barrier identified relates to the legal framework and in particular the impact of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which was adopted by the European Union in 2016 and came into force in 2018 (GDPR.EU, 2023^[31]). Concerns around GDPR compliance and lack of understanding of the law in relation to data protection among public service employees has been identified as an issue in respect of collection of equality data (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2020^[24]). In the consultations carried out by the Children's Rights Alliance, stakeholders called for striking the appropriate balance in recording and sharing data to ensure that the rights of service-users were protected (Children's Rights Alliance, 2022^[32]). While the reforms set out in the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 are expected to bring greater clarity in relation to information-sharing, OECD interviews confirmed a demand and need for trainings in both the statutory

and non-statutory sectors around the legal and ethical framework for sharing data within and across organisations.

ICT

Multiple ICT systems across government departments and agencies were identified as a practical barrier to efficient data reporting and to sharing of data. There was a recommendation for a centralised system, which would allow for user-friendly “reporting and retrieval of data” by practitioners and facilitate sharing of data across government. It was recognised that such a system would require “a cross-government approach” so that the various ICT systems at department/agency level could feed into a central system. This would entail the development of a framework enabling the production and coordination of relevant child and youth data across government, fostering a safe and efficient data flow between different government bodies (e.g., departments, agencies, local government) to achieve coherent and evidence-informed decision-making. This approach puts children and young people at the centre by promoting the use and reuse of data by different government bodies, all the while ensuring safeguards against misuse. A plan to publish guidance for Departments and agencies on developing cross-government data linking projects with the CSO is included as Action 4 of the Data and Research Development component of *Young Ireland*.

Accessibility of data

The need for accessible platforms and tools to obtain up-to-date information was emphasised in the CRA consultation (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2022^[32]). This could take the form of an “accessible and standardised dashboard” through which data could be obtained from government departments and agencies (the Outcomes for Children Data Hub is of relevance here).

Sourcing evidence from involving children and young people in policymaking

This section provides an overview of standards and mechanisms adopted by DCEDIY to strengthen public consultation practices across the Department to generate robust evidence and inform the planning and implementation of child and youth policy. The first part of this section benchmarks relevant indicators in Ireland against OECD countries, including young people’s political literacy, perceptions of political efficacy, and interest in politics. The second part discusses the legislative basis, strategies, structures, and practices in place to enable children, young people, and civil society to shape relevant policies.

Child and youth participation in Ireland in comparison to EU and OECD countries

Political literacy

Young people are more likely to engage with local and national decision-making bodies when they have a good understanding of the political system and government processes (OECD, 2020^[33]). Across the 22 OECD countries for which data is available⁵ Ireland fares above average, with data showing that 64% of young people (ages 16 to 30) consider they know “a fair amount” to “a great deal” about the Irish government compared to the OECD-22 average of 58%. This places Ireland in the top six OECD countries in the EU where young people feel most knowledgeable of how their government operates, only behind Portugal (77%), Poland (67%), Finland (67%), Italy (66%), and Luxembourg (66%) (Eurobarometer, 2021^[34]).

Perceptions of political efficacy and political apathy

In 2021, young people, aged 16 to 30, in Ireland gave an average ranking of 6.3 out of 10⁶ in terms of how important they believe it is to be able to express their opinion on political issues, against the OECD-22 average of 6.5 (Eurobarometer, 2021_[34]). At the same time, more than 1 in 2 respondents (52%) reported feeling that they had “little” to “no influence” over national-level government decisions and policies, compared to 60% across OECD countries in the EU. In turn, 45% of 16–30-year-olds in Ireland reported feeling they have “some” to “a great deal” of influence compared to 38% of their peers across OECD countries in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2021_[34])⁷ suggesting that, despite higher than OECD average outcomes, significant efforts remain to engage children and young people who feel disempowered or disenfranchised from the political process in Ireland.

Young people’s perceptions of political efficacy at a subnational level follow similar trends, with 48% of youth in Ireland reporting they felt they had “some” to a “great deal” of influence over government decision-making (OECD countries in the EU: 44%), and 51% reporting having “little” to “no influence” (OECD countries in the EU: 54%) (Eurobarometer, 2021_[34]).

Data from 2018 shows that perceptions of having an influence in politics differ significantly among young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Ireland (European Social Survey, 2018_[35]). 57% of young people in Ireland reporting living ‘comfortably’ on their current household income reported feeling they had “some” to “a great deal” of influence over politics. On the contrary, only 15% of respondents stating that it was ‘very difficult’ to live on their current household income reported having “some” to “a great deal” of influence. These results point to a clear need for action to create a more enabling environment for children and young people in economically disadvantaged circumstances to get involved in decision-making.

The Government of Ireland has made significant efforts to strengthen public consultation and engagement practices, which are further discussed in the next section. Despite these efforts, evidence shows that – in line with many OECD countries – young people in the country may not see government government-led consultations as the most effective way to have their voices heard, raising questions about the quality of public consultation practices and the extent to which constituents are able to see their inputs inform policymaking. In 2021, voting and taking part in public demonstrations were seen as the most effective ways to influence decision-makers (by 36% of respondents respectively), followed by contacting a politician about an issue (28%). Using hashtags or changing profile pictures on social media to support a political or social issue (18%) taking part in a public consultation (17%) and joining a youth organisation (10%) were considered less effective (Eurobarometer, 2021_[34]).

Perhaps paradoxically when discussed in relation to the evidence above, in 2018, Irish young people (16–29) tended to be more interested in politics than those aged 50 and over. On a scale from 0 to 3, (0= very interested and 3= not at all interested), young people in Ireland averaged a score of 1.14 and those aged 50 and above scored 1.63. This is aligned with the OECD-24 averages of 1.19 for young people and 1.51 for people aged 50 and above (European Social Survey, 2018_[35]).

Measures to engage children and young people in policymaking

The OECD Recommendation on Open Government calls on governments to “grant all stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted and actively engage them in all phases of the policy-cycle and service design and delivery”, underlining that stakeholder participation increases government inclusiveness and accountability (OECD, 2017_[36]). Similarly, the OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People calls on governments to deliver targeted communication, explore innovative methods and create or strengthen institutions such as youth advisory bodies and opportunities for consultation with youth councils at national and subnational level, as ways to involve young people in policymaking and strengthen the evidence base (OECD, 2022_[37]). In Ireland, important initiatives and child

and youth-specific engagement structures were developed under the National Children's Strategy, the National Childcare Scheme, and as part of the transversal goal of BOBF 2014-20 'Listening to and involving children and young people' as outlined below.

Legal frameworks and strategies to consult and engage children and young people

Ireland adopted several laws that require government stakeholders and agencies to consider the views of children and young people in the development of policies that are relevant to them. Of most note, the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 provides a legal requirement for Tusla to consider the views of children when planning and reviewing the provision of services in connection with the performance of relevant functions (Government of Ireland, 2013^[38]). Provisions for children to be consulted in decisions that affect their lives are further included in the Education Act 1998, the Children Act 2001, the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002, the Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015, and the Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2015. Recent developments also include the Government's launch of a review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 to ensure that children and young people have a legal entitlement to participate in decisions that affect them (Department of Education, 2021^[39]). The Heads of Bill and General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023, published in April 2023, also introduces proposed guiding principles underlining the need to engage children in decisions made in relation to the Child Care Act 1991.

Regarding public engagement strategies at national level, the National Participation Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 was adopted by the Irish Government with the goal to ensure that children and young people have a voice on policies and service delivery across the five national outcome areas (Government of Ireland, 2015^[40]). While primarily aimed at children and young people under the age of 18, it also set out provisions for young people up to the age of 24 to be better engaged in policymaking. The strategy drew from the principles established in the Council of Europe's 2012 *Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18*, and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Government of Ireland, 2015^[40]). The strategy was also underpinned by Lundy's Model of Participation⁸, and has been instrumental to strengthen public consultation practices across departments and agencies, as evidenced by its final DCEDIY-led review which suggests that concerted efforts led to 93% of the actions to be completed or in progress (Government of Ireland, 2023^[41]).

In 2023, the DCEDIY published a National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making to support government departments and agencies to enhance child and youth participation in decision-making, following learnings from the aforementioned Strategy. This Framework is designed to work in tandem with the Strategy and was launched by the DCEDIY's national centre of excellence on child and youth participation, Hub na nÓg (see below), as a response to calls from government departments, agencies, and non-government organisations for accessible training and guidance on a rights-based approach to child and youth consultation. The Framework outlines the following overarching objectives (Hub na nÓg, 2021^[42]):

- Improving and establishing mechanisms to ensure that seldom heard and vulnerable children and young people are listened to and involved in decision-making; and
- mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation, services, and research.

The Framework follows the Lundy model of participation, guiding practitioners on engaging children and young people's voices in early learning, schools, youth service delivery, sports, creative and artistic programmes, and government departments/agencies and other organisations' development and delivery of services for CYP. It provides guidance for the development of advisory groups, refers to existing sources to involve seldom-heard children in decision-making, and discusses the importance of closing the loop and setting realistic expectations on impact. The Framework further outlines principles to guide child and youth

consultation processes, provides practical advice to capture their views without undue adult influence, outlines levels of participation, and includes three checklists to guide decision-makers in planning, conducting, and evaluating child and youth participation processes. The checklists serve to 1) guide government bodies to engage children and youth in government decisions, 2) evaluate government and non-government consultations to children and youth and 3) guide teachers, practitioners, social workers, and other adults in similar roles to support children and youth to have a voice in their “everyday spaces”. Finally, the Framework includes a feedback form for children and young people to evaluate the engagement process they were part of.

While the Framework represents an important step towards strengthening public consultation and participation for children and young people in Ireland, opportunities remain for it to better address challenges raised by government and non-government parties. For instance, civil society organisations in the OECD interviews suggested that more could be done to raise awareness of upcoming consultation opportunities, pointing to a need to clarify in the Framework existing government resources and channels that children and young people can expect to use to have their say. Further, while the Framework cites the 2015 Practical Guide to Including Seldom-Hard Children and Young People in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015^[43]), further could be done to integrate a consideration for the multidimensional needs of these target groups across the planning and delivery of mainstream consultation activities (e.g., identifying and addressing economic and cultural barriers). In addition, further guidance could be provided for practitioners on the wide array of existing participation methods, as well as the appropriateness to each depending on consultation needs.

Regarding the Framework’s checklists, further dimensions could be included to ensure that practitioners have considered all necessary aspects of public consultations. In line with OECD guidelines, the checklists could include additional questions for practitioners to: clearly identify the problem to solve and the stage at which children and youth should be included, define expected results, identify relevant target groups (including vulnerable children and young people), choose adequate participation methods and tools, raise awareness of consultation opportunities, plan resources and alignment with the project to be informed, and fostering a culture of participation in the long-term (OECD, 2022^[44]).

Child and youth participation structures

The National Participation Office (NPO) is a permanent office established in 2021 whose officers are contracted by the DCEDIY to manage and co-ordinate some of the main youth participation structures in Ireland – Comhairle na nÓg (Children and youth councils), Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament), the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, and the National Youth Assembly. Further, the Hub na nÓg is a complimentary structure, which acts as a centre for excellence for child and youth participation.

Membership of youth councils in local authorities

Local youth councils can empower young people by allowing them to participate in local decision-making, as well as by promoting a sense of belonging and ownership in their community. They can also mobilise facts, opinions and perceptions of children and young people in terms of their access to services and perception of quality, which provide a valuable source of information for local and national policymakers. Children and youth councils (Comhairle na nÓg) exist in each of the 31 local authorities in Ireland (Comhairle na nÓg, 2021^[45]). Funded by the DCEDIY, Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund and local authorities, these councils provide opportunities for children and young people under 18 to be involved in the development of local services and programmes.

Findings from 2022 show that 29 out of 31 Comhairlí reported being involved with Local Authorities through varied activities such as presentations to County Councils, including Council representation in the Comhairle na nÓg steering committee, and consultation of Comhairle in sectoral strategies (e.g., Play and Recreation Policy) (Comhairle na nÓg and Pobal, 2022^[46]). Further, 14 Comhairlí also stated they engaged

with Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in 2022, either at the initiative of the Comhairlí or through consultation on sectoral plans (Comhairle na nÓg and Pobal, 2022^[46]). These findings suggest that while punctual engagements have been numerous and reportedly impactful, local authorities could embed consultations to Comhairle na nÓg more systematically and proactively. This could be done, for instance by ensuring that strategic directions and frameworks guiding local engagement and consultation activities prepared by Local Authorities routinely consider the foreseen impact of proposed policies on young people and develop proactive consultation plans that engage Comhairle na nÓg accordingly. The 2022 Comhairle na nÓg Annual Report shows that the total national membership of Comhairle na nÓg was 853, compared to 951 in 2021, with an average of 28 members per Comhairle (Comhairle na nÓg, 2021^[45]). More than half (58%) of members were aged between 16 to 18 years and 42% were 12 to 15 years old. (Comhairle na nÓg and Pobal, 2022^[46]). The total number of young people who regularly attended meetings during 2022 nationally was 578, with wide variances on meeting attendance rates across local authority areas.

One representative of each council is elected to the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, which takes the recommendations from the Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament) forward. The latter meets every two years and gathers representatives from each Comhairle na nÓg to identify key areas of concern to children and youth (Comhairlí Na NÓg, n.d.^[47]). A national event showcasing the work of Comhairle na nÓg and engaging directly with local and national decision-makers to inform them about the topics and issues that are important to them is also held every two years, alternating with Dáil na nÓg. Serving a two-year term, the National Executive meets monthly to progress the topic selected at Dáil na nÓg, consult on key policies at national level and reports back to local child and youth councils on progress and outcomes. The National Executive is supported by the National Participation Office and DCEDIY to engage with ministers, policymakers, representatives from relevant Oireachtas Committees and other decision-makers. In 2021, the National Executive has been engaged in consultation with the Department of the Taoiseach for the implementation of the Climate Action Plan, among others (Comhairlí Na NÓg, 2021^[48]).

To increase the impact of the work of Comhairlí, OECD interviews point to the need to better institutionalise child and youth consultation processes so that these occur as an integral part of local decision-making processes rather than ad-hoc. For instance, further work is needed to ensure consistency of how local authorities report on having considered the voices of children and young people. Establishing clear policy leadership at a local government level on child and youth policymaking and developing performance indicators to measure the extent to which local authorities engage with children and young people were identified as key priorities in OECD interviews. Raising further awareness of Comhairlí at local government level, and the importance of engaging them early and meaningfully in local decision-making, was also seen as needed. Regarding strengthening capacities within Comhairlí, OECD interviews pointed to the need to further support the role of Coordinators that report to local authorities.

Youth councils at subnational level exist in 88% of OECD countries. In some countries, local youth participation is further institutionalised through provisions in law. For instance, in Finland and Norway, establishing local youth councils at a municipal level is mandated by law. Similarly, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, public institutions are compelled by decree to consult young people in policymaking both at the city and national level (OECD, 2020^[33]).

Membership of the National Youth Assembly

The National Youth Assembly of Ireland was established by DCEDIY in response to a commitment in the Programme of Government 2020 (DCEDIY, 2022^[49]). It functions as a consultative forum for children and young people between the ages of 12 and 24 to have a say on issues that are important to them and inform government policies. The Assembly meets up to four times a year, including annual meetings as the Youth Assembly on Climate and the Rural Youth Assembly. Its membership is composed of 50 delegates, 20 of whom are nominated by Comhairle na nÓg and the remainder nominated from Irish youth organisations,

and sits for a term of 18 months. Sitting delegates are joined at each Assembly by up to 10 guest delegates who have a special interest in specific topics. The delegates come from all of Ireland.

Similar mechanisms, usually affiliated to specific ministries, exist across 53% of OECD countries (OECD, 2020^[33]). For instance, in Denmark, the Ministry of Environment and Food has established a Youth Climate Council. OECD research shows that these bodies widely differ across member countries in terms of functions, composition, terms of appointment, financial and human resources, and involvement in the policy cycle (OECD, 2020^[33]).

Hub na nÓg

Hub na nÓg is a national centre of excellence and coordination on giving children and young people a voice in decision-making. The Hub supports government departments, agencies, and non-government organisations to conduct public consultation practices with children and young people, particularly those that are seldom-heard. It was established by the DCEDIY to support the implementation of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015-2020), and is seen by many as the 'go to' mechanism to conduct public consultations in the field of youth and child policy (Government of Ireland, 2015^[40]). For instance, Hub na nÓg was engaged to conduct consultations with vulnerable children and young people, including those from Traveller communities and those having experienced homelessness for the planning of *Young Ireland*.

The Hub provides training, coaching, development, advice and support to government and non-government organisations to engage children and young people in decision-making. Trainings are usually tailored to the particular needs of organisations, identified through a training-needs analysis. Most trainings have a two-day duration, and include components on theory, legal frameworks, policy context, and how to leverage advisory groups. All trainings include an evaluation and target setting. Despite this service being on offer, OECD interviews point to gaps to engaging Hub na nÓg consistently across departments and agencies, with the potential to further raise awareness of this structure to policymakers.

The European Structured Dialogue Process

The European Structured Dialogue Process is a participatory structure established by the Council of the European Union to foster debate between young people (15-30 years) and decision-makers and give children and young people the opportunity to influence youth policy development at national and European levels (European Commission, n.d.^[50]). In Ireland, a National Working Group with stakeholders chaired by DCEDIY and supported by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) was responsible for the Structured Dialogue in which young people had a formal engagement with the Policy Consortium established under BOBF 2014-20 in the form of consultations, and to identify priority issues for young people.

Engaging with civil society on child and youth policies

Engaging civil society in the development of policies for children and young people has been primarily done under the structure of the Advisory Council, created under BOBF 2014-20, and reinvigorated with a new composition to support the implementation of *Young Ireland*. OECD interviews point out that this structure was instrumental to coordinating civil society views on children and young people voices, with some of its key members (including, for instance, Barnardos and the Children's Rights Alliance) leading consultation activities across all five national outcome areas. OECD interviews with civil society suggest that there is a need to better resource civil society organisations to leverage their expertise and make the most of their outreach abilities. Further efforts are also required to strengthen coordination with existing outreach structures led by departments other than DCEDIY, such as the Public Participation Network (PPN), which allows local authorities to connect with community and voluntary groups around the country. Strengthening coordination with other outreach structures would address challenges noted in OECD interviews, including a perceived proliferation of consultative bodies engaging with civil society

organisations, unclear functions and remits across participation structures, and resource strain for civil society organisations engaging in several consultative bodies.

Streamlining public participation practices

As demonstrated above, Ireland has set up a solid institutional framework to foster child and youth participation in policymaking and is among the leading countries across the OECD on child and youth consultation and engagement. To further strengthen participatory practice, the assessment points to a number of more general conclusions, notably the need to strengthen public awareness on opportunities to engage and have a say in government processes, as well as to clearly communicate on how children and young people's voices and the evidence generated through these activities have impacted policy planning and delivery. Further, the final review report of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 found that policymakers had a limited understanding of how to involve children and young people in decision-making in practice (Government of Ireland, 2023^[41]) and that concerns over the resource- and time-consuming nature of organising consultations prevailed.

Further, there is scope to strengthen coordination on consultative requirements, processes and skills across departments by ensuring that public officials have the right tools to guide decisions over, for instance, at which point children and young people should be engaged in the policymaking cycle, which stakeholders should be engaged, what level of policy impact triggers a public consultation, and what requirements exist to engage with hard-to-reach children and young people, among others.

Moreover, OECD interviews suggest that engagement with children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds is likely to continue being a challenge to government officials. Engagement and consultation with these demographic groups (e.g., including Traveller young people, young people experiencing homelessness) is usually delegated to Hub na nÓg, which is configured and supported by the government to specialise in consultation with seldom-heard young people, as well as civil society groups who have direct contact with these groups as was done for the consultation on *Young Ireland*. Despite the aim of NPO and the Hub to embed consultation practices across government, the expertise that is generated by them is not necessarily being transferred to policymakers, limiting their capacity to engage children and young people in a meaningful and impactful way in decision-making.

The DCEDIY's Equality Youth and Participation Division is currently developing a Participation Action Plan, to succeed the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020. Eight objectives with actions and lead stakeholders are outlined in the plan, some of which seek to address the aforementioned challenges. These include better embedding the voices of children and young people in decision-making, policy, service development, legislation, and research (e.g., through convening a Rural Youth Assembly and a National Youth Assembly on Climate yearly) and building capacities across government sectors on the importance of child and youth consultations (e.g., through capacity-building trainings for public officials). The Plan also includes objectives on giving a voice to children and youth in their homes and local environment (e.g., working with local authorities to better consult children and young people), in the education system (e.g., establishing a Participation Unit in the Department of Education), in health and social services (e.g., train healthcare staff on child and youth participation in healthcare decisions), and in the court system (e.g., increase child and youth participation in court processes). Finally, the Plan outlines actions to support children and young people to participate safely in decision-making online (e.g., expand public consultations into digital platforms), and to ensure participation structures are more inclusive and accessible (e.g., identifying systemic barriers for seldom-heard groups). The Plan aligns with *Young Ireland's* priorities, governance structures and periodic review processes.

The challenges discussed in this section are commonly shared across OECD countries. Child and youth organisations are leveraged by many OECD countries to communicate with and outreach to seldom heard groups in policymaking. However, when consulted by the OECD in 2020, youth organisations in OECD countries raised important challenges to meaningful participation, most notably that government bodies

lack awareness of the added value of involving them and that opportunities to participate in consultations are not always well communicated. They also pointed to the lack of financial and human capacities among government bodies as a barrier (OECD, 2020^[51]). These challenges were also commonly reported by government entities in charge of youth affairs across OECD countries. Moreover, youth policymakers referred to the absence of manuals to provide guidance on meaningful engagement practices, which exists in only 9% of the surveyed government entities (OECD, 2020^[51]). Box 5.3 outlines the mechanisms and tools put in place by Finland and New Zealand to engage children and young people in policymaking in a meaningful way.

Box 5.3. Engaging children and young people for more evidence-based and responsive policies and services

New Zealand: Age-appropriate and culturally respectful guidelines

Since the establishment of the Children’s Amendment Act 2018, any adoption or amendment of a strategy to foster child wellbeing, obliges the responsible Minister to conduct a consultation with children and young people, the Children’s Commissioner, the Minister of the Crown responsible for Māori Development, and representatives of Māori.

The Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group (CWPRG) under the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) developed a series of guidelines to support policymakers consult with and engage children and young people across government bodies. These guidelines were developed in consultation with other departments, children and young people and the Office of the Children’s Commissioner. They include a series of steps to follow, as well as links to resources for policymakers. The steps include:

1. *Planning the engagement:* Mapping previous engagements and consultations, establishing purpose and scope of the engagement, choosing a consultation method, recruiting participants, and taking informed consent and ethical considerations into account. It also includes understanding what is needed for the targeted group of children and young people to take part in the consultation in a meaningful way, choosing a venue, time, and consultation facilitator, helping children and young people prepare, and devising whether a recompense or incentive is needed.
2. *During the engagement:* Steps in the process include creating a comfortable and welcoming space, establishing culturally appropriate relationships, adapting to the needs of children and young people in the moment, ensuring the engagement is active and age-appropriate, employing creative methods to record participations, and showing respect and listening. This is also a key opportunity for policymakers to build civic skills among children and young people through learning opportunities.
3. *After the engagement:* Guidance is provided on analysing the insights gathered throughout the engagement process, as well as closing the loop and demonstrating the impact of participation.

In the 2022 review of the *Child and Youth Well-being Strategy*, the DPMC analysed which engagement methods had been used to consult government departments, civil society organisations, children and young people including those from minority backgrounds in the consolidation of the original Strategy. Further, a targeted consultation process was performed with the above groups as part of the 2022 review. Findings and feedback from these targeted engagements were summarised to inform the review recommendations.

Finland: Building capacities in public administration to consult children and young people

As part of the implementation of the Child Strategy, a training module was prepared in co-operation with subject-matter experts in the field in Finland. The purpose of the module is to strengthen policymaker capacities and competences in relation to the Rights of the Child and, in particular, on children's participation and consultation in Finland. The 10-module online training programme on the Rights of the Child was finalised and made available in February 2023. This initiative serves to fulfil obligations outlined in Article 42 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which informs Finland's implementation of the Rights of the Child. The measure is also based on recommendations to Finland issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child on building awareness and training among policymakers and service providers working with children on the Rights of Children. The parliamentary committee and the working group monitoring the Child Strategy considered this training programme to be a key measure for policymakers to effectively implement the Child Strategy.

Ensuring that all adults working with children have sufficient understanding and competence for supporting children's inclusion and participation is among the key priorities of Finland's Child Strategy. The training was offered as a response to demand raised by government officials across fields working with children and by children themselves. It is envisaged this training will be updated and supplemented as a part of tasks of the Child Strategy Unit during subsequent government terms.

Source : (DPMC, 2022^[52]); (eOppiva, 2023^[53]).

Mainstreaming child and youth perspectives in policymaking and service delivery

Public budgets, regulations and procurement are critical instruments government can leverage to generate more child and youth responsive policy outcomes. For instance, the OECD Recommendation on Regulatory Policy and Governance recognises regulatory impact assessments (RIAs) as an important tool for an evidence-based policymaking. In the context of youth policy, RIAs can help identify potential differentiated impacts of policy and rulemaking on children and young people (OECD, 2012^[54]).

Over the past decade, various countries have been experimenting with innovative governance tools to ensure their policies and services are more closely aligned with the needs of children and young people. At least 15 countries (including Finland and New Zealand) and two regions use child rights impact assessment (CRIA) tools to anticipate whether policy proposals improve the well-being of children (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023^[55]). While one in three OECD countries use general regulatory impact assessments and provide specific information on the expected impact on young people, only three countries (Austria, France, Germany) and one region (Flanders in Belgium) apply *ex ante* "youth checks" to assess and anticipate the possible impact of new legislation on young people more systematically. There is also wide variation across countries with existing child and youth RIAs in relation to legal underpinnings and methodology (OECD, 2020^[51]). Box 5.4 outlines selected child and youth impact assessments in OECD countries and their respective characteristics.

Box 5.4. Selected child and youth impact assessments in OECD countries

Austria: Child and Youth Impact Assessment

Austria's Child and Youth Impact Assessment ("Youth Check") is a national-level tool, which exists since 2013 to enable policymakers to take the needs of children and young people (ages 0 to 30) into account when drafting new legislation. The tool assesses three dimensions including 1) the protection and development of children and young adults; 2) care for and maintaining children and young adults, including the costs of raising children; and 3) safeguarding the future of children and young people.

The Youth Check is performed through a survey filled by the Ministry in charge of drafting new legislation. It is triggered if the new legislation is expected to have an effect on more than 1,000 children and youth (for the first two aforementioned dimensions), or if the legislation is expected to have significant financial, fiscal, or environmental implications (e.g., spending over 1 billion over 10 years).

Flemish Child and Youth Report in Belgium

The Flemish Child and Youth Report (JoKER) is a tool employed by policymakers since 1997 (as a Child Report) and updated in 2008 (to include young people). Assessing the impact of draft legislation on the population aged 0 to 25, the JoKER is an obligatory procedure for all legislative proposals introduced by the Flemish government that may impact the lives of children and young people. The Report must include a summary, description of issue, policy objective, options and alternatives to draft legislation, impact analysis, and information about the execution, administrative costs, enforcement, evaluation, and consultation efforts. The JoKER is drafted by the respective ministry in charge of developing new legislation.

France: Youth Impact Clause

The Youth Impact Clause in France (*Clause d'impact jeunesse*) is used by policymakers since 2009 to perform a preliminary assessment to consider the impact of government drafts on bills or regulations on young people, aged 15 to 25.

A youth impact statement produced through this assessment is required by law for any draft regulatory text that includes new measures applicable to local authorities, civil society, and State services. Ministries in charge of drafting a new bill are responsible for preparing the statement, which is then sent to the Secretary General of Government. The tool serves to map the state of proposed legislation, its objectives, alternative options to legislating, and its anticipated impact on the target population. As part of the assessment, consultations are carried out with the French Economic and Social Council, a constitutional consultative assembly representing key economic, social, and environmental stakeholders.

Germany: Youth Check

Germany's Youth Check is an instrument of regulatory impact assessment established in 2017 to analyse the impact of federal legislation on young people (aged 12 to 27). There is no legal requirement to carry out a youth check in Germany yet. The Youth Check is conducted by the Competence Centre Youth-Check, which is located within the German Research Institute for Public Administration and receives funding from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). It receives legislative proposals from all federal ministries to determine whether a youth check is required.

If legislative proposals are identified as relevant, the Competence Centre triggers a two-stage assessment process, which analyses impacts across six areas of young people's lives (family, leisure, education and work, environment and health, politics and society, and the digital world). The

assessment also expands across 11 impact dimensions.⁹ The Youth Check is applied during the draft bill stages of legislation. In addition, the Competence Centre examines bills again once they have been approved by Cabinet and adopted by the Federal Government. In case changes occurred between the draft and approved legislation, a new youth check is performed.

New Zealand: Child Impact Assessment Tool (CIAT)

The New Zealand Child Impact Assessment Tool (CIAT) was established in 2018 as a non-mandatory tool to support policymakers to systematically take into consideration the wellbeing of people aged 0-18 in the law- and policymaking process.

The CIAT comprises a screening sheet, a three-step impact assessment and a guidance document. The screening sheet serves to help determine which proposals should be assessed more fully or if the anticipated impacts on children and young people merit further analytical steps. If the impacts of children and young people are assessed as distinct and significant, the Screening sheet material recommends that the analysis be transferred into a Child Impact Assessment. The three-step process (preparation of a proposal, data collection and stakeholder consultation, and preparation of summary of impacts) enables policymakers to unpack the broader context of a legislative proposal, including how it may impact different dimensions of children and young people's lives as well as the effects across different groups (e.g., depending on disability, class, cultural background).

Whilst the CIAT is not mandatory, Ministerial Cabinet papers in New Zealand have a population impact section, which requires policymakers to assess the impact of policy on particular cohorts, including children. In addition, when a policy requires regulatory/legislative change, a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) must be completed with information about the expected distributional impacts – information sourced from a CIAT can thus be used to deliver on these requirements.

Sources: (Ministry of Social Development, 2023^[56]); (Legifrance, 2016^[57]); (Schneider, 2022^[58]); (Belgian Presidency to the EU, 2023^[59]).

Several impact assessment tools are used in Ireland to anticipate the impact of planned and evaluate existing laws, policies, and programmes in the field of child well-being. Notably, the development of a RIA is obligatory for major primary laws and subordinate regulations, and should be conducted at early stages of legislative consultation processes to explore through a structured approach regulatory and non-regulatory alternatives to address a policy challenge (Department of the Taoiseach, 2018^[60]). Although no specific RIAs exist in relation to child and youth policies, BOBF 2014-20 established a commitment to regularly analyse and update relevant legislation, including the Child Care Act 1991 (see Box 5.1). As part of a RIA in Ireland, poverty impact assessments (PIA) are a statutory tool to shed light on the situation of vulnerable groups, including children.

Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) have been employed by the Ombudsman for Children's Office on an ad-hoc basis to assess the impact of policies and laws and foster compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OCO, 2022^[61]). The introduction of child and youth impact assessments are also part of the commitments outlined in *Young Ireland* to embed systematically the perspectives and concerns of children and young people in government decision-making. A project led by the Children's Rights Alliance in partnership with DCEDIY, the EU, and other actors, was launched in 2023 to document the work of child participation structures during the pandemic. This will inform the development of a prototype Child and youth RIA (see Box 5.5) (DCEDIY, 2023^[62]).

Box 5.5. Child Impact Assessment Tools and Practice in Ireland

Child Rights Impact Assessment

Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) are a tool supporting policymakers and lawmakers to comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child through assessing and reviewing potential impacts of proposed or existing legislation and policies on children and their rights.

A first pilot study focusing CRIA on the impact of school closures on children's rights in Ireland was published in 2022 by the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO). The study's methodology included desk research on key indicators, as well as interviews with stakeholders, including state agencies and non-governmental organisations. Beyond assessing the impact of school closures on children's rights, this pilot disseminated learnings among relevant State agencies and OCO staff to strengthen skills and capacity to implement CRIA the future. To date, however, CRIAs are not yet systematically applied across relevant agencies.

Regulatory Impact Analysis conducted by DCEDIY on the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2019

As part of the review of the Child Care Act 1991, and in response to a commitment included in BOBF 2014-20, DCEDIY conducted a RIA to assess the Guardian ad litem (GAL) arrangements under the Act 1991, which regulate service provision to children and young people who are the subject of childcare proceedings. As part of the process, the DCEDIY led consultations with government departments and agencies, and Hub na nOg. The results obtained from conducting the RIA informed legal reforms in the GAL system, as embedded in the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022.

Poverty Impact Assessment

Introduced in 1998, Poverty Impact Assessments (PIA) are part of RIA processes in Ireland. The objective of PIA is to indicate the impact of the proposal on groups in poverty or at risk of falling into poverty. These include lone parent families and families with a large number of children. "Childhood" is further identified as one critical lifecycle stage in the process of poverty alleviation.

Sources: : (OCO, 2022^[61]) ; (Department of the Taoiseach, 2018^[60]); (DCEDIY, 2019^[63]); (Office of Social Inclusion, 2008^[64]).

To use RIA more systematically and successfully implement the prototype Child and youth RIA currently in preparation, OECD interviews point to the need to strengthen capacity for data analysis and training on impact assessment methodologies within DCEDIY and across relevant departments to harness their full potential to inform evidence-based policymaking. Further work is also needed to raise awareness among policymakers of the benefits and utility of utilising youth checks or child and youth RIA in their work, as well as ensuring that these are utilised meaningfully rather than as a 'tick-box' exercise.

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[6]

Notes

¹ See: <https://whatworks.gov.ie/>.

² See: <https://outcomes4children.tusla.ie/>.

³ See: <https://www.eurochild.org/initiative/datacare/>.

⁴ See: <https://outcomes4children.tusla.ie/>.

⁵ Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.

⁶ On the question “To be a good citizen, how important do you think it is for a person to express their opinion on political or social issues?” featured on the 2021 Eurobarometer Youth Survey, ranking options included: 0=extremely unimportant and 10=extremely important.

⁷ Data reflects findings from the question ‘How much of a say do you feel you can have over important decisions, laws and policies affecting your country as a whole?’ on the 2021 Eurobarometer Youth Survey. Responses in Ireland showed 11% of respondents indicated ‘A great deal’, 34% of respondents indicated ‘Some’, 33% of respondents indicated ‘Not very much’, and 19% of respondents indicated ‘None at all’. 3% of respondents indicated ‘Don’t know’.

⁸ The Lundy Model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus educational decision-makers on the distinct elements of the provision (space, voice, audience, influence).

⁹ The 11 Impact Dimensions of Germany’s Youth Check include: participation opportunities, educational conditions and opportunities, health effects, individual rights, financial effects, media access and use, mobility, protection against discrimination, protection against violence, self-determination, and social relationships.

6

Reviewing the evidence: Are Ireland's policies effective at tackling child poverty?

This chapter reviews different types of evidence that are produced to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies at reducing child poverty and improving outcomes of children growing up in socio-economic disadvantage in Ireland. It takes stock of the existing evidence base and identifies any blind spots or gaps. Ireland has the benefit of a broad range of available evaluations, analyses and statistical measures on child poverty trends and drivers, and on the impact of policy measures on child poverty reduction and child outcomes. Nevertheless, key evidence gaps exist that are pertinent to monitoring the European Child Guarantee and Ireland's national efforts to reduce child poverty and its impact on child living standards and well-being.

Introduction

Child poverty involves three aspects that may arise separately or together: low income, material deprivation and family stress (OECD, 2021^[1]; Thévenon et al., 2018^[2]). The lack of income may first limit households' ability to purchase or access important "inputs" for child development, such as good quality housing, healthy food, or good quality care and education services, etc. It may also affect the quality of the home learning environment (for instance through no budget capacity to purchase books, educational toys or to provide children with a quiet space to do their homework), while also causing stress due to the difficulties in making ends meet. Low-income families are also more likely to live in neighbourhoods where there is, for instance, poor transportation infrastructure, few care and education facilities, low quality schools, as well as higher exposure to air pollution and criminality. Lack of income, and the stress it generates, may limit families' ability to engage with and access services.

Against this background, governments are investing substantially in cash and in-kind support to lift families out of poverty and to ensure an adequate income (OECD, 2018^[3]). A first set of measures aims to promote parents' employment and by doing so to secure a sustainable income. These measures can include cash subsidies or tax reliefs to help parents find work and to make work pay, as well as non-cash measures to help parents reconcile work and family life. Other income support measures (cash benefits or tax breaks) aim at ensuring that families have an adequate income to fulfil the needs of their members, including children. These benefits may supplement earned income when parents are working, or they may provide a minimum income to live on when parents are not working. A critical issue, then, is to design these measures in such a way that the support given in cash to lift families out of poverty does not result in disincentives for parents to work.

In Ireland, income support for families with children has historically been an important tool for reducing child poverty and ensuring that families have an adequate income. Several key programmes and measures combine to provide a substantial income supplement to all families, although the total support provided depends on whether parents are in work or not (Box 6.1). One significant form of support is Child Benefit, a monthly universal payment provided to all families with children under the age of 18 who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. The amount varies based on the number of children in the household. To support low-income working families, Ireland offers the Working Family Payment (WFP), which is a means-tested payment that provides a weekly top-up to individuals or couples with children who are in employment but have a low family income. It helps to bridge the gap between earnings and the minimum income threshold, ensuring that families can meet their basic needs. Providing access to quality care, education and social services is also key to reconcile work and family and to mitigating the consequences that poverty may have on child development, and therefore it forms an important component of the European Child Guarantee.

Box 6.1. Summary of Irish social welfare payments and subsidies to families with children

Ireland provides families with children with a range of income support payments and subsidies that are not subject to taxation. Only some of these payments are universal, while the rest are means tested and/or targeted at families in particular circumstances. Below are the main income support payments:

- **Child Benefit:** universal monthly payment to parents/guardians of children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their eighteenth birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. From September 2024 the payment will be extended to children until their nineteenth birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. The standard rate per child increases in the case of multiple births;

- **Increase for a Qualified Child:** supplement to primary social welfare payments. The rate for over 12s is higher;
- **One-Parent Family Payment:** weekly means tested payment to lone parents with a child aged under seven. Extensions of the age limit exist for recipients of certain social welfare payments. Supplements provided for dependent children. Higher payment rate for children over 12;
- **Jobseekers Transitional Payment:** means-tested weekly payment targeted at lone parents whose youngest child is aged between 7 and 13 (inclusive). No requirement to be actively looking for work, but must attend meetings with a case officer to identify and access supports;
- **Working Family Payment:** weekly means tested payment to help families on low pay with dependent children up to 18 years of age, or 22 if in full-time education. To qualify a person must work as an employee for at least 19 hours per week or 38 hours per fortnight. A person can combine their weekly hours with their partner's hours to help meet the requirements;
- **Back to Work Family Dividend:** weekly payment to help people with children move from the One-Parent Family Payment or Jobseekers Payment to employment. Paid out for two years, with rate reduced of 50% in the second year. In the first year, this is paid at the equivalent of any Increases for Qualified Children that were payable on their Jobseeker's or One-Parent Family Payment (up to a maximum of 4 children). Higher payment rate for children over 12;
- **Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance:** a means-tested annual payment to assist families with the cost of school uniforms and footwear. Higher payment rate for children over 12;
- **Domiciliary Care Allowance:** monthly non-means tested payment for a child with a severe disability, requiring ongoing care and attention that is substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age.

Ireland provides financial subsidies towards the cost of centre-based childcare. The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was introduced in 2019 to replace all existing targeted and universal childcare subsidies. It provides two types of childcare subsidy for children over 6 months of age: i) a universal subsidy for children up to 15 years of age which is not means tested and ii) an income assessed subsidy for children up to 15 years of age which is means-tested. The scheme also includes a sponsor referral programme to help ensure access to childcare support for vulnerable children. Additional grants are available to childcare providers to support the care of children with disabilities.

Ireland provides housing support payments to families and individuals in private rented accommodation:

- **Rent Supplement:** short-term means-tested subsidy for people in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to cover accommodation costs and do not have accommodation available to them from another source. Claimants are being transitioned over to Housing Assistance Payment if they have a long-term housing need;
- **Housing Assistance Payment:** means-tested subsidy for people who qualify for social housing support, paid directly to landlords. A rent contribution is required but depends on ability to pay.

Source: The OECD Tax-Benefit Database: Description of policy rule for Ireland 2022.

This chapter reviews different types of evidence that are produced to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies at reducing child poverty and improving outcomes of children growing up in socio-economic disadvantage in the Irish context. It takes stock of the existing evidence base to identify any blind spots or gaps.

This chapter begins by presenting the main reports and resources that are produced by the government, advisory bodies, and civil society to track child poverty in Ireland. It then examines the existing statistical

measures to track child poverty and income adequacy and to account for children's experiences of poverty, including measures that are not currently used in Ireland's monitoring. It also examines the statistical measures that are used to track child poverty risks and drivers and identifies key information gaps on groups of children who are at a high risk of poverty.

This chapter moves on to look at evidence that is produced on the impact of policy measures to support parental employment as means to reduce child poverty, specifically income support and access to affordable childcare. It then examines the evidence that is produced on the impact of policy measures promoting access to a number of key services on children living in poverty, specifically parenting and family support, school meals, and general practitioner health care. Other key services, specifically education and housing are not covered because this would require an examination of the education system and the housing market, which falls outside of the scope of the present review. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the evidence that is produced in spending reviews in child and family services and more broadly the practice of value of money assessments.

Tracking progress on child poverty reduction and income adequacy

The evidence base

There is a broad range of reports and analyses documenting child poverty trends and drivers, and the impact of income support on child poverty reduction and other outcomes in the Irish context. These documents differ according to their purpose. First, there are a series of reports available to monitor the implementation of governmental policies, track progress on strategic commitments, and advise on measures to remove obstacles for the full achievement of policy objectives. Second, research reports exist that dig deeper into the causes and consequences of child poverty, and of the impact of child income support and of the Irish welfare system on child poverty and social inclusion more broadly (Box 6.2). Finally, the available grey literature generally aims to inform budget policies and steer policies at a higher level.

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) has published several documents that track progress on child poverty reduction. The DSP's mission is to promote people's active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services. Its main functions include advising government and formulating appropriate social protection and social inclusion policies. As part of its mission, the DSP publishes the Social Inclusion Monitor reports, which track progress towards the National Social Target for Poverty Reduction (Department of Social Protection, 2019^[4]). The Social Inclusion Monitor reports also examine Ireland's contribution to the EU poverty target and progress on reducing poverty among children and jobless households. Each report contains a short discussion of poverty trends, in relation to the macroeconomic context and the impact of social transfers on poverty reduction. To fulfil its advisory mission, the DSP also conducts public consultations that precede budget decisions where non-governmental organisations, such as Barnardos (Barnardos, 2022^[5]), the *Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice* (Vincentian MESL Research Center, 2022^[6]; Boylan, 2023^[7]), and other stakeholders can submit their views and make recommendations.

Other monitoring reports provide assessments of whether policies are achieving the desired objectives to reduce child poverty. These include reporting attached to Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (BOBF) the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020, and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025. These reports document poverty trends and the distance remaining to achieve objectives, while also suggesting new steps that could be taken to meet poverty reduction targets (DCEDIY, 2020^[8]; Department of Social Protection, 2022^[9]).

The BOBF framework set a target to lift over 70,000 children (aged 0-17 years) out of consistent poverty by 2020 and achieve a reduction of at least two-thirds on the 2011 level. In order to steer the implementation of the framework, the National Advisory Council for Children and Young People (NACCYP)

played a role in shaping the implementation of the BOBF framework. In 2021, it published the paper, *Addressing Child Poverty: Towards a National Child Poverty Action Plan*, which sets out the perspective of the Council on what the government needs to do to further address child poverty. The paper provides an analysis of causes and trends of child poverty and makes proposals for a whole-of-government approach to tackle child poverty (NACCYP, 2021^[10]) (Box 6.2).

Similarly, the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 –2025 is built around seven high-level goals, one of which is supporting families and reducing child poverty. It also includes other goals that are instrumental to reducing child poverty, such as “ensuring work pays” and ‘reducing poverty among people.’ As part of the commitments to deliver on those objectives, the Roadmap suggests prioritizing increases to family-related payments, and to introduce and extend new family support measures (Department of Social Protection, 2020^[11]). A mid-term review was carried out in 2023, which assessed the Roadmap’s coherence with other sectoral strategies and government commitments, as well as with EU-level developments, and other big development, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis. The mid-term review involved an assessment of the Roadmap’s indicators, a stakeholder consultation and a few background documents to inform the recommendations made by the steering group (Department of Social Protection, 2023^[12]).

The National Economic and Social Council¹ (NESC) produces reports that are important resources for evaluating how income support directed at families can be made more effective. For instance, a series of NESC reports discuss the option of moving towards a simplified and more integrated system of support for families, and whether integration should be considered solely in terms of income support (Johnston, 2021^[13]), or as a way to foster the complementarity of supports in-cash and in-kind (NESC, 2020^[14]; Johnston, 2021^[15]).

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), the national longitudinal study, generates important evidence on the lives of children, young people, and families to help inform the development of effective policies and responsive services. These data have been analysed to identify the drivers of child poverty and its consequences for developmental and other outcomes over time. The GUI study is a flagship research project of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) delivered in collaboration with the Central Statistical Office. Since 2006, the study has been tracking the lives of two large nationally representative cohorts of children/young people: Cohort '98, recruited at the age of 9 years and born in 1998; and Cohort '08, recruited at 9 months old and born in 2008. GUI recently launched a third cohort who will be nine months old in 2024. The study has generated a multitude of reports and analyses about how children and young people are faring in relation to physical health, mental health and well-being, educational development and transitions, and civic/economic engagement – as well as the extent to which outcomes are associated with background variables such as family income, social class, and parental educational attainment.

In addition to direct reports from the study, DCEDIY has a research partnership with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to produce in-depth policy relevant research reports drawing on GUI data. Outputs from this partnership include reports on disrupted transitions (among young adults post Covid); the dynamics of child poverty (and what triggers transitions in and out of poverty); how children with a migrant background are faring; mental health and well-being in childhood and adolescence; and most recently, the impact of housing adequacy on outcomes in early and middle childhood (DCEDIY, 2023^[16]).

Last but not least, the annual *Child Poverty Monitor* reports prepared by the Children’s Rights Alliance are a key resource to inform policies and debate on possible actions to improve policy effectiveness (Children’s Right Alliance, 2023^[17]). These reports track progress on reducing the number of children living in poverty, showcase best practice solutions across the country and put under the spotlight key areas of concern. Over the years, key areas of concern have included income inadequacy, food poverty, early childhood education and care, education, health, housing and homelessness, participation, play recreation and family support and youth services. These reports also point to the existing evidence on the relationships between

income poverty, access to basic resources and services, and a range of children's health, education and well-being outcomes (DCDEIY, 2023^[18]).

Box 6.2. Key national reviews of child income support payments

A few important reviews have been undertaken on the effectiveness of child income support payments for child poverty reduction. The 2010 report, *A Policy and Value for Money Review of Child Income Support and Associated Spending Programmes*, examined the effectiveness of child income support in reducing child poverty indicators and the associated impact on employment incentive indicators (Department of Social Protection, 2010^[19]). This report contained specific analyses on i) comparison of child income support payment rates with income indicators; and ii) household income simulation to determine the impact on poverty and on work incentives of programmes. The report pointed to a positive contribution of child income support on child poverty reduction, although the exact size of the contribution could not be estimated due to data limitations and also limitations in the way in which the unobserved determinants of employment opportunities were captured. Positive effects were estimated to be due to two main factors: i) the increase in the value of the child income support payments package, which has been more rapid than the rise in the poverty line; and ii) the universal nature of Child Benefit, which to some extent avoids potential problems of uptake and work disincentives that selective instruments would have generated (see the discussion in section 3). The report also highlighted that the child income support package was moderately efficient at targeting resources at the lower half of the income distribution.

In 2020, the NESC reviewed the Irish Social Welfare System and made recommendations for its modernization (NESC, 2020^[14]). In relation to child income support, the report proposed introducing a two-tier child income support system. The two-tier system would comprise of a universal Child Benefit payment for all children, with an automatic supplement payable in respect of children in low-income families, regardless of whether these families are in receipt of a social welfare payment or in low-paid employment. The report also included a critical discussion of poverty indicators and how they could be revised to better inform child poverty targets and measures of social inclusion more broadly.

The NACCYP 2021 paper on addressing child poverty, discussed data needs to better assess the causes and consequences of child poverty, as well as to evaluate the impact of policy measures on children and young people's lives (NACCYP, 2021^[10]). This report also explored the desirability of setting ambitious targets to end consistent child poverty, and of developing indicators to identify trends in persistent poverty and deep income poverty, and on specific outcomes connected to child poverty. It underlined the need of information on the outcomes generated by prevention and early intervention programmes. It recommended further targeted measures to eradicate child poverty, spanning over 11 policy areas.

The most recent and third edition of the annual ESRI report on poverty, income inequality and living standards looked at option for reducing child poverty and underlined the trade-offs based on the current policy tools. This report indicated that introducing a new Child Income Support Payment (CISP) based on household means and number of children would enable policymakers to reduce child poverty more effectively by targeting resources towards reductions in child poverty while preserving financial work incentives and ensuring children in the very lowest-income households' benefit. However, undertaking such a reform would necessitate confronting some of the implicit choices made by the structure of the current welfare system that are rarely discussed, such as whether the welfare system should incentivise low-income individuals to engage in part-time work (ESRI, 2023^[20]).

Existing measures to track child poverty

Statistical measures of poverty play a central role in measuring whether policies are effective at contributing to child poverty reduction. Though statistical measures are neither a very direct nor perfect measure of policy influence, they should allow to capture whether policies that are being implemented are as – a whole – adequate or sufficient to reduce child poverty and achieve poverty reduction targets. However, a policy can have a positive effect on poverty reduction and child material well-being and not be properly reflected by broad statistical income poverty measures. It is therefore important that statistical measures of child poverty at national level reflect well all facets of influence that policies can have on various aspects of poverty, including incidence, persistence, intensity, as well as capacity to improve the standard of living and material well-being of economically disadvantaged children.

Ireland's Central Statistical Office (CSO) publishes annual poverty statistics on its website. These statistics are based on information collected in the *Survey of Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) survey, which is Ireland's official source of data on household and individual income and is based on population representative samples (Central Statistics Office, 2023^[21]). The CSO has developed two main indicators based on SILC data to measure and monitor child poverty as part of its general statistics on poverty.

- Child “relative” income poverty rate describes the proportion of children who live in a household with an “equivalised income”² below 60 % of the national median income. All children in those households are counted as “at risk” of being income poor. This indicator is included in the Children and Young People’s (CYP) Indicator Set (DCEDIY, 2023^[22]), and is used to set national targets for poverty reduction and social inclusion (NACCYP, 2021^[10]; Department of Social Protection, 2023^[12]).
- Child “consistent poverty” rate where children are regarded as being in consistent poverty if they live in a family where household members are at-risk of income poverty and experiencing enforced deprivation. Enforced deprivation is defined the lack of at least 2 out of the 11 items on the basic deprivation list because their family could not afford them while they would like to possess them³. It is important to note that this indicator is not based on the child-specific information on material deprivation that is collected at a less frequent pace (see more below).
- The use of combined measures like the consistent poverty rate is intended to overcome the limitation of using income poverty measures only as these may not properly reflect the actual living standards of children and their experience of deprivation if, for instance, parents prioritize spending on children items over other household’s expenditures (Cooper and Stewart, 2013^[23]; 2017^[24]; Menton, 2007^[25]). However, the potential downside of combined measures is that they may only capture a subset of economically vulnerable children (Maître, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]) (see Tracking risk and the drivers of child poverty).

Examining relative income poverty rates by age cohort reveals that children have the second highest poverty risk at 15.2 %, higher than the rate of the general population at 13.1 %. Families headed by one adult have a higher risk of poverty, compared to those headed by two adults, at 23.8 % and 13.1 % respectively. Children are also the most vulnerable to consistent poverty, with a rate of 7.5 % versus an overall population rate of 5.3 %. Children with a lone parent are also significantly more vulnerable to consistent poverty at a rate of 14.1 % compared to 5.3 % for children in two parent families (Children’s Right Alliance, 2023^[17]). Poverty for children of non-Irish nationality is also higher than for Irish nationals (Byrne and Treanor, 2020^[27]).

A striking finding also is that, no matter what statistical measure of poverty is adopted, adolescents aged 12 to 17 years old are much more frequently exposed to poverty than younger children (Byrne and Treanor, 2020^[27]). Rates of income poverty, enforced deprivation and consistent poverty for children in the 6-11 and 12-17 age ranges were found to be significantly higher in 2018 than for those in the 0-5 age group⁴. These

findings suggest the need for targets and indicators distinguished by age groups (Byrne and Treanor, 2020^[27]).

Measuring the overall influence of income support policies on child income poverty

Measuring the contribution of income support in reducing child poverty at national and international level is essential to steer policy. One way to measure its contribution is to compare poverty rates before and after redistribution through the tax and benefit system, which gives an indication of the overall performance of the whole package of income support measures in reducing child poverty. From a comparative standpoint, the redistribution system in Ireland is quite effective in reducing child income poverty rates (see Chapter 3).

The CYP Indicator Set contains an indicator on the impact of social transfers in reducing the at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate. This indicator measures the percentage reduction, in relative terms, of the AROP rate from social transfers (excluding occupational pensions) (DCEDIY, 2023^[22]). Social transfers include unemployment and old-age benefit, child- or family-related allowances, housing allowances and other social transfers, such as sickness or disability benefits. This indicator shows that, between 2014 and 2019, the percentage of income poverty reduction linked to social transfers for 0–14-year-olds increased, rising from 57.9% to 60.8%. Another option is to also account for, at the same time, the redistributive effect of the tax system. The OECD has an indicator on the rate of child income poverty before and after tax and social transfers, which shows that redistribution causes Ireland's child poverty rate to fall from among the highest to the lowest in the OECD (see Chapter 3).

Another dimension that matters is whether income transfers are effective in compensating for the costs of raising children (Verbist and Van Lancker, 2016^[28]; Thévenon et al., 2009^[29]). How this can be explored empirically depends on the question being answered. For example, how much income a family with children needs compared to a family without children, which would involve a normative judgement on a bundle of goods and services needed to maintain children and is often resolved empirically by developing a budget standard (with variation in terms of methodology and categories of goods included) (see Children's Living Standards and Income Adequacy). Alternatively, how much income a family with children requires to be as well off as a family without children, which would deal with accounting for how much money is required so that families with different numbers of children achieve the same level of standard of living. In their assessment of income support for families across European countries, Verbist and Van Lancker (2016^[28]) developed an indicator to capture how much the child income support system contributes to compensating for the cost of children, and what would be required for families with children to get an equivalized income that is equal to those of households without children. The researchers show that Ireland's child income support system is not only comparatively effective in reducing child poverty, but also in compensating families for the cost of raising children.

Capturing children's varied experiences of poverty

Just like other population groups, children's experiences of poverty are shaped by the depth of poverty, the duration of the poverty exposure, and the types of material deprivation experienced. As anti-child-poverty policies impact on these different dimensions, it is therefore important to have measures for each to complement child relative income poverty and consistent poverty measures. This additional information is key for gauging whether the situation of poor children is improving, as well as informing the discussion on where to target further support.

Children's Exposure to Persistent Poverty

Children who experience prolonged periods of poverty are among the most vulnerable of children living in poverty. A child is more likely to achieve poorer outcomes when their family is persistently poor or

economically vulnerable (Nolan et al., 2006^[30]; Maître, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]). Certain family characteristics are associated with higher risks of persistent poverty, such as lone parenthood, parents being from ethnic minority backgrounds, low levels of maternal education, parents with a disability and larger family size. This suggests that child persistent poverty will only decrease if policies are effective at reaching these population groups (Maître, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]).

Persistent at-risk-of-poverty rate is measured at European level as the percentage of the population living in households where the equivalised disposable income is below the AROP threshold for the current year and at least two out of the preceding three years (Eurostat, 2021^[31]). The addition of a persistent poverty measure to the set of indicators used to monitor child poverty would make it possible to assess how successful policies are in protecting children against prolonged exposure to the risks associated with income poverty. This is along the lines of what the National Advisory Council for Children and Young People has suggested in its proposal for a national child poverty action plan (NACCYP, 2021^[10])⁵.

Children's Living Standards and Income Adequacy

Anti-child-poverty policies do not only concern reducing the risk of poverty, but also aim to improve the standard of living of poor families. Income support measures targeting the poorest families are likely to improve living standards without drastically reducing the proportion of children in relative poverty. Not taking this into consideration when assessing the influence of policies on child poverty can be misleading since a decline in poverty rates, or a small increase, can co-exist with a substantial deterioration in the standard of living of those affected by poverty. For instance, after the 2008 financial crisis, the child poverty rate only rose moderately in Ireland, yet the standard of living of low-income families fell sharply until the mid-2010s (OECD, 2018^[3]).

There are several ways to document trends in the standard of living of poor children and explore their association with policies. One option is to measure child poverty rates with an “anchored” poverty line, which is based on a poverty line fixed at some given income level such as the median equivalized income in a past year and adjusted for inflation. The purpose of this indicator is to get some indication of the changes in ‘absolute poverty’ over time. Using the anchored rate, it is possible to see how many children are poor today based on the standards of some point in the past, which is useful for assessing to assess whether their proportion decreasing over time after the adoption of policy measures for low-income families. If the standard of living of low-income families has increased over time, the “anchored” poverty rate will be on the decline. Ireland’s Roadmap for Social Inclusion recommends using the anchored poverty rates as part of monitoring the Roadmap, with a poverty line anchored at its 2020 value (Sprong and Maître, 2023^[32]; Department of Social Protection, 2023^[12]). Estimating this measure for children is advisable for tracking the proportion of children whose standard of living is equal to the 2020 poverty line, and whether this proportion declines or increases over time.

It may also be desirable to assess how much the measures supporting poor families are successful in reducing the gap in living standards between income poor families and others. One option is to measure the child “poverty gap” that captures the difference between the average disposable income of poor families and the poverty line to see whether family income support has reduced the poverty gap (Thévenon et al., 2018^[2]). However, it can be the case that the poverty gap will stay constant or increase despite support received by poor families if the poverty line rises at a faster pace than the disposable income of poor families. Strengthening income support for poor families may then be desirable if the aim of income support is to prevent the relative gap of income from growing.

Information on whether the income support provided to poor families is sufficient to meet the needs of children and other family members can also be useful for steering policy. A critical issue here is to have a reference for benchmarking how much income is needed for a family to buy the essential goods and services that children need. In order to provide such a benchmark, the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) uses a budget standard approach to calculate the Minimum Essential Standard of Living

(MESL), which reflects how much income a family needs to cover its basic needs, depending on family composition (Mac et al., 2012^[33]; Boylan, 2023^[7]). Using these estimates, the VPSJ's research consistently identifies older children as having additional and distinct needs in comparison to younger children, and that child income support is insufficient to cover the needs of poor families with adolescents. For instance, in 2019, the minimum needs of children aged 12 and over cost over €120 per week, which is 63% more expensive than the minimum needs of younger children (NESC, 2020^[14]). Additional costs relating to food, clothing, personal care, education, and leisure account for much of this difference. The same approach is used to assess how increases in income support introduced in the government budget may contribute to helping families meet children's costs. For instance, the VPSJ's assessment of post-Budget 2023 forecasted that social welfare supports would meet just 62 % of MESL costs for older children (Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2023^[34]).

Family household costs and housing affordability

Households' ability to afford to meet children's needs depends on the amount of disposable income they have available. A growing proportion of disposable family income in Ireland is used to pay housing costs, as a result of sharp increases in housing costs, especially for tenants in the rental market (Jose Doval Tedin and Faubert, 2020^[35]). Housing costs are particularly high for low-income households and are an important driver of child poverty. Low-income households pay between two-fifths and half of household income on housing costs compared to only one-fifth for the general population (Children's Right Alliance, 2023^[17]; Byrne and Treanor, 2020^[27]).

Because of high housing costs, an indicator on the child poverty rate after housing costs would provide a more accurate information on the proportion of children at risk of poverty. Such an indicator would also inform whether there is a need to strengthen the income supports towards poor families or to make the payment of rent supplement or housing assistance payment more responsive to the impact of housing cost on child poverty. For instance, in 2022, the AROP rate for under-18s was 15.2 %, jumping to 27.7% after rent and mortgage interest costs are deducted from disposable income. This indicator also highlights that housing affordability is growing factor in children's risk of poverty. The percentage point difference in the AROP rate and AROP after rent and mortgage interest rate grew in 2021 and 2022 (CSO, 2023^[36]).

It might also be worth measuring the gap in the AROP for children after housing costs by housing tenure, for example, by owner-occupied housing and rental housing, and specifically private renters and supported renters in receipt of housing assistance. Population poverty rates are much higher for home renters, especially for supported renter (CSO, 2023^[36]). Differences between the AROP before and after housing costs are particularly pronounced for lone parents as they have lower disposable income and are more likely to rent and thus unaffordable housing contributes towards even higher rates of AROP after housing costs (Roantree, Barrett and Redmond, 2022^[37]).

Measuring child-specific material deprivation

Income support for low-income families has the potential to reduce material deprivation among children in poor households, but it may not provide enough support to fully meet children's material needs. As shown in Chapter 3, there is no strict overlap between households' income poverty and child material deprivation: thirteen per cent of children experienced child specific material deprivation in Ireland in 2021, 2.5% of these were in income poor households, and slightly less than 11% were in non-income poor household. This evidence suggests that lack of income may not be the only cause of children's exposure to material deprivation as it also depends on the provision of services to meet children's basic needs (see discussion in Chapters 2 and 3).

The absence of strict overlap between these two dimensions suggests that collecting information on child material deprivation is critical to complement income poverty rates. To be fully relevant, this information must include information on deprivation types affecting children specifically. To this aim, the CSO produces

statistics based on 13 child-specific deprivation items reported in *ad hoc* modules of the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (CSO, 2022^[38]). Overall, in 2021 one in ten (9.2%) households with children were deprived of two or more of the 13 items⁶. An analysis of deprivation by household characteristics shows that single-parent households, households with no worker, and households that rent had higher rates of child-specific deprivation. To capture material deprivation, a recent wave of GUI used a measure of child-specific deprivation that asks of ten key material items and five key experiences that a child has or can do. Thirteen percent of 13-year-olds reported experiencing some form of deprivation, with 4% reporting more than one (Smyth, 2023^[39]).⁷

It can be advisable to measure children's exposure to material deprivation using both child-specific item and household level information. The EU Social Protection Committee indicator on child material deprivation also includes important non-child specific information, such as whether the household can afford or not to have adequate warmth at home or replace worn furniture (Guio, Gordon and Marlier, 2017^[40]). The indicator on child material deprivation proposed by the EU Social Protection Committee also has the advantage of allowing international comparison of the situation of children (Box 6.3).

Box 6.3. The European Indicator on child specific material deprivation rate

Tackling child poverty and social exclusion is an objective of European Union policies, including the European Child Guarantee. The European Union Social Protection Committee does not have a single and formally approved indicator to measure the prevalence of child poverty and social exclusion. Eurostat has developed a few different indicators to measure child poverty and the risk of social exclusion for children, to which the Social Protection Committee refers to (Eurostat, 2023^[41]).

The child-specific material deprivation rate (CSMDR) is another indicator included in the set of indicators proposed by the Social Protection Committee to monitor social inclusion at EU level. This indicator measures the share of children suffering from an enforced lack of at least three of 17 items⁸, including child-specific items relating to food and nutrition, clothing and footwear, social activities, leisure activities, and a few household-level items such as whether the household can afford or not to: avoid arrears; have adequate warmth in home; have (access to) a car for private use; replace worn-out furniture; and have an internet connection at home. The adoption of this indicator in March 2018 follows the work by Guio et al. (2018^[42]) which establishes consistently high levels of reliability of this indicator. This indicator was used in Chapter 3 to document children's exposure to material deprivation.

Tracking risk and the drivers of child poverty

Understanding child poverty risk factors is crucial for deciding whether to increase child and family income support and where to put efforts. Getting the right information on the family living arrangements and work situation of parents is essential. Certain situations, such as living in a jobless household or in a lone-parent family are well-known factors associated with higher risks of child income poverty and economic vulnerability (Maître, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]). Attending to this fact, the CYP Indicator Set includes an indicator on the proportion of children living in a jobless household (DCEDIY, 2023^[22]).

Identifying the drivers of child poverty over time is crucial too to understand what triggers movements in and out of poverty, and to assess what the impact of policies are over time. This requires longitudinal data to analyse the dynamics of child poverty, and pathways through which poverty has an influence on child outcomes, as permitted by the survey on Growing up in Ireland (Maître, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]) (Box 6.4).

Using indicators that capture economic vulnerability more broadly than the indicators of child relative income poverty and consistent poverty do is also important to track risks and progress. To this end, the European Commission recommends the use of an indicator on children at risk of poverty and social exclusion - at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) - to monitor the European Pillar of Social Rights (Eurostat, 2021^[43]). This indicator measures the share of children under 18 who are either income poor, severely materially and socially deprived, or living in a household with a very low work intensity. This indicator is not based on information on children's specific material situation, and instead draws on information that applies to the whole population. It measures the share of children who are living in an income poor household, or experiencing severe material deprivation because they lack access to at least seven items out of the thirteen material and social deprivation items, or living in households where the adults are inactive or employed for a working time equal or less than 20% of their total combined work-time potential during the previous year.

This indicator has the advantage of allowing a comparison of risks across different age groups of the population on the same basis. However, it does not consider for the specific deprivations that children may experience in domains essential to their development. It is also possible for a child to be living in a household identified as materially deprived without being personally affected, if household's spending for children's material well-being is prioritised, while the opposite situation can also occur (Cooper and Stewart, 2013^[23]).

Another way to improve our understanding of child poverty drivers is to focus on 'economic vulnerability' (EV), as defined by (Maître, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]) on the basis of data from the national longitudinal study on children *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) (Box 6.4). This study measures EV using information on whether a child lives in a household where there is a low household income (bottom 20%), experiencing difficulty/great difficulty in making ends meet, or experiencing material deprivation over time. EV is assessed using Latent Class Analysis, which makes it possible to identify children with a high probability of experiencing EV without necessarily experiencing all dimensions of poverty at a particular point in time. The same information is available in SILC surveys, which offers the possibility to develop an indicator on the economic vulnerability of children that is close in spirit to the indicator used in this study.

Box 6.4. The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study

The study on the dynamics of child poverty was prepared for DCEDIY and tracks economic vulnerability (EV) in families with children over a nine-year period on the basis of data of two cohorts from the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study. The younger of the cohorts were born in 2008, for which study data cover the period from 9 months to 9 years old, while the older of the cohorts were born in 1998, for which study data covers the period from 9 years to 17–18 years old. The study identifies the family types most at risk of persistent poverty, examines the factors that trigger moves into and out of poverty, and ultimately explores the consequences of poverty for children across a wide range of domains.

The target group of the study is children who are "economically vulnerable" (EV), which is defined on the basis of three indicators: i) living in a household with a low income (bottom 20 %); ii) experiencing difficulty/great difficulty in making ends meet; and iii) experiencing material deprivation (based on the Irish measure of basic deprivation, which identifies households that are lacking essential goods or services out of a list of 11 items). The study uses a latent class analysis (LCA) to identify EV in the cohort children. This technique identifies those who have a high probability of experiencing a distinctive risk profile in relation to multiple dimensions of poverty without necessarily experiencing all dimensions at a particular point in time. An advantage of using a measure of EV based on LCA is that it identifies a

group of families that may not be currently experiencing economic stress, deprivation and low household income, but may have a high underlying risk of experiencing these situations and poverty defined more broadly, depending on their characteristics (low education, low social class profile); or they might face this risk if their circumstances were to negatively change (e.g. job loss, partnership dissolution and so on).

Exposure to EV on at least one occasion was found to be a common experience among families with children below age 9 (44 %) and with older children (38 %) during the studied time period. However, for many families, vulnerability is once-off or transient event (22 % for both cohorts). Exposure to EV was found to reach highest level at to 29 % for the younger cohort at age 3 (in years 2011– 2012, i.e., after the Great Recession). Persistent exposure to EV – defined as being EV in at least two consecutive survey waves – affected 22.8% of the '08 cohort and 16.6% of the '98 cohort. At the extreme, 5 % of families in both cohorts were constantly exposed to EV.

A few socio-economic characteristics were found to be the main drivers of EV and increase the risk of experiencing persistent poverty. Lone-parent families, larger families (four or more children), those in the lowest maternal education categories and ethnic minorities all have a much higher likelihood of experiencing persistent poverty. Barriers to labour force participation, such as disability or illness, but also caregiver's unemployment and full-time caring in the first wave of the survey are also strongly predictive of persistent EV. Maternal education appeared also to be particularly strongly predictive of persistent poverty from infancy to nine years.

Both maternal and paternal job loss is an important trigger for entry into EV. By contrast, mother's transition from non-employment into full-time work were found to play a significant role in moving families out of poverty, an effect which is almost identical to that of a father's entry to full-time employment. Interestingly, transitions from non-employment into part-time employment are not associated with exits from EV, suggesting that in particular mothers' part-time work is not enough to lift families out of poverty. The analysis also identified (for both cohorts) an increased risk of entering poverty when a new partner joins the household, which the researchers describe as a risk factor that is not currently on the policy radar.

Source: (Maitre, Russel and Smyth, 2021^[26]), The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey.

Information gap for other population groups with higher risks of poverty

Last but not least, an obvious limitation of the existing poverty indicators is that they are based on a population sample in SILC data or the GUI data, which are household surveys and do not include some child population groups who are known to be at higher risk of poverty, such as children in homeless families living in homeless accommodation or who are 'roofless'; children living in residential care, and children in the international protection system. These are important gaps to be filled for monitoring the European Child Guarantee (Guio, Marlier and Frazer, 2020^[44]).

Evidence of the impact of policy measures to support parental employment

When evaluating the benefits of income support for families, an important dimension to consider is the effect that it may have on parental employment. In theory, this effect is ambiguous. On the one hand, income support can increase the ability of non-working parents to search for and find a job. However, the economic theory also suggests that financial assistance can generate an 'income effect' that reduces the monetary return from working and can therefore act as a disincentive to work.

To reduce disincentives to work, Ireland has introduced a range of changes over the past decade. These include, for example, institutional changes such as the establishment of the Intreo service and the introduction of JobPath, as well as policy changes such as the Action Plans for Jobs and Pathways to Work plans, and the reinforcement of activation requirements for income support payments (NESC, 2020^[14]). Changes were made to encourage labour force participation, particularly among lone parents, but also people with disabilities. These involved changes to housing and childcare benefits to ease their integration into employment. For example, the Housing Assistance Payment and the National Childcare Scheme provide supports whose intensity is tapered rather than completely withdrawn as incomes increase (Box 6.1).

A number of supports have been developed to provide greater provision for families combining care of children and employment, including the introduction of paid Paternity and Parental Benefits. A further change is the Homecaring Periods Scheme that awards credited social insurance contributions for up to 20 years to those who have provided full-time care to children or other dependents.

Income support and work (dis)incentives

The Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI) explored the possible work disincentives generated by the Irish social welfare system, finding strong income disincentives to take up employment were infrequent for those who were currently unemployed (Savage, Callan and Walsh, 2014^[45]). Overall, lone parents were shown as a group to be the least likely to face very high-income replacement rates. However, the paper identified a few groups with a greater likelihood of a strong financial disincentive to work, such as unemployed individuals with children and more broadly the unemployed or jobless persons with low potential wages (Savage, Callan and Walsh, 2014^[45]). To some extent, this result is inherent in the nature of the social welfare system: jobless households are likely to be in receipt of full social welfare add-on payments in respect of a spouse/partner and/or children. One limit of this study, however, is that childcare costs were not included in this assessment of work disincentives, despite being important parameters in the decision to return to work.

More recently, a NESC review of options for reforming the welfare system, underlined that disincentives to work seem to relate to particular circumstances, especially households with a number of unemployed adult members, often containing children and where people transitioning to work can only command low wages rates (2021^[13]). Specific payments are available to ease this transition such as the Working Family Payment⁹ (WFP) and the Back to Work Family Dividend¹⁰ (BWFD). However, in making the transition from social welfare to employment there can be an element of uncertainty, with loss of social welfare benefits and delays in receipt of wages or in getting assessed for the Working Family Payment (WFP) (NESC, 2018^[46]). Poor awareness of ability to retain and claim certain benefits when taking up employment also acts as a disincentive to work (CIB, 2017^[47]). Crucial in this regard will be flexibility and clear, accessible, and fluid administrative pathways.

The DSP reviewed the Working Family Payment, which pointed out inconsistencies with maintenance payments and issues with qualification rules (DEASP, 2018^[48]). Though for the vast majority of recipients, the WFP is extremely effective in reducing in-work poverty – especially among lone parents and large two-parent families, there are some cases (including small families headed by two adults) who are below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold while on WFP. In addition, to receive WFP, a parent must work a minimum number of 38 hours per fortnight, which obviously precludes employees with too low work intensity. Two parent families have the possibility to combine weekly working hours to meet this threshold. Lowering the hours worked threshold could be an option to allow more families to qualify for WFP and as a consequence lift more families out of poverty; however, a concern of the DSP is that a further reduction in the “hours worked” requirement may facilitate precarious employment and bad employer practice by acting as a prop up to unsustainably low working hours, and facilitating low-hours contracts which potentially allow employers to ‘control’ employees. As a result, there is a risk of perpetuating in-work poverty. In 2019,

working people accounted for almost a third of people living below the poverty line. Tackling in-work poverty requires other policies, such as an expansion of affordable high quality full-time childcare to help facilitate an increase in full-time paid work for at least one adult in a household (Roantree, Barrett and Redmond, 2022^[37]). The National Childcare Scheme, which was launched in 2019, is intended to ensure that access to affordable childcare will no longer be a barrier to labour market participation, including female labour market participation. At the time of its introduction, the NCS presented significant new administrative challenges for parents and providers (Paull, 2021^[49]). A 12-month Review of the National Childcare Scheme was prepared for the DCEDIY to assess, among other things, the effectiveness of NCS delivery and contribution to reducing the cost of early learning and care and school-age childcare. The review was based on the analysis of administrative data, including application and claim data, as well as of data from a survey of parents registered to the NCS and of administrative and survey data of service providers. The analysis highlighted that uptake was higher for younger children, and higher in some regions than others, but there were no systematic differences between urban and rural areas and little difference by level of area deprivation. The uptake was also higher for lone parents, those who met the work-study test for enhanced hours claims, families with only one child, and families not in the highest income band. The NCS was also found to cover higher proportions of family childcare costs for lone parents over couples, and for couples with one parent not working or working part time over couples with both parents working full time, as well as for families with school children over those with only preschool children (Paull, 2021^[49]).

Nevertheless, the NCS review reported of concerns expressed by some stakeholders that many vulnerable families have received substantially less support under the NCS than they had under the legacy schemes due to lower subsidy rates, higher threshold of need to be met for the NCS sponsorship, and because children in families not meeting the work-study test were only entitled to standard hours. There was some evidence that families on the lowest income received higher level of subsidy than on the older schemes. Lower access for preschool children from vulnerable families is also seen as potentially detrimental to the most disadvantaged children who are reputed to benefit developmentally from more childcare hours and for school (Paull, 2021^[49]).

Evidence of inconsistencies in the income support system

Since the late 2000s, a number of reports have pointed to the limits of Ireland's current social welfare system. Ireland's social welfare system provides, on top of a universal child benefit, a large number of contingency-based benefits, which translate into a number of different payments serving a diverse set of needs from low income, lone parenthood, illness, unemployment, caring etc. Though this has allowed for the development of payments to meet changing needs, it remains questionable whether some payments achieve the best outcomes for individuals in the longer term (Johnston, 2021^[13]). Developing payments in this way has led to complex eligibility rules, especially in relation to means testing, disregards of income and interactions with other payments. It also has generated stigma and a lack of understanding of the system, which in turn leads to low take up, long-term unemployment and/or poverty traps, and a lack of effectiveness in reducing poverty (Johnston, 2021^[13]).

Specifically for child poverty reduction, the problem is generally less about a low level of child income support, but rather that often parents have a low level of market earnings, and when employed face high net costs for services such as childcare, health care and housing. Though the social welfare system provides several benefits to working parents on a low income, there are obstacles preventing the system from delivering fully effective support. In the current system, all parents receive Child Benefit, and if unemployed they will receive the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC), which has a higher rate for over 12s. However, if they move from welfare to employment, it is likely that parents will lose the IQC. Moving from welfare to work may qualify working parents for the Back to Work Family Dividend, and the Working Family Payment (WFP) if they are on a low income (NESC, 2020^[14]; Johnston, 2021^[13]).

One proposed solution by NESC to overcome these limits is to move towards a more integrated payment structure on an incremental basis. The implications of such a move need to be considered carefully, particularly in relation to retaining flexibility to tailor payments to meet people's needs, and to be complemented by adequate support structures and service provision (Johnston, 2021^[13]; 2021^[15]). More specifically, the NESC has proposed introducing a two-tier child income support (rather than the current system described above), which would comprise of a universal child benefit paid in respect of all children with an automatic supplement payable in respects of children whose families are in receipt of a social welfare payment or in low-paid employment. As child income support would be automatic and income-related, it would likely make it easier for people to move from welfare to work without worsening the level of support, in most cases. The focus here is on smoothing the transition from welfare to work or education and training to work, thus encouraging people to make this transition without the uncertainty of possibly losing child income support. In addition, the approach could address many of the difficulties associated with the current system, such as take-up of WFP, and the exclusion from WFP of self-employed workers and those in temporary or low hours work hour contracts.

Evidence on access to childcare and incentivising parental employment

High childcare costs can act as a disincentive to parental employment, especially for families on low incomes, with a large family size, and for lone parents. There are two studies using GUI data that look at the effect of access to childcare for younger children on maternal employment. There are no available studies looking at how access to school-age childcare affects parental employment.

The earlier of these studies by (McGinnity, 2013^[50]) looks at the characteristics of mothers taking up employment before their infant is nine months old and what type of employment they are engaged in. At time of this study, the vast majority of parents of children up to about three and a half years of age received no financial support for childcare. The study uses multinomial logistic regression models to estimate the timing of the return to work and mothers' characteristics, child factors and neighbourhood characteristics. Highly educated mothers are more likely to return to work than low-educated mothers, but only when paid maternity leave had ended. Early returnees (before six months) are more likely to be self-employed, young, or lone parents, while those returning in 8-9 months are more likely to be educated, older, Irish and a mother living in a couple. Mothers of three or more children are much more likely to have been out of the labour market prior to childbirth, and their employment rates at nine months are lower than those with one or two children. Use of non-parental childcare for infants at nine months is closely related to mothers' employment. Even accounting for this, family income also played a salient role, with higher-income families more likely to use childcare. Infants from larger families are also less likely to be in non-parental care, also likely to be cost related (McGinnity, 2013^[50]).

The later study by (Russel, 2018^[51]) examines whether childcare costs at age three, before children are eligible for the free ECCE scheme, made a difference to maternal employment at the time and also two years later. The study uses logistic regression and liner regression model. It finds that there is considerable fluidity in maternal employment in the early years after the birth of a child. The cost of care is associated with a small reduction in hours of paid work; however, the negative effect for lower income households is larger, suggesting that childcare costs is a stronger barrier for low-income families' workforce participation. In addition, the study underlines that a lack affordable childcare poses financial difficulty for many middle-income families with multiple children, and for low income and lone parent families is a significant barrier to employment. Limitations of this study is that it only captures childcare costs of the three-year old Study Child and not of any other children in the household, nor does it account for regional variations in childcare costs.

Evidence on impact of policy measures to promote access to key services to mitigate child poverty

Ireland pursues various policy measures aimed at improving children and their families' access to basic services. Ensuring that children from poor families have access to key services is an important lever to limit the negative repercussions that growing up in poverty has on child outcomes (Guio, Marlier and Frazer, 2020^[44]). There is evidence from the Irish context that the impact of poverty differs depending on the county where children and families live, because of differences in the availability and cost of local services (NESC, 2020^[14]; McGauran, 2021^[52]). Yet, statistical measures of child poverty (or economic vulnerability) do not reflect well this fact. Depending on where a family lives, a low income may be partially compensated by the provision of low-priced services.

Access to parenting and family support programmes and impact of policy measures

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 7, Ireland has undertaken several initiatives over the past decade to enhance the provision of prevention and early intervention services for children and families. Most notable of these initiatives are the establishment of Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) pillar in 2016 and DCEDIY's Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services in 2022. Though both initiatives aim to support all types of families, families living in poverty are assumed to be a key beneficiary group given the negative effect that poverty can have on parenting, family functioning and child outcomes.

Tusla's PPFS pillar contains several approaches to offering children and families early support. Among them is providing family supports through a wraparound approach and providing parenting programmes through local Family Resource Centres and the early intervention practice model Meitheal (Rodriguez, 2018^[53]). Another is the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, which takes an area-based approach to breaking the cycle of child poverty. The ABC Programme operates in 12 areas of high deprivation where children's outcomes are significantly poorer. Each ABC area designs their own programme of evidence-based/evidence-informed interventions and services to meet local needs within the broad parameters of the ABC Programmes design. The chosen interventions must target child development, child well-being, parenting and educational disadvantage. Examples of interventions delivered include parenting programmes and supporting the implementation of interventions in early childhood settings. DCEDIY's Supporting Parents sets out 23 actions to facilitate greater access, information, and inclusion of parenting support services (DCEDIY, 2022^[54]).

Existing evaluations

Two key evaluations exist, both prepared by the Centre for Effective Services,¹¹ that provide evaluative information on parenting and family support programmes in Ireland. The first is On the Right Track series, which covers individual evaluations of programmes ran under the PEIP initiative.¹² The second is the National Evaluation of the ABC Programme, which evaluates under one framework 12 ABC areas. Beyond these, there are several other valuable documents providing evidence of the impact of key parenting and family support programmes, such as the National Teen Parent Support Programme (Quinn and Kazmeirczak-Murray, 2023^[55]), and to inform a national approach to early childhood home visiting (Home Visiting Alliance, 2023^[56]). In addition, What Works recently launched an evidence hub, which provides information on prevention and early intervention programmes that have been evaluated and indicates whether an Irish evaluation exists (Box 6.5).

Box 6.5. What Works: Promoting the use of evidence in children’s services and among practitioners

What Works is a cross-cutting initiative under the DCEDIY and funded through the Dormant Accounts Fund, which aims to embed and enhance prevention and early intervention in child and young people policy, service provision and practice. What Works has four strands of focus: i) data to improve access and use of data and information by aligning and developing what current exists; ii) evidence to actively supports the use of learning from prevention and early intervention initiatives and research; iii) professional development and capacity building to enhance the capacity and skills development of policymakers, providers and practitioners in the appraisal and application of evidence informed approaches; and to iv) align, enhance and sustain quality in prevention and early intervention as it relates to the development and delivery of policy, provision and practice.

What Works recently launched an evidence hub, which provides information on prevention and early intervention programmes that have been evaluated. The evidence hub is the first tool of its kind in Ireland and was developed in conjunction with What Works for Early Intervention and Children’s Social Care (now renamed to *Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families*). Featured programmes are listed under the 5 National Outcomes for Children and Young People developed under Better Outcome, Brighter Futures. Of the 123 programmes included in the evidence hub, 56 are currently provided in Ireland and most have been evaluated in the Irish context.

Source: What Works: Sharing Knowledge, Improving Children’s Futures. <https://whatworks.gov.ie/>.

The Right on Track series is a best-evidence synthesis of the learning available from individual evaluations of programmes that were implemented in Ireland under the PEII initiative from 2004 to 2016. Information was derived from implementation reports and process evaluations. The series includes reports on impact on parent outcomes, child behaviour, child learning, child health, inclusion and diversity, and leadership. The reports draw from different evaluation. For example, the report on children’s outcomes drew on 14 evaluations, ten of which were based on randomised control trials (Statham, 2013^[57]). Learning from this initiative was used to inform the design of the ABC Programme.

The ABC Programme evaluation covers the period of 2015 to 2017 (O’Riordan, 2018^[58]). This evaluation explored what, if any, contribution the ABC Programme has made to improving outcomes for children and parents, for practitioners and managers, and to improving strategic planning and service delivery, locally and nationally, across the 12 studied areas. The evaluation used a common measurement framework and thus its findings concern the ABC Programme as a whole and did not examine individual interventions or areas. To note, the ABC evaluation captures many of the specific programmes funded under PEII, however its interest is in the impact of the overall national programme. Limitations of this evaluation were the absence of comparison groups to assess observed changes in pre- and post-test data, meaning that any changes observed cannot be attributed with certainty to programme participation. National data was used to locate evaluation findings in trends within the national population. For some measures, there was a considerable drop-off post testing. As data was collected by practitioners, this risks exposure to practitioner bias of perceived changes (O’Riordan, 2018^[58]).

Evidence of impact of parenting and family support programmes on child outcomes

The On the Right Track series finds that the majority of programmes were able to deliver improvements in children’s behaviour compared to a control group. However, improvements were not always statistically

significant, but change was in the right direction. One report is dedicated to summarizing evidence on child behavioural outcomes. It underlines complex findings in relation to children's behavioural outcomes, often showing improvements in some respects but not in others. It notes evaluation quality issues, such as that outcomes assessments often varied depending on who is doing the reporting, for instance, children themselves, or parents and teachers (Statham, 2013^[57]).

The ABC Programme evaluation provides evidence of impact on parenting, children's learning and child health and development. On parenting, it found a statistically significant and desirable decrease in parental stress and improvements in parental self-efficacy. Local and regional stakeholders reported other changes, including increased knowledge and confidence to engage in local services and changes in levels of perceived empowerment. Only a small number of ABC areas evaluated child social emotional development, finding that children had fewer difficulties in terms of their overall social and emotional well-being. It also found evidence of improved parent-child relationships, as self-reported by parents (O'Riordan, 2018^[58]).

Evidence that parenting and family support programmes are being implemented as intended

Both evaluations provide evidence on the acceptability and quality of parenting and family support programmes in the Irish context. The On the Right Track series' main finding was that evidence-based programmes developed elsewhere can be used successfully in Ireland, once adaptations are made which take time and care to get right. Generally, parenting programmes developed outside of Ireland required modifications (Statham, 2013^[57]). The researcher underlined the need for a range of services and programmes to support parents and children in different ways at different points in their lives. The On the Right Track series have evidence of acceptability to parents, which points to the need for good recruitment mechanisms and adaptability to meet parents' needs (Statham, 2013^[57]). Furthermore, the On the Right Track series identified common features of effective implementation (CES, 2019^[59]).

The ABC Programme evaluation finds that implementing the ABC model had resulted in changes in most ABC areas, that included new interventions/services being implemented, existing intervention being adapted and practitioners adopting new or changed approaches or ways of working. Local and regional service providers across the areas were for the most part positive about the ABC Programme and the ways of working that were supported by it. There is evidence that the ABC Programme positively contributed to local strategic and service planning and delivery, but there is less evidence of change at the national level and none of cost effectiveness. The evaluation provides information on what the main barriers and enablers are in this context and outlines learning to be applied to similar initiatives in the future (O'Riordan, 2018^[58]).

Evidence gaps

The wide range of evidence available on parenting and family support programmes in the Irish context highlights their benefits for socio-economically disadvantaged children. A key challenge to moving policy forward is to ensure that the evidence that is collected can inform the process of replicating and scaling up of effective programmes so that all children who stand to benefit have access. This raises a number of questions regarding the development of an evidence base that can support this process. These questions have been explored, for example, in the report on the Feasibility of Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland (Home Visiting Alliance, 2023^[56]), but also apply to expanding other types of parenting and family support services (DCEDIY, 2022^[54]).

A first requirement for developing the necessary evidence is to agree on a national definition of 'evidence based' interventions, which concerns practice rather than focusing on programmes themselves, in order to identify those that work and have the potential to be adapted to other contexts. The aim is not to define a fixed set of good practices, but to leave room for innovation and adaptation, as long as these aspects are included in the evaluation of practices. Such an approach aims to reflect the complex way services

and programmes are implemented and to ensure that programmes are innovative and responsive to new emerging research and population-level needs.

Developing the evidence needed for policy monitoring requires supporting local data collection based on national standards and common data collection instruments, and with processes put in place to ensure accurate real-time data collection at a local level. Common data collection instruments would be particularly welcomed in the area of parenting supports where detailed metrics on outputs and outcomes are recorded for some individual services (e.g. the Teen Parents Support Programme), but are not collected for other types of parenting supports (DCEDIY, 2022^[54]). There is a general lack of data on the demand for, availability of, outputs and outcomes of parenting support services. These data gaps mean it is difficult to compare the level of need with the level of funding, types of services, and quantity of parenting supports available across different areas. Finally, as suggested by the Home Visiting Alliance (2023^[56]), the development of evidence could be supported with the creation of a centralised national office reporting to a cross-departmental policy structure, with one of its role being to collect and collate data on parenting and family support services at national level to inform national policies with evidence on local needs and adaptation of services to best meet those needs and conditions.

Access to healthy nutrition and impact of school meals provision

Barnardos conducts an annual parent survey on food poverty and food affordability, which highlight issues around a high number of parents cutting back on other essentials to afford food. Studies using GUI data provide evidence on how the quality of children's nutrition varies by socio-economic status as does the prevalence rate of childhood overweight and obesity (ESRI, 2018^[60]; McNamara et al., n.d.^[61]). For example, the rate of overweight among 17/18-year-olds is higher among the lowest income quintile than in the highest, 29% compared to 22%. Young women are also more likely to be overweight or obese compared to young men (30% versus 25%) (McNamara, 2020^[62]). At age 20, the rate of young people who are not overweight jumped, from 73% at age 17/18 to 63% while the gap by top and bottom income quintiles had narrowed significantly (O'Mahoney, 2021^[63]).

In order to promote access to healthy nutrition for children at risk of or living in poverty, Ireland has committed in the country's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan to improving the availability of healthy meals each school day. Ireland has no universal school meals provision and instead has two targeted programmes to provide regular access to nutritious food to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first, the Department of Social Protection-funded School Meals Programme (SMP) was established in its current form in 2003 and allows DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools to apply for funding to provide children, through a supplier of the school's choice, with breakfast, lunch, both hot and cold, and afterschool snacks. A Hot Meals pilot was introduced in 2019 in primary schools without onsite cooking facilities to gauge the efficacy of providing hot school meals in primary schools. The pilot has since been expanded. School must ensure that all meals provided meet the basic nutritional standards set out in Healthy Ireland Framework documents. The second programme, the smaller scale 'Meals Grants' is funded by the DCEDIY and provides full or partial funding to 150 beneficiary service providers in early learning and care and school age childcare settings for some or all children attending their services.

Existing evaluations

The Department of Social Protection published two recent commissioned evaluations of the SMP. The first evaluation concerns only the Hot Meals pilot, while the second and the more extensive covers the entire SMP programme and looks again at the impact of the Hot Meals provision. The SMP's objective is to provide regular, nutritious foods to children, who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided. The SMP's underlying assumption is that school meal provision will improve children's daily diet, achieve better school attendance, and increase educational attainment.

The first evaluation was based on an online survey administered to parents, teachers and principals and qualitative one-to-one interviews with a small number of providers of various sizes and in different locations of Ireland. This evaluation did not collect the views of children on their experience of the Hot Meals provision (B&A, 2020^[64]). The second evaluation was based on a multi-method approach that combines desk research and qualitative and quantitative methods. The evaluation sought to answer, among other things, whether the current SMP is effective, what are the implications of extending the scheme to non-DEIS schools, and the impact of the SMP on child school attendance and educational achievement and on food poverty/and improved deprivation measures among families of beneficiary children (RSM Ireland, 2022^[65]).

DCEDIY published an evaluation of the Meals Grant in 2022. The purpose of this evaluation was to evaluate the implementation of the scheme and the impact of the scheme on service providers and to determine a focus for future funding. This evaluation was based on a survey administered by the DECEIY to service providers. The survey contained open-ended questions that were analysed qualitatively using the method of thematic analysis (DCEDIY, 2022^[66]).

Evidence of impact on school meal provision on child outcomes

Both evaluations of the SMP provide qualitative evidence on programme impact on a select number of child outcomes only, while the evaluation of the Meals Grants does not focus strongly on impact on child outcomes. For example, the first SMP evaluation provides information on parents and teachers' perceptions of the impact of provision on child's school attendance, physical health and psychological well-being, diet, behaviour, and attentiveness. The second SMP evaluation provides similar qualitative evidence from teachers and parents on programme impact on child outcomes, such as school attendance, behaviour management, concentration in class, physical and mental health, and attitudes towards healthier eating. Importantly, the second evaluation provides no evidence on impact on academic grades. The researchers outlined that since a positive impact has been found from school meal programmes in countries similar to Ireland, similar could be expected to be true in the Irish context.

The second SMP evaluation does not directly measure food poverty, but instead provides qualitative evidence of 'reduced' food poverty. The researchers underline that any claims that the evaluation can make about alleviating food poverty are generally limited. To provide quantitative evidence of SMP's impact, the researchers suggest that a longitudinal study is needed focusing on better diets, better attendance, and better educational attainment. The evaluation of the Meals Grant provides only minor information on the scheme's impact on a small number of child outcomes, specifically healthy eating habits and some enhanced opportunities for children to develop social and personal skills.

Evidence that school meal provision is being implemented as intended

Overall, there is a variety of evidence to inform on whether school meals provision is being implemented as intended. All three evaluations look at quality and acceptability of provision to schools or service providers. The two SMP evaluations also consider to parents too but only the second evaluation includes to beneficiary children.

All three evaluations provide positive evidence on the quality and acceptability of provision. Both SMP evaluations provide evidence on the quality of food, including portion sizes and meal personalisation. The Meals Grant evaluation identified providing children with a range of high quality and nutritious hot meals and snacks as the most positive aspect of the Scheme. All of the evaluations provide evidence raising concerns for the sustainability of provision, particularly issues for suppliers. For example, the larger SMP evaluation provides evidence on how the relative flexibility of the programme allows issues to be resolved from the bottom up but found that across the board rates are too low and there are inconsistencies in rates.

While the Meals Grant evaluation flagged issues over the inadequacy of funding, it lacked an objective analysis of the funding impact, as service providers were asked to assess this impact based on their own subjective experiences. Service providers may have been somewhat biased in their responses in anticipation of future funding.

Both SMP evaluations consider the feasibility of programme expansion. The second evaluation provides evidence showing significant support among stakeholders to expand, both school numbers and scope of programme. However, this evaluation does not include consultations with non-DEIS schools to test interest and willingness to participate. It offers recommendation on how coverage could be expanded, suggesting expansion on a ‘needs must’ basis. Of particular relevance here is evidence from the first SMP evaluation on the acceptability of Hot Meals provision by parents whose children are attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools, and towards targeted versus school-wide availability of Hot Meals provision. This comparison reveals that parents whose children are in DEIS school and hence more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more positive about the value of this provision, while teachers in DEIS schools are more likely to think that provision should be targeted to the most in need.

Main evidence gaps

There is a need to provide better evidence on the impact of provision on achieving its ultimate objective, that is, ensuring that children, regardless of their background, can take full advantage of their education. Both SMP evaluations provide some indication that school meals provision has a positive influence on school attendance, concentration, and behaviour, which are mediators for increasing school performance, but this needs to be further explored.

Moreover, there is a need to develop evidence on the longer-term impact of school meals provision on children’s diets and dietary habits. Developing measures of children’s dietary intake and habits is tricky. Children younger than age eight lack the cognitive abilities required to self-report food intake, while adolescents’ willingness to report may be hindered by issues of motivation and body images (Livingstone and Robson, 2000^[67]). This would also help inform the effect of the associated nutritional standards guidelines and of changes to provision.

Finally, there are a number of options for tracking progress at aggregate level when reporting progress on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee:

- a separate indicator on food deprivation to help tracking the issue. The CYP Indicator Set has no indicator on children experiencing food deprivation. The Indicator Set contains one global indicator on “deprivation” (see Section 2), which nutrition-wise captures eating a meal with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day and having a roast joint or its equivalent once a week. However, a child could be considered deprived under this indicator without necessarily experiencing food deprivation. It would be reasonable to expect that full scale implementation of the SMP would reduce the number of children experiencing food deprivation.
- indicators on outcomes directly influenced by the provision of school meals, as identified by the impact evaluation, such as concentration and school attendance, and the relationship with children missing meals. HBSC collects data on children arriving at school hungry or going to be hungry because of there not being enough food at home. PISA has an indicator on whether students skip breakfast or dinner and the frequency, making it possible to explore these issues if these questions are maintained in future survey waves.

Cost of access to healthcare and impact of free GP visiting

Historically, free access to health care for children has been means tested in Ireland, with exceptions made for certain medical conditions (such as cancer) or being in receipt of domiciliary care allowance. Households are eligible for a Medical Card, which provides free GP care, in-patient hospital services,

dental, optical, and aural services, and some personal and social care services if they earn under a certain income threshold. Around 27% of 0-24 year olds have a Medical Card (HSE, 2021^[68]; HSE, 2023^[69]). Families just above the income threshold for access to a medical card can face difficulties covering costs of medical care (Reilly, 2023^[70]). GUI data shows that household income is an important determinant of GP visiting for children without a full medical or GP card (Nolan, 2017^[71]).

Ireland has committed in its European Child Guarantee National Action Plan to removing financial barriers to accessing healthcare for more children. Among the policy measures identified is the expansion of free General Practitioner (GP) Care and child-related services for children aged 12 years and under. In 2015, Ireland introduced free GP care for children under six years of age, which includes two periodic wellness checks for children at ages two and five years. This policy reform is part of Ireland's transition from a mixed public and privately funded system to a system of universal health care (Burke et al., 2018^[72]). Recently, coverage has been expanded to six- and seven-year-olds.

Existing evaluations

There is no one outright evaluation of the impact of government's effort to remove financial barriers for children accessing health care, in particular, the 2015 policy of introducing free GP care for under sixes. There are a number of small studies looking at how different coverage levels, or in other words cost, affect children's attendance rate at the GP. No evaluations that were reviewed considered child health and development.

Evidence of impact of policy on child outcomes

An ESRI study looked at the impact of the 2015 policy of introducing free GP visiting for under sixes on visits to Emergency Departments (ED) and whether it reduced the affected group's (0-5 years) ED visits relative to the older age group (7-15 years), and led to an increase in GP referrals to ED for the affected group (Walsh, 2019^[73]). The study found that free GP visiting doubled the total number of children eligible for free GP care, with high uptake by GPs to the scheme.

This study used data from the Patient Experience Time dataset, which is a large administrative dataset covering over 400,000 ED visits by children between January 2015 and June 2016 in Irish public hospitals with Tier 1 (operating 24/7) EDs. These data include information on age and sex of the attendee, and the time of day, day of week, and hospital of the visit, as well as the mode of referral and referral type of the ED visit. The researchers applied a difference-in-differences statistical method to compare how ED visits changed for the group targeted by the introduction free GP visiting (children aged 0-5 years) compared to a group (children aged 7-15 years) who were not directly affected by the policy change. The study found that the introduction of free GP care to all under 6s did not impact their visits to public hospital EDs, but referrals from a GP to EDs increased by a small extent. The researchers suggested that the latter finding may indicate increased pressure placed on GPs because of additional demand for care. There is evidence of a larger increase in GP referral rates for under 6s at the weekend, when Out of Hours GP care is more common. These results are consistent across geographic regions. A limitation of this study is the unavailability of data on attendances to private emergency or medical clinic to capture under sixes who were covered by private health insurance and for whom engagement with ED may be less influenced by cost of a GP visit (Walsh, 2019^[73]).

A further study assessed the impact of the 2015 policy on attendances to daytime and out-of-hours (OOH) GP care showing a significant increase in uptake (McDonnell et al., 2022^[74]). The study applied a difference-in-differences analysis to visit records of over a period of five years, two years of which were pre-policy, for two groups, 0-5 who were affected by the policy and 7-15 years who were not. The study found that attendances at daytime GP by children aged under-six increased substantially by 20%–21% in the three years following the introduction of the policy, largely explained by an increase in the number of patients attending (17.4%–18.6%). Of children aged under-six attending pre-policy, 14.9%–15.8% had

greater than six visits annually, increasing to 18.5%–20.3% post-policy. OOH GP attendance also increased by 20.5%–29.4% over the same period (McDonnell et al., 2022^[74]).

This study could only extract data from daytime GP visit record by year of birth, which excluded children from the model in the year they turned six. However, effects estimated the inclusion of children turning six in the treatment cohort were comparable with effects estimated when these children were included in the comparison cohort and statistical significance remained unchanged throughout. A limitation of this study is the absence of diagnosis codes from OOHs and the extent of missing data in daytime GP records, which prevented the impact of the policy on reason for attendance from being assessed. Similarly, severity of presenting illness is not recorded preventing differences in the urgency of presentations from being determined (McDonnell et al., 2022^[74]).

Evidence that policy is being implemented as intended

One qualitative study explores the impact the 2015 policy on GP service provision from the perspective of GPs themselves (McCombe et al., 2019^[75]). It uses semi-structured interviews based on purposive sampling, which recruited a small number of GPs who could provide important information relevant to the research questions. The topic guide was informed by two theoretical frameworks, the ‘Behavioural model for health seeking behaviour’ and ‘Implementation Outcomes Framework’¹³. The study highlights an increased workload and activity for most GPs and other healthcare providers in primary care, which required enhanced capacity (especially staff, facilities). In addition, the policy decreased antibiotic prescribing as the removal of fee reduced parents’ expectations here.

The reviewed evaluations suggest that free access to GPs has had the desired effect on uptake. The question remains as to whether, when fully implemented, this policy will meet the overall need for GP consultations because of capacity issues and address children’s healthcare needs in a timely fashion. However, Ireland’s current data systems, particularly in primary care, make assessing the impact of health initiatives challenging. For instance, the absence of a national platform for collating GP patient-level data presents a challenge to health researchers and requires the commitment of GP and research resources to supporting individual research studies (McDonnell, 2022^[76]).

One way to document progress on this dimension at national level might be to use the information available at regular intervals in the SILC surveys on the number of GP consultations by children, or on the existence of unmet healthcare needs. To document this issue at national level, one possibility may be to use the information available at regular intervals in the SILC surveys on the number of GP consultations by children, and to see whether the gap in the number of visits according to household income has narrowed. The question on the existence of unmet healthcare needs could also be used to examine the extent to which greater access to GP consultations reduces the frequency of unmet needs.

Assessing the “Value for Money” of child poverty reduction and mitigation policies

An important dimension of policy evaluation is to establish whether the results of policies to combat child poverty are commensurate with the amounts of public money invested, and whether these policies should be strengthened or the expenditures re-prioritised across different policy layers. Spending reviews aim to provide an in-depth assessment of existing public expenditure in order to identify opportunities to reduce or redirect spending from low-priority, inefficient, or ineffective spending. They offer a systematic approach to ensuring that spending is aligned with the government’s policy priorities, is effective in achieving its intended objectives, and is deployed efficiently. These evaluations can be carried out at the level of each programme, or at the aggregate level of the total investment.

In order to be able to carry out such evaluations, it is necessary to have good quality information on spending and how it has been rolled out, if possible, to link this information to outcomes. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has a series of spending reviews, which document the first part of the equation, namely the expenditures on different programmes and measures and what has been delivered. Each year, spending reviews are carried out on specific areas, with an analysis of policy outputs, cost drivers and a focus on possible expenditure re-prioritisation.¹⁴

Existing evidence

Only a few spending reviews have looked at family living standards and government spending to support children and families. These reviews are variable in nature, but nonetheless are an important resource for identifying weaknesses in the income support system and gaps in the evidence base. For instance, a 2010 review looked at trends in spending on child income support and their determinants (demographic and by type of expenditure) (Department of Social Protection, 2010_[19]) (Box 6.2). It also examined the evolution of the Child Benefit payment against a number of relevant indicators and found that the payment level increased significantly both in real and relative terms. However, the review pointed out a limit in the extent to which the adequacy of income support could be objectively assessed due to a lack of clear policy targets on how much assistance should be provided.

The processes that need to be put in place in order ensure 'Value for Money' from programmes can also be discussed in Spending Reviews. For example, the review of Family Support Services (2022_[77]) clearly highlights the considerable progress made by Tusla in recent years in transitioning from a 'grant writing' model to a commissioning-based service model. This transition has helped improve needs-based assessments, transparency in resource allocation, and remove duplication and resource gaps. The drafting and implementation of local area Commissioning Plans to ensure that policy goals are achieved is seen as a key component of the commissioning model, since these plans should summarise local area needs and provision, identify priorities, and provide evidence to inform decision-making processes.

The information that needs to be collected to enable a better evaluation of policy outputs is also occasionally documented by Spending Reviews. For instance, the review on Family Support Services (FSS) highlights that a clearer understanding of FSS activities (i.e., outputs) is necessary to determine the value for money of Tusla expenditure on FSS (DCDEIY, 2022_[77]). This review suggested that the reporting on service providers' activities services in Quarterly Performance and Activity Reports would benefit from a clearer definition and categorisation of activity content of the different branch of activities. Equally important is the adoption of a clear definition of what constitutes one 'unit' of FSS provided, so that the true quantum of family support behind the number of children who receive FSS in a year could be measured. Currently, the metric of one 'child in receipt of FSS' could mean a once-off visit or a weeks-long treatment programme. Defining a unit of service could make commensurate these variables of time and resource commitments and how service need interacts with cost.

Most recently, DCEDIY conducted a pilot on the expenditures on children in 2019 made by DCEDIY (Collins et al., 2022_[78]). The aim of the pilot was to introduce a methodology that could be improved and repeated in the future to estimate the amount of public expenditure benefiting children, whether they are the direct or indirect target of expenditures. The proposed methodology is a major step forward in providing more reliable estimates of spending that benefits children, but the next step is to better connect this information on aggregate spending with budget decisions and the discussion around policy priorities and targets.

Spending Reviews as a tool to monitor child poverty reduction and mitigation policies

A greater harmonisation and standardisation of the scope and key issues to be documented in spending reviews could contribute to strengthen their role in the assessment of the value for money of policies

(Doherty and Sayegh, 2022^[79]). This would require, for example, a more systematic discussion of how budget allocation mechanisms can be improved to make budget decisions more efficient, the indicators of policy outputs to be reported, and an analysis of cost drivers. Potentially, spending reviews could include a review of existing evidence on the impact of policies on population outcomes, including child outcomes, as a step towards making them a more powerful tool for assessing the value for money of policies. Where the objective of a spending review is to achieve better value for money, setting clear objectives of saving or efficiency targets can help set the level of ambition for the review (Doherty and Sayegh, 2022^[79]). For example, review teams could be required to develop a certain number of options or to propose alternative approaches for raising spending effectiveness or improving policy outcomes.

Embedding Spending Reviews into Value for Money Assessment processes can be a way to align these reviews with what is needed to inform budget decisions and the monitoring of policy implementation more broadly (Box 6.6). This requires the definition of evaluation criteria and associated indicators to assess the implementation of policies, from resource use to measuring short- and long-term impact. Broadly speaking, these criteria fall into three key groups:

- The resource use ('what did we put in, and how was it used?'), which involves evaluating programmes' relevance (i.e., the extent to which the intervention objectives and design respond to beneficiaries and partners' needs and priorities, and continue to do so if circumstances change), as well as its coherence (the compatibility of the intervention with other interventions). It implies also assessing the efficiency of spending to generate policy outputs;
- Value derived from the resource use ('what did we get out?'), which is about assessing policy effectiveness, the extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve its objectives. It implies assessing the impact of policy outputs on child poverty and other outcomes, including any differential results across groups;
- Whether the value derived justifies the resource use ('was it worth it?'), which is about assessing the cost-effectiveness of a programme (i.e., whether the impact on poverty reduction exceeds the cost) and assessing at a higher level what difference the intervention when long-term, potentially unintended effects, and alternative uses of public spending are considered.

It is worth noting that such assessment required a 'mixed methods' evaluation that combines different methods, data sources and combines quantitative and qualitative indicators in order to arrive at a richer and more nuanced understanding than might be achieved through the use of a single method alone (Allan and King, 2018^[80]; Barr and Christie, 2014^[81]). Indicator-based measurement makes a valuable contribution to evaluating programme performance, but they may be insufficient to support well-reasoned evaluative judgements about a complex programme. Broader contextual evidence is also important to provide further information about performance and support appropriate interpretation of the indicators.

Box 6.6. The Value for Money Framework

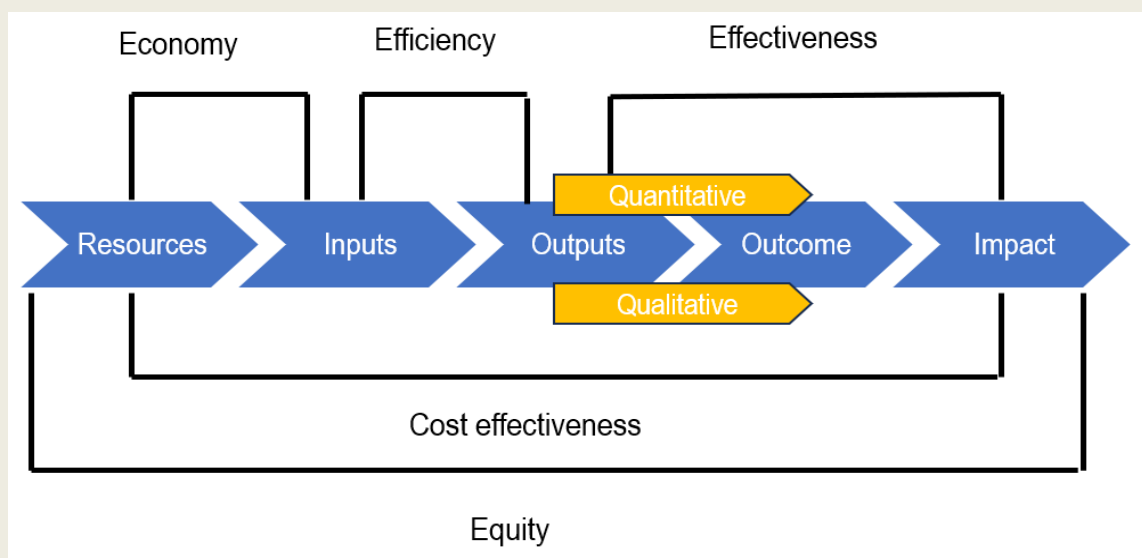
In general terms, VfM framework is set to answer an evaluative question about how well resources are used, and whether they are being used well enough (Allan and King, 2018^[80]; Barr and Christie, 2014^[81]; DfT, 2015^[82]). It requires a judgement to be made based on a chain of evidence and using a transparent process of reasoning. Although there is no universal definition of VfM, governmental organisations have used a range of working definitions that tend to emphasise minimising wastage, delivering outputs, achieving outcomes, improving equity, and/or maximising outcomes for a given cost.

The need to consider VfM arises because, when resources are invested in a particular policy, programme, or intervention, the opportunity to use those resources in another way is foregone. Good VfM assessment can also support organisations to work effectively by helping to clarify and communicate the value of their work, and by providing insights to support learning and improvement.

Consequently, choices need to be made in resource allocation – with a 'good' allocation being one that compares favourably to its next-best alternative, considering a series of criteria to assess programmes' performance.

A five “Es” approach to VfM assessment is common currency. Each “E” refers to criteria to be considered for assessing a programme performance throughout the implementation of a programme or policy, as highlighted in the Figure below:

Figure 6.1. The five “Es” framework



DFID (2011^[83]) defines these criteria as follows.

- **Economy:** Are we buying inputs of the appropriate quality at the right price? (Inputs are things such as staff, consultants, raw materials, and capital that are used to produce outputs). It looks at opportunities to spend less by minimising the cost of resources used or required (inputs);
- **Efficiency:** How well do we convert inputs into outputs? Therefore, it looks at the relationship between the output from goods or services and the resources to produce them – spending well;
- **Effectiveness:** How well are the outputs from an intervention achieving the desired outcome on poverty reduction? Here the assessment is on the relationship between the intended and actual results of public spending (outcomes) – spending wisely;
- **Equity:** It looks at the extent to which services are available to and reach all people that they are intended to – spending fairly. Some people may receive differing levels of service for reasons other than differences in their levels of need;
- A final “**Cost-Effectiveness**” criteria: How much impact on poverty reduction does an intervention achieve relative to the inputs that we invest in it?

'Cost-effectiveness' traditionally measures the ratio between a single outcome indicator, measured in natural or physical units (e.g. lives saved), and monetary programme costs. In VfM assessment, however, a broader interpretation is needed: the 'cost-effectiveness' criterion addresses whether the programme creates more value than it consumes, or whether sufficient outcomes or impacts are achieved to justify the investment of resources. 'Value created' potentially includes both tangible (monetary or readily monetisable) and intangible value (outcomes or impacts that are difficult to value credibly in monetary terms).

Although they are expressed differently, these criteria are close to those highlighted by the OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation (EvalNet) which has defined six evaluation criteria – relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

Source: DFID (2011^[83]), DFID's Approach to Value for Money.

Conclusion

Ireland has the benefit of a broad range of available evaluations, analyses and statistical measures on child poverty trends and drivers, and on the impact of policy measures on child poverty reduction and child outcomes. Nevertheless, key evidence gaps exist that are pertinent to monitoring the European Child Guarantee and Ireland's national efforts to reduce child poverty and its impact on child living standards and well-being. To note, Ireland uses data from the Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) survey to track child poverty. An obvious limitation of SILC is, as a household survey, its exclusion of child populations that are known to have a higher risk of poverty, such as children in homeless families and in the international protection system. Ireland publishes annual statistics on child relative income poverty and consistent poverty (which combines information on income poverty and material deprivation) to track child poverty. These statistical measures could be enriched further through age disaggregation to capture the effect a child's age has on poverty risk. Including an indicator to measure the persistence of poverty over time in policy monitoring would help to better inform how successful policies are for children at high poverty risk. Tracking trends in child and family poverty both before and after housing costs helps distinguish between the need for support to cover children's housing expenses and other costs. It is crucial that this detailed information, which can be derived from official statistics, is integrated into the data used to guide the policies implemented as part of the new Young Ireland strategy.

Ireland has scope to improve the evidence on children's living standards. Indicators on child poverty rate after housing costs would inform on the impact of housing affordability and housing assistance and highlight the high exposure to poverty of children in lone parent households. An indicator on the child poverty rate using an anchored poverty line would inform on changes to the absolute number of children living in poverty. The addition of an indicator on child-specific material deprivation would inform on supports needed to address the unique ways poverty limits children's access to basic goods and services.

Ireland has good (but not up to date) evidence on the work (dis)incentives created by the social welfare system and income support issues that arise as parents make the transition back to work, with solutions proposed and the respective implications considered. There is good evidence available on the impact of the main parenting support initiatives, showing that evidence-based programmes developed elsewhere can be successfully implemented in Ireland and afford benefits to socio-economically disadvantaged children. The What Works initiative provides an infrastructure for further advancing the evidence of parenting supports in Ireland. For policy monitoring, local data collection based on national standards and common data collection instruments could be supported and processes put in place to ensure accurate real-time data collection at a local level.

Ireland has good evidence documenting the relationship between children's socio-economic background and the quality of nutrition. For policy monitoring, it would be practical to have a standalone indicator on food deprivation and relevant indicators exploring the effect school meals provision (or lack thereof) on school performance. There are no evaluations on impact of free visiting on child health and development, but there is evidence to suggest a likely positive effect. Conducting impact evaluations could help getting a greater grasp of the extent to which free GP visits help tackle financial barriers to accessing health care and meet children's health. Additionally, indicators on GP visits and main reasons unmet health need, as

for instance reported in EU-SILC child health data, would help further understand the financial barriers to accessing health care.

Finally, significant efforts are underway to estimate the budgetary resources benefiting children. It is crucial to consider how this information can be effectively integrated into the decision-making process for budget allocation.

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Notes

¹ The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) was established in 1973 and advises the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development in Ireland. The members of the Council are appointed by the Taoiseach for a three-to-five-year term. These members are representatives of business and employers' organisations, trade unions, agricultural and farming organisations, community and voluntary organisations, and environmental organisations, as well as heads of Government departments and independent experts. The composition of the NESC Council means that it plays an important role in bringing different perspectives from civil society together with Government.

² In order to account for differences in household composition, household income is adjusted by equivalence scales that assign a different 'weight' to household members. The weight is intended to take account of the greater needs of larger households while also taking account of the economies of scale associated with living together. Equivalence scales generally assign a lower weight to children under age 14.

³ The 11 items to measure material deprivation are: 1. Without heating at some stage in the last year, 2. Unable to afford a morning, afternoon or evening out in last fortnight, 3. Unable to afford two pairs of strong shoes, 4. Unable to afford a roast once a week, 5. Unable to afford a meal with meat chicken or fish every second day, 6. Unable to afford new (not second-hand) clothes, 7. Unable to afford a warm waterproof coat, 8. Unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm, 9. Unable to afford to replace any worn out furniture, 10. Unable to afford to have family or friends for a drink or a meal once a month, 11. Unable to afford to buy presents for family or friends at least once a year.

⁴ It is worth noting that some of the variation in poverty measures by age of child may be because in adjusting for household size and composition, a greater weight is given to children aged 14 and over. That is, in adjusting for household size and composition (the equivalence scale), a higher weight is given to children aged 14 and over, which means that a household with children over age 14 would need to have a higher total income than a household where the children are under 14 in order to be at the same equivalised income level and to be considered as non-income poor. However, this assumption does not distort patterns for the pre-school and primary school groups, as they each use the same equivalence rate (Byrne and Treanor, 2020^[27]).

⁵ Social Justice Ireland (2023) also recently advocated for consistent poverty to be replaced by 'persistent poverty' as the basis for national targets and that resources be provided to the CSO to support longitudinal data collection.

⁶ The 13 child-specific deprivation items are: unable to afford some new (not second-hand) clothes for children under 16, two pairs of properly fitting shoes in good condition that are suitable for daily activities, to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) at least once a day, to afford fruit and vegetables once a day, a one week holiday away from home, age-appropriate books for children, indoor games (educational baby toys, building blocks, board games, computer games, etc), outdoor leisure equipment (e.g. bicycle, roller skates, etc.), regular leisure activity (e.g. swimming, playing an instrument, youth organisations, etc.), celebrations on special occasions, to invite friends, suitable place to study or do homework, school trips and school events (that cost money).

⁷ 13-year-olds were asked about their experiences of missing out on five key material items (clothes, books, own bed, electronic devices, and a suitable place to study or do homework) and five key experiences (inviting friends over, celebrating their birthday or special events, going on school trips, having a meal out with family, and going on a family holiday at least once a year).

⁸ The complete list of items taken into account to measure children's exposure to material deprivation include information on household's inability to provide at least one child in the family with: some new clothes; two pairs of shoes; fresh fruits & vegetables daily; meat, chicken, fish daily; suitable books; outdoor leisure equipment; indoor games; leisure activities; to organise celebrations; invite friends; participate in school trips; and go on holiday; it also includes non-child-specific information on whether the household cannot afford to: avoid arrears; have adequate warmth in home; have (access to) a car; replace worn-out furniture; access to Internet.

⁹ Working Family Payment (WFP) (formerly known as Family Income Supplement (FIS) is a weekly tax-free payment available to employees with children. It gives extra financial support to people on low pay; The Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) is a scheme for people with children who stop claiming a jobseeker's payment, or a one-parent family payment, because they are in—or are taking up—work or self-employment.

¹⁰ The BTWFD is a weekly payment for up to two years after you start work. For the first year in employment, you are paid the equivalent of any Increase for a Qualified Child that you were getting on your jobseeker's payment or one-parent family payment (up to a maximum of four children). You get half of that amount weekly for the second year.

¹¹ The Centre for Effective Service was established in 2008 and was funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies. It is focused on developing an evidence-informed approach to policy and practice with those working children, families and communities.

¹² The PEII initiative was a funding scheme that supported the evaluation of prevention and early intervention programmes to advance the mainstreaming of evidence-based programmes. Organisations receiving funding were required to rigorously evaluate the programmes they provided.

¹³ For more information on the Behavioural model for health seeking behaviours see (Gelberg, Andersen and Leake, 2000^[85]), and on the Implementation Outcomes Framework see (Proctor et al., 2010^[84]).

¹⁴ Further information on this series of spending review is available here: [gov - The Spending Review \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie).

7 Accountability for child and youth well-being policy in Ireland

This chapter analyses the broader governance arrangements which aim to ensure accountability in the field of child and youth policy outcomes in Ireland. It first provides an overview of the legal frameworks underpinning accountability for child and youth policy in the country. It then looks into the institutional responsibilities, capacities, as well as practices to promote various types of accountability, as identified by the previous national policy framework for children and young people “Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-20”, notably political accountability, inter-departmental and non-governmental accountability, accountability to children and young people, financial accountability and public accountability. It highlights opportunities to strengthen institutional reporting and accountability mechanisms and to embed policy monitoring and evaluation within and across layers of government and the whole of the Irish society for more robust results.

Introduction

Governments have a greater chance to deliver better outcomes for all citizens, including children and young people, if robust accountability mechanisms are in place and underpin their actions. As set forth in the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People, having in place strong oversight and accountability mechanisms is a key element to ensure inclusive policy outcomes across age groups (OECD, 2022^[1]).

The evaluation of impacts of child and youth well-being policies, as well as the provision of robust redress and recourse options are important pillars of a broader set of accountability and oversight mechanisms to deliver better policy outcomes for children and youth. Accountability refers to the responsibility of public institutions to inform citizens and the target groups about decisions affecting them, as well as to provide an account of government activities and performance to achieve objectives as laid out in policy and strategies. Strengthening accountability has many facets and dimensions, such as the capacity of mechanisms and institutions to handle complaints in a fair, timely, and transparent way. It also relies on the scrutiny of a variety of stakeholders, such as parliamentary committees, ombudsperson offices, and internal audit institutions, as well as non-governmental organisations, and expert advisory committees, among others (OECD, 2020^[2]).

This chapter assesses the governance arrangements in place to ensure accountability in the field of child and youth policy in Ireland. It first provides an overview of the legal frameworks to promote accountability for child and youth well-being. It then looks into the institutional responsibilities, capacities, and practices to promote various types of accountability, as identified by Ireland's previous national policy framework for children and young people *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-20*, notably political accountability, inter-departmental and non-governmental accountability, accountability to children and young people, financial accountability, and public accountability (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). By highlighting existing good practices and areas for further improvement, the chapter identifies opportunities to strengthen institutional reporting and accountability mechanisms and to embed policy monitoring and evaluation within and across layers of government and the whole of the Irish society for more robust results¹.

Legal framework pertinent to child and youth well-being in Ireland

In Ireland, a comprehensive legal framework underpins the stated policy objective to improving child and youth well-being. Some of these laws directly address the needs of children and young people, such as child protection laws. Others pertain to specific policy areas like education, primarily geared towards delivering services to children and young people as their target group, although not exclusively. In addition, others focus on policy areas such as health, which is important for groups in society independent of age, but for which children and young people express specific public service needs. The main laws under this definition are highlighted in Box 7.1.

Box 7.1. Laws and other legal instruments related to child and youth well-being in Ireland

- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:** Ireland has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. Therefore, the country has the legal obligation to commit itself to promoting, protecting, and fulfilling the rights of children that are entitled in the Convention.
- **Child Care Act 1991 and Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023:** this act is the primary legislation establishing a legal framework for child care policy in Ireland. It sets out duties for the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection.
- **Children First Act 2015:** this act introduces a legal requirement for professionals and organisations providing services to children to report child protection concerns to the Child and Family Agency. It also establishes an obligation for organisations working with children to publish Child Safeguarding Statements and “put the Children First”.
- **Child and Family Agency Act 2013:** this act establishes the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) as the agency responsible for supporting and promoting the development, welfare, and protection of children. It states that Tusla shall demonstrate high standards in transparency and accountability.
- **Health Acts 2004 and 2007 and the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022:** these acts form the legal framework for the provision of health services, including for children and young people.
- **Mental Health Act 2001:** this act regulates both adult and child psychiatry and involuntary detention for mental health reasons.
- **Children and Family Relationships Act 2015:** this act sets out a legal framework for putting the interest of the child at the primary consideration in all family law matters. It aims to better reflect contemporary family life in Ireland by developing a more inclusive family law on issues such as adoption, guardianship, and custody.
- **National Youth Work Act 2001:** this act sets out the legal framework for the provision of youth work services in Ireland.

Source: (United Nations, 1989^[4]); (Government of Ireland, n.a.^[5]); (Irish Statute Book, 2015^[6]); (Irish Statute Book, 2020^[7]); (Irish Statute Book, 2004^[8]); (Irish Statute Book, 2001^[9]); (Irish Statute Book, 2015^[6]); (Irish Statute Book, 2001^[10]; Office of the Attorney General, 2013^[11]).

This set of laws was adopted to support improvements in child protection and welfare services over the last decades, including quality and accessibility of services for children and families, and to enhance reporting and management of child protection concerns.

In addition, there is an extensive legal framework establishing the mandate and prerogatives of stakeholders exercising scrutiny over child and youth policy in Ireland, notably in the field of children’s rights (see Box 7.2).

Box 7.2. Legal framework establishing mandates and prerogatives of accountability stakeholders in Ireland

Political accountability and accountability through independent oversight institutions

- **Houses of the Oireachtas (Inquiries, Privileges and Procedures) Act 2013:** through this act, the Parliament can set up Committees of Inquiries tasked with examining policy, legislation, or a particular topic. The Committee can seek submissions from experts and interested parties and must report its findings back to the Parliament.
- **Ombudsman for Children Act 2002:** this act sets out the role and powers of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, thus providing a legal basis for the independent oversight exercised by that body. It has the competence to investigate complaints for a defined list of services provided to young people under 18 years by public organisations such as schools, local authorities, the Health Service Executive (HSE), or Tusla.
- **Ombudsman Act 1980 and Ombudsman Amendment Act 2012:** these acts introduce the Ombudsman and define its powers to examine complaints from people on public service provision in Ireland. The Ombudsman cannot investigate in matters that are subject to an investigation by the Ombudsman for Children.
- **Rights Tribunals established by Acts of the Parliament:** several specialised rights tribunals were established in Ireland to provide quick, informal, and inexpensive alternative to the courts system in a specific area of law. Among the tribunals with potential effects on children's rights are, i.e., the International Protection Appeals Tribunal or the Social Welfare Appeals Office.
- **Tribunal of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1924:** according to this act, the Parliament has the power to establish tribunals of inquiry to investigate certain matters of public importance. They are set up with powers to investigate specific matters and to submit a report to the Parliament that may contain recommendations.
- **Commission of Investigation Act 2004:** this act allows for the establishment of Commissions of Investigation to examine a matter of "urgent public concern". The Government can set up a commission based on a proposal by a minister, with the approval of the Minister for Finance. Members are appointed by the Government or a specified minister and shall have the appropriate experience, qualifications, training, or expertise to conduct the concrete investigation. The Parliament must approve a draft of the order establishing the commission.
- **Courts (Establishment and Constitution) Act 1961:** this act and respective amendments establish the present court system in Ireland that allows for the review of public and private acts potentially violating children's rights.
- **Mental Health Act 2001:** this act establishes the Mental Health Commission to promote, encourage and foster the establishment and maintenance of high standards and good practices in the delivery of mental health services.

Financial accountability

- **Comptroller and Auditor-General Act 1923 and Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act, 1993:** according to these acts, the Comptroller and Auditor General is responsible for the audit of accounts across a wide range of state activities, including the central government, funds administered by Government Departments and non-commercial sponsored bodies, health bodies and educational training boards. These acts play an important role in establishing financial accountability mechanisms in Ireland, including with respect to child and youth well-being policies.

Public accountability

- **Freedom of Information Act 2014:** this act gives each individual legal rights to access, amend or delete both personal and non-personal (corporate) records held by a defined list of public bodies or inquire about reason for decisions affecting them made by public bodies. It aims to strengthen public accountability through increasing governmental transparency.
- **Standing Order 111A:** this standing order re-establishes a Joint Committee on Public Petitions of the Parliament. Through petitions, every citizen can raise issues of general public interest with the Parliament that subsequently considers if further action on the matter is required.

Source: (Citizens Information Board, 2023^[12]).

Accountability mechanisms for child and youth policy in Ireland

This section assesses the institutional arrangements, capacities, and practices to ensure accountability in the field of child and youth policy and outcomes in Ireland. The analysis is organised along the five types of accountability identified by Ireland's previous national policy framework for children and young people *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-20*, notably political accountability, inter-departmental and non-governmental accountability, accountability to children and young people, financial accountability, and public accountability (Figure 7.1) (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]).

Figure 7.1. Types of accountability in the field of child and youth policy outcomes in Ireland as classified in BOBF 2014-20



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Political accountability

Effective political accountability requires a robust institutional framework to serve as catalyst for ensuring the implementation and co-ordination of children and youth policy objectives. It necessitates a holistic approach with a clear allocation of mandates and responsibilities across ministerial portfolios and different levels of government, and independent oversight mechanisms. Independent oversight institutions should have statutory independence from the executive and be given sufficient authority and resources to monitor, oversee and promote the implementation of policy initiatives over all of the government (OECD, 2017^[13]) (OECD, 2018^[14]), including with respect to child and youth policy.

Accountability through the government

In a representative democracy, elected politicians and members of the Government are accountable through elections. While voting decisions are made on a wide range of criteria, some voters will be influenced in their decisions, in whole or in part, by the policy outcomes achieved for children and young

people. Various OECD countries have developed implementation plans and established a requirement to review existing child and youth strategies regularly to strengthen government accountability (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023^[15]). Box 7.3 provides more details on such practices in Finland and New Zealand.

Box 7.3. Reporting requirements as a means to increase government accountability

Finland: Securing political commitment to the National Child Strategy beyond government terms

The accountability framework established to underpin the *National Child Strategy* in Finland aims at ensuring consistent and long-term improvements. Every government is obliged to adopt a new implementation plan for the *National Child Strategy* when taking office, to be implemented in cross-administrative collaboration and with a wide range of stakeholders in society and population groups.

This plan has to be linked to selected indicators used to monitor the effectiveness of the policies laid down in the Strategy and the measures implemented during each government term. At the end of each term, the Leading Specialist of the *National Child Strategy* in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (previously: Secretary General, located within the Prime Minister's Office) presents a monitoring report to the Ministerial Working Group for a Sustainable Welfare Society, chaired by the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services and co-chaired by the Minister of Local and Regional Government, and comprising four other ministers (European Affairs and Ownership Steering, Agriculture and Forestry, Social Security, Interior). The report monitors the Strategy and its corresponding implementation plan. It is also used to inform the design of the implementation plan that is developed by the subsequent government by defining possible priorities and thus providing intra and inter-governmental accountability over consecutive government terms.

New Zealand: Setting 3-year and 10-year targets for reducing child poverty

The Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018 requires the government to set, review and report on 10-year and 3-year targets for reducing child poverty, and on a set of child poverty related indicators. By setting 10-year targets requiring the commitment of various subsequent governments, New Zealand intends to facilitate political accountability for addressing child poverty. Additionally, amendments to the Children's Act 2014 require the Minister responsible for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to present an annual report to Parliament on progress made against the outcomes of the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, with contributions provided by various government agencies (departments). The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* outlines how the outcomes will be measured and the monitoring progress.

Sources: (Lapsen Oikeudet, 2021^[16]); (Lapsen Oikeudet, 2023^[17]); (Finnish Government, 2022^[18]); (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019^[19]); (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022^[20]); (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2018^[21]).

In Ireland, Cabinet Committees are established by the Government to assist in carrying out its responsibilities and derive their mandate and prerogatives from it (Government of Ireland, 2023^[22]). With respect to children and youth policies, BOBF 2014-20, the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, and *First 5* were covered by the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy, which was chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and identified social policy as a transversal issue. Membership was inclusive of 12 ministers, including the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. This Committee, renamed to Committee on Social Affairs and Equality under the 32nd Government, was also responsible for exercising oversight of other strategies related to child and youth well-being. With the adoption of *Young Ireland* in November 2023, these functions are now exercised under the 33rd

Government by the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, whose membership includes the Taoiseach, Tánaiste (Ireland's deputy head of government), the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and other 8 ministers (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]). Currently, the Cabinet Committees on Housing, on Health, on Environment and Climate Change, and on Humanitarian Response to Ukraine also oversee relevant work for children and young people (Government of Ireland, 2023^[22]).

The relevant Cabinet Committee for BOBF 2014-20 and related strategies seemed to encompass all Cabinet members, and this may have facilitated policy coherence across sectors and promoted a whole-of-government approach for the advancement of the child and youth well-being agenda in Ireland. At the same time, in view of the competing and multiple priorities of the Taoiseach and ministers responsible for other areas, OECD evidence suggests that it may be difficult to dedicate the necessary level of attention to cross-cutting issues, such as the ones related to child and youth well-being, in all of those thematic committees (OECD, 2008^[24]) (OECD, 2018^[25]). In general, the meetings of Cabinet Committees are preceded by a meeting of the Senior Officials' Group, which is responsible for setting up the agenda and preparing documents for discussion. The Senior Officials' Groups can meet more frequently than the Cabinet Committees and typically have a wider representative base than the Cabinet Committees to facilitate inter-departmental co-ordination.

Not every Minister with a portfolio pertaining to children and young people sits on all the Cabinet Committees that touch upon relevant policies for those age groups. For instance, under the 32nd Government, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth was not participating in the Cabinet Committees on COVID-19, on Health, and on Environment and Climate Change. Similarly, the Minister for Education was not a member in Cabinet Committees on COVID-19, on Environment and Climate Change, and on Accommodation and Supports for Ukrainian Refugees (Government of Ireland, 2023^[26]). Likewise, under the 33rd Government, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth does not participate in the Cabinet Committees on Environment and Climate Change, and on Housing. While this may speed up decision-making thanks to a more targeted involvement of senior officials, and therefore less intense co-ordination and coalition-seeking efforts in a multiparty government, it comes with the risk that the rights and specific needs of children and young people are not sufficiently mainstreamed at the highest political level. Following recommendations by the independent panel on strengthening Civil Service accountability and performance in 2014, the Government established an Accountability Board which was dissolved shortly afterwards and has not met since 2016 for unknown reasons (Government of Ireland, 2022a^[27]). Going forward, it would be beneficial to ensure that, whenever an accountability structure is dissolved, the reasoning behind this decision is comprehensively understood, documented, and shared with relevant stakeholders. This approach would contribute to fostering accountability and facilitating learning.

Regarding the implementation of BOBF 2014-20, stakeholders interviewed by the OECD pointed out that Government Departments and state agencies should have been held more accountable for the commitments assigned to them (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018^[28]). This report of limited accountability across departments and agencies at the political level may have been due to the fact that accountability for the implementation of BOBF 2014-20 was defined for the entire Government rather than in terms of specific accountability for each department.

Finally, Ministers may commission a (non-statutory) inquiry into a matter of public importance. Ministers have also conducted (independent) reviews of the work of government agencies related to child and youth policies, such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2022^[29]).

Accountability through the Parliament (the Oireachtas)

In Ireland, the Oireachtas has several instruments to hold government to account and provide oversight for programmes related to children and young people, including:

- Committee system in the Oireachtas, where Committees are responsible for reviewing government programmes and policies, including those related to children and young people. They can conduct hearings, gather evidence, make recommendations to the government, and have a considerable importance in providing a more detailed examination of draft legislation and executive work on a specific area (see Box 7.4). The Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is responsible for the oversight of the DCEDIY and the State bodies within the responsibility of this Department. It was established by both Houses of the Oireachtas on 24 May 2021 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021^[30]). In 2023, it focused on foster care issues, integrated care, education, and refugee issues and analysed the proposed “Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme Bill 2022”. The Joint Committee also issued a report on Assessments of Need for Children including recommendations, to be followed by a disability capacity review action plan. The reports published by the Committee contain pre-legislative scrutiny of proposed bills with recommendations to the Parliament and DCEDIY (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[31]). However, in general, the Joint Committee appears to operate under limited access to relevant data, which may limit its capacities for conducting thorough reviews. For instance, the Committee demanded the referral and publication of a Data Protection Impact Assessment from DCEDIY, which was not granted (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021^[32]).
- The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is responsible for answering questions of Oireachtas Members on the performance of the department and its agencies. Questions from members of parliament are published online together with the answers provided and appear to be a common instrument of deputies to inquire information from the government on the state of child well-being and implementation of children and youth policies in Ireland. Hereto, they can increase visibility and transparency of government action and challenges (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023^[33]).
- In the past, parliamentary reviews of children and youth policy strategies were conducted in Ireland. For instance, the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus, a cross-party parliamentary group to strengthen women’s rights, petitioned for the Government to introduce measures to mitigate period poverty. As a result, a cross-sectoral Sub-Committee of the National Strategy for Women and Girls Strategy Committee was established and conducted an in-depth review of how the Strategy addresses period poverty (Period Poverty Sub-Committee, 2021^[34]).
- Committees of Inquiry or Tribunals of Inquiry related to children and youth policies have not been created since 1990 (Citizens Information Board, 2023^[35]).
- The Oireachtas has budgetary oversight through the review and approval of the government budget, including for child and youth policies and services (see also Section on financial accountability). The Parliamentary Budget Office supports the Oireachtas and in particular the Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight with financial and budgetary intelligence. As an independent unit within the Houses of the Oireachtas Service, it conducts *ex ante* scrutiny of budgetary matters, e.g., before the budget is adopted by the Oireachtas (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023^[36]). By examining why and how public money is spent for childcare in Ireland and providing suggestions for more efficient use of public resources, it can provide valuable financial oversight on government programmes and policies (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2019^[37]). However, as the Government has a strong role and primacy in budgetary decision-making, there is continuous space to improve the information base for the Oireachtas in this process to strengthen its control functions (OECD, 2016^[38]).
- Public petitions of citizens, introduced in 2012, concerning children and youth-related matters have been discussed by the Oireachtas Committee responsible for public petitions and relevant stakeholders. This mechanism has helped to identify challenges in the implementation of child and

youth policies, such as in debates on financial relief for therapy of autistic children, or via the Annual Reports of the Office of Ombudsman for Children (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023^[39]).

Box 7.4. Oireachtas Committees

In Ireland, parliamentary committees fall into two major categories – departmental and thematic. Oireachtas Departmental committees shadow the work of a government department while thematic committees consider specific topics.

The committees are established by one or both Houses of the Oireachtas and cannot expand the powers allocated to them. Committees have an overall scrutiny function on legislative and executive work related to their area of expertise. They can influence law-making by examining and amending draft legislation, including reviewing draft EU legislative proposals. They also provide advice on policy issues by producing reports based on investigations through stakeholders’ hearings and off-site visits. Reports include findings and recommendations with a view to influencing policy decisions or legislation. Ultimately, committees play an important role to promote government accountability by questioning the respective Ministers on policy, expenditure and governance matters during hearings.

Source: (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021^[40]), “About committees”, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/about-committees/>.

Accountability through independent oversight institutions

In Ireland, a large number of independent bodies and institutions have a role in fostering public accountability in the field of child and youth policy and outcomes, contributing to creating a complex system of relationships that could be streamlined by further defining and clarifying roles and responsibilities of all actors involved.

For example, an important role in ensuring accountability for children’s rights is played by the **Office of the Ombudsman for Children**, an independent statutory office that was established under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (Law Reform Commission of Ireland, n.a.^[41]). The role of the Ombudsman for Children is to promote and safeguard the rights and welfare of children in Ireland by exercising oversight over the policies affecting children and young people under 18 years of age as well as the services provided to them. In fact, it can conduct investigations through research and evidence-gathering and make recommendations to improve policies and practices. It also investigates complaints made by or on behalf of children, related to situations of unfair treatment or potential violations of their rights (Ombudsman for Children, n.a.^[42]). As such, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children frequently conducts general reviews of public institutions implementing child and youth policies in Ireland, such as Tusla or DCEDIY, and handles individual complaints on public services for children (Office of the Ombudsman, 2017^[43]; Office of the Ombudsman, 2022^[44]; Office of the Ombudsman, 2023^[45]). To determine if a complaint is justified, the Ombudsman has the power to request information from public bodies, although there is no obligation on the part of public bodies to provide this information, thus potentially undermining the effectiveness of the Ombudsman’s functions. The Ombudsman for Children reports directly to the Oireachtas and submits annual reports on its activities, which are made public (Irish Statute Book, 2002^[46]). The reports include both the number and nature of received and investigated complaints and recommendations for improving the well-being of children and young people. In addition, the Ombudsman can submit special reports on matters of urgency or special importance on issues linked to child rights and well-being. These reports aim to increase public awareness about issues affecting children in Ireland and can lead to changes in policies or services (e.g., child protection), enhance accountability of officials and bodies, and trigger further investigation by other bodies.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Children is currently funded by the Central Fund – the main accounting fund used by the government of Ireland – through the DCEDIY, which in practice exercises oversight of the Office itself. As highlighted in the Review of the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (Ombudsman for Children, 2022^[47]), the current approach to the funding of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children raises concerns in relation to its independence, considering that it receives its funding from the department which represents the main object of the Office’s scrutiny. Similarly, while the Office of the Ombudsman for Children can recruit its own staff, new positions have to be approved by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, thus potentially limiting the Office’s independence to decide on staffing (Ombudsman for Children, 2022^[47]).

An additional main challenge that the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Ireland faces in carrying out its functions is related to capacity. Stakeholder interviews conducted by the OECD suggest challenges exist due to resource constraints and, to some extent, limited availability of legal, policy, and research expertise. In addition, OECD interviews highlighted that, given the broad mandate of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children focusing on the rights and welfare of children in Ireland, it may be difficult to examine certain issues relating to child protection law and policy in depth.

The Office of the Ombudsman is another independent institution that examines complaints from members of the public against a public body. It conducts general reviews of public institutions implementing child and youth policies in Ireland, such as Tusla or DCEDIY, and handles individual complaints on public services for children (Office of the Ombudsman, 2017^[43]) (Office of the Ombudsman, 2022^[44]) (Office of the Ombudsman, 2023^[45]). By this, the Office of the Ombudsman provides an important oversight function to enhance administrative accountability. However, non-constitutional recognition of the Ombudsman and challenges to the findings of its investigations into public services leave space to further improve the acceptance and uptake of its assessments and recommendations (Donson and O’Donovan, 2014^[48]).

Another stakeholder contributing to promoting accountability for child and youth policy in Ireland is the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, who is appointed by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for a three-year term. The Rapporteur is accountable to the Oireachtas to which it submits yearly reports, and is entitled to consult with Departments of Government and the Ombudsman for Children about any legislative initiatives designed to enhance child protection (Government of Ireland, 2023^[49]). As such, the Special Rapporteur fulfils important functions to analyse existing and draft legislation and highlight gaps for improvement, by making comments and recommendations. However, there is scope to strengthen engagement with the government, considering that the Special Rapporteur stated in 2022 in his official report that government departments (other than the DCEDIY) were not adequately engaging and responding to his requests (O’Mahony, 2022^[50]). Further, as reports are currently published only four to seven months after their submission (O’Mahony, 2022^[50]), there is room to accelerate their publication to foster immediate take-up of findings and recommendations. According to the Rapporteur’s report issued in 2022, this also led to information being outdated and individuals affected by issues that were covered in the report feeling “anxiety” due to persisting unclarity (O’Mahony, 2022^[50]). This appears to reduce the Special Rapporteur’s ability to act as an effective oversight institution, highlighting potential to improve co-operation from government departments.

Commissions of Investigation related to children’s rights have played a critical role to promote accountability in the child and youth sector in Ireland. For instance, they have investigated sexual child abuse by religious institutions in Ireland, such as the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse established in 2000 and the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation set up in 2015 (Citizens Information, n.a.^[51]). Members of Commissions of Investigation are experts on the investigated matter, such as judges or professors (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, n.a.^[52]). Among others, these Commissions published reports available to the wider public and subsequent monitoring reports on the implementation of their recommendations to different stakeholders, including the Government. As such, Commissions of Investigation have given impetus to legal, institutional and policy change to foster child and youth well-being. For instance, the reports monitoring the implementation of the “Ryan Report” (2009) highlight the

establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 and the initiative of proposals for the reform of the Child Care Act, which was subsequently amended in 2013 by the Child and Family Agency Act (Ryan Report Monitoring Group, 2014^[53]). According to stakeholders, it has however taken until 2023 to start implementing some of the recommendations of the “Ryan Report”, for instance to conduct longitudinal research on care leavers. This shows room to improve effective learning and uptake of recommendations provided by Commissions of Investigation.

As part of the Implementation Plan of the “Ryan Report”, the National Review Panel (NRP) was set up in 2010. The Panel is commissioned by Tusla but is functionally independent and operates separately from the agency. It conducts reviews of child deaths and serious incidents and produces reports to improve the quality of services provided to children and families. Reviews of the Panel consist of investigation in all records held by social work departments and professionals from other services who have worked with the child and family as well submissions from stakeholders, interviews with staff and family members. With limited exceptions, reports of the Panel are published (Tusla, 2023^[54]). Annual reports highlight that IT resource constraints and the number of referred cases caused “delayed and inadequate assessment” while data protection legislation made it difficult to obtain relevant case records from involved public agencies (National Review Panel, 2021^[55]). It is also unclear in how far recommendations by the Panel were taken up and effectively considered for implementation.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), established under the Health Act 2007, also has an important oversight function of government action to promote child and youth well-being in Ireland. The HIQA is an independent authority reporting to the Minister for Health and engaging with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Affairs, advising on children’s social care services. It is mandated to develop standards, inspect, and review health and social care services, as well as to inform decisions on how these services should be delivered (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2018^[56]). HIQA’s Children’s Team is responsible for inspecting the social services that children access to in order to assess whether they meet national standards (Health information and Quality Authority, n.a.^[57]). The findings of HIQA’s inspection reports are generally published on the Authority’s website, unless they would potentially allow the identification of children, especially in small residential centres. All reports are then sent to Tusla and/or other service providers, that can share them with children living in the centre and their families.

Similarly, the Mental Health Commission plays a role in fostering accountability for child and youth policy with respect to the provision of a wide range of mental health services in Ireland. Established as an independent regulator under the Mental Health Act 2001 (Irish Statute Book, 2001^[9]), the Commission aims to promote, encourage, and foster high standards and good practices in the delivery of mental health services. It publishes national reviews of mental health services and inspection reports on approved mental health centres. The Commission’s reports have been discussed in the Oireachtas, for instance with regards to children left without care by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. However, it was reported during discussions in the Oireachtas that recommendations provided by the Commission were only partially addressed, thus indicating space for improvement to ensure effective accountability through enhanced uptake of the Commission’s investigative work (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023^[58]).

Finally, some form of independent oversight is also ensured by the **Comptroller and Auditor General**, an independent constitutional officer with responsibility for the audit of public funds. The Comptroller and Auditor General audits financial accounts of Ireland’s public bodies (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, 2020^[59]) but does not conduct reviews or audits of child and youth-related strategies and initiatives. Its role is discussed more extensively in the section on financial accountability below.

Further, apart from bodies and commissions, some specific independent projects contribute to strengthening accountability in the field of child and youth policy, such as the Child Law Project described in Box 7.5.

Box 7.5. The Child Law Project

The Child Law Project was established in 2012 under the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2007. Previously funded by two philanthropic organisations, it is now fully funded by the DCEDIY but remains operationally independent. The Project examines and reports on judicial childcare proceedings in the courts and provides information to the public on the operation of the childcare system with the aim of promoting transparency and accountability. To this effect, it makes recommendations to address shortcomings in the childcare system identified in its research. Through publications of reports on individual childcare proceedings in courts and more general analytical reports, e.g., on law reforms, the Project has the ability to highlight areas of improvement. However, it is unclear to what extent departments and service providers have been taking recommendations by the Project into account so far.

Source: (Child Law Project, 2023^[60]); (Child Law Project, 2023^[61]).

Interdepartmental and non-governmental accountability

Policies and services for children and young people are intrinsically cross-cutting and multidimensional and this means that they cannot be implemented in isolation from each other (Chapter 4 and 8). In Ireland, a wide range of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders are involved in the implementation of child and youth policy and in the delivery of services to children and young people. In this context, strong co-ordination mechanisms across governmental and non-governmental stakeholders are essential to avoid fragmented delivery (OECD, 2020^[62]), and effective mechanisms need to be set up to ensure interdepartmental and non-governmental accountability to deliver better outcomes.

Interdepartmental accountability ensures that the different departments and agencies as well as other service providers involved in the implementation of child and youth policy develop a shared understanding of policy challenges and shared accountability to address cross-cutting and complex issues. OECD countries have established *ad hoc* structures, as well as legal and operational arrangements, to promote interdepartmental accountability, as described using the example of New Zealand in Box 7.6.

Box 7.6. Fostering interdepartmental accountability in New Zealand

In New Zealand, as a core government principle, all government agencies (which correspond to departments in Ireland) are expected to work in consultation and collaboration with each other to achieve shared objectives.

The Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet acts as the lead institution to monitor the implementation of the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*. More than 20 government agencies have partial responsibility for its implementation. Overall, the chief executives of these agencies (appointed by the Public Service Commissioner, responsible to a minister for the performance of their agency), and by extension their respective line Ministers, are accountable for more than 110 individual actions. In addition, the Children's Act 2014 requires children's agencies to report annually to the responsible Minister on their progress in implementing the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan, which presents the Government's commitment, actions, and leading institutions responsible to ensure that the children and young people with the greatest needs receive targeted support and services. The implementation report must also be included in the annual report submitted by each agency to Parliament.

Sources: (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023^[15]); (OECD, 2020^[62]); (Oranga Tamariki Action Plan, 2023^[63]).

Non-governmental accountability aims to ensure that civil society and the wider public can actively contribute to help advance policy change and hold governments and policymakers accountable for their performance. Departments, agencies and organisations working with, and for, children, young people and by extension their families or providers of care are key stakeholders to promote interdepartmental and non-governmental accountability architecture. Similarly, also the Centre of Government (CoG), by promoting policy co-ordination, providing incentives to foster horizontal work, and playing a leadership role with respect to driving government-wide strategic priorities (OECD, 2020^[2]), can contribute to reinforcing those mechanisms.

Interdepartmental accountability

The adoption of BOBF 2014-20 was accompanied by the creation of new structures aiming to ensure accountability, drive implementation, and provide a forum for stakeholder engagement (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). *Young Ireland* re-established governance structures to promote accountability in the development of policies impacting children and young people (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]). The Children and Young People's Policy Consortium was established under BOBF 2014-20 to promote interdepartmental accountability for the child and youth well-being policy in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]), and was replaced in 2023 by the Children and Young People's Policy Forum (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]) with similar functions (see Chapter 4).

The Consortium was chaired by the Secretary General of DCEDIY, supported by a representative of the Department of the Taoiseach as deputy chair (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). It comprised of senior officials from Government departments and agencies with a role in the implementation of child and youth policies, as well as representatives from advisory (the Children and Young People's Services Committees National Steering Group and the Advisory Council) and local operational fora (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). Until 2020, the Consortium oversaw and drove the implementation of DCEDIY-led child and youth policies (including *First 5* and BOBF 2014-20 constituent strategies, as discussed in Chapter 8) across

government departments, agencies and sectors and reported annually to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy, to which it submitted a mid-term review and annual reports on BOBF 2014-20.

The Consortium also included a Sponsors Group, which was established as a sub-committee of the Policy Consortium to which it reported. The Sponsors Group was made up of senior officials from the five departments leading implementation in the areas of the cross-cutting national outcomes covered by BOBF 2014-20: the DCEDIY, the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Social Protection, and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The purpose of the Sponsors Group was similar to that of the Consortium, namely, to drive implementation and provide a forum for problem solving. Only representatives of government departments were involved in this sub-committee that tended to be more implementation-focused than the Consortium, as highlighted in the BOBF 2014-20 mid-term review provided by the Advisory Council (Government of Ireland, 2016^[64]).

To support the work of the Policy Consortium and Sponsors Group, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs created an Implementation Team within the Policy Innovation Unit. The Implementation Team aimed to drive accountability and the delivery of cross-Government co-ordination and collaboration to achieve better outcomes for children and young people by co-ordinating the work in and across the BOBF 2014-20 implementation structures, i.e., the Consortium and the Sponsors Group (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). It also helped identify emerging themes and trends relating to implementation and promote knowledge transfer.

As highlighted in BOBF 2014-20, the structures presented above were envisaged to play a crucial role in driving implementation and foster shared responsibilities in the achievement of Ireland's child and youth-related objectives (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). Cross-departmental structures are widespread in Ireland to engage relevant departments in child and youth policymaking. However, OECD interviews suggest that representation in these structures tended to slip down over time, compromising their capacity to effectively take decisions on cross-cutting issues. While OECD interviews suggest that a more co-operative approach among departments' Secretary Generals appears to emerge, the level of representation in the Consortium and in the Sponsors Group had slipped at the end of the BOBF implementation period with a negative impact on interdepartmental accountability. OECD stakeholder interviews also highlighted that meetings of these groups often tended to overlap with other relevant commitments, and that attendance was often not compulsory.

As discussed above and in previous chapters, departments often lack incentives to work together and thus ultimate responsibility for policy outcomes remains unclear in the absence of strong interdepartmental accountability mechanisms. Interviews conducted by the OECD also pointed to high administrative costs associated due to the proliferation of cross-departmental structures and limited human and financial capacity and resources to embed the perspectives and needs of children and young people from diverse backgrounds in policymaking.

Interdepartmental accountability seems to be further challenged by limited clarity in defining what counts as implementation progress, including through clear metrics and shared definitions to systematically track progress across stakeholders. For example, BOBF 2014-20 set out 163 government commitments across eleven lead departments or agencies, tacitly but not explicitly to be achieved in the seven-year duration of the national framework. Of these, 75% were current government policy commitments and 25% were new ones. The final BOBF 2014-20 implementation report conducted in 2020 aims to examine the extent to which they had been met by the end of the process (Government of Ireland, 2020^[65]). However, the set of commitments has a rather ambiguous nature, and no specific and verifiable indicators have been created to enable their monitoring (OECD, 2024^[66]). Overall, commitments by government departments and agencies were reported as "done", "ongoing", "in progress", or "not being progressed" in the final report. From a governance perspective, there are challenges in using this information at the end of the implementation period to assess *ex post* performance and promote accountability, since this qualitative, self-reported system impedes the objective verification of the delivery of governmental activities as

explained in the OECD's Analysis of the Monitoring System of Child Policies and Outcomes in Ireland (OECD, 2024^[66]). In fact, the final annual reporting does not provide details about the *ex post* status of each of the individual commitments as of 2020, while BOBF 2014-20 had attributed organisational responsibility for each commitment in terms of lead agency and partners. Thus, the absence of a feedback loop for commitments made in BOBF 2014-20 has further limited accountability across the involved departments and agencies.

Moreover, stakeholder interviews conducted by the OECD suggest that, while the DCEDIY was expected to play a steering role within the Consortium, it lacked convening power to influence and monitor the work undertaken by other departments. A structure similar to the one of the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium has been re-established under *Young Ireland*, with the Policy Forum to be chaired by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with a Deputy Chair from the Department of the Taoiseach. As stated in the new policy framework, the Forum will have Assistant Secretary members from all Government departments and relevant agencies, as well as the Chair and representation from the Children and Young People's Advisory Council (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]). Its terms of reference and work programme are still to be developed by DCEDIY.

The lessons learnt from BOBF 2014-20 underscore the potential for the Centre of Government, mainly represented by the Department of Taoiseach, to leverage its strategic and communication functions to further strengthen accountability mechanisms in child and youth policy implementation. Having the Department of the Taoiseach as deputy chair of the Consortium has reportedly facilitated sustained high-level political commitment and collaboration across implementing departments and agencies thanks to its convening power. Nevertheless, stakeholder discussions conducted by OECD revealed a gradual decrease in the Department of the Taoiseach's involvement over time, thus leaving space for rethinking accountability structures underpinning the new Framework. Overall, OECD interviews also highlighted the potential for reviewing the balance between the need to centralise the ownership over some policy areas to ensure stronger leadership and oversight, and the willingness to decentralise others to engage all departments and agencies based on shared responsibility for transversal policy issues.

Building on this experience, the creation of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach in early 2023 is expected to encourage greater co-ordination across key departments, provide strategic leadership from the Centre of Government, and bring stronger accountability to the child poverty agenda (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]), by combining an enhanced whole-of-government approach with a more focused and prioritised strategic outlook on key issues. As outlined in its Initial Programme Plan, the Programme Office will spearhead the co-ordination of a cross-government network dedicated to addressing child poverty within its six identified priority areas (see also Chapter 4). This network will encompass all government departments, agencies, and local authorities responsible for relevant delivery and policy development and will contribute to the development of an annual update report (Government of Ireland, 2023^[67]).

Accountability relationship between DCEDIY and Tusla

In terms of the accountability arrangements, the relationship between DCEDIY and Tusla, Ireland's Child and Family Agency, deserves specific mention. Tusla regularly reports on its performance and service provision for children and families to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth who has responsibility for overseeing its work. In line with a requirement in the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2013^[68]), Tusla publishes on its website annual performance reports that focus on activity data and input-focused performance, emphasising services delivered rather than highlighting results and final outcomes (Tusla, n.a.^[69]).

As its parent department, the DCEDIY provides funding and support to Tusla operations, including guidance on specific services, such as child protection, to strengthen the implementation of the Children First Act. The Tusla Governance and Performance Oversight Unit within the DCEDIY, a team of seven

employees as of 2023, manages governance arrangements between the Department and Tusla. The Unit has developed a performance framework to set out policy guidance, direction and prioritisation parameters for the preparation of Tusla's 3-year corporate plan, as well as service improvement and corporate development objectives. However, OECD interviews suggest that the DCEDIY does not directly set Tusla's strategic priorities but rather shapes the overall policy context in which Tusla operates. Interviewees pointed to weak links between policy planning in DCEDIY and priority setting in Tusla, which makes it difficult to set clear accountability lines for the Agency. DCEDIY has the capacity to conduct a Periodical Critical Review (PCR) for Tusla to consider performance against the directions as set in the Performance Framework developed by the Minister of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The Review could contribute to better aligning strategic planning and operations in DCEDIY and Tusla respectively. More in general, fragmentation and limited accountability of agencies in relation to their parent department appear to be widespread in the Irish public sector as highlighted by the OECD in a 2008 report (OECD, 2008^[70]).

In addition, Tusla is regulated by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), which undertakes inspections of the services provided by Tusla in relation to welfare and child protection. The Ombudsman for Children and the Office of the Ombudsman also have the authority to investigate complaints about Tusla's services, although their capacities to provide effective oversight appear limited. Furthermore, Tusla's Chief Executive Officer can be requested to attend before Oireachtas Committees, at their written request, to give an account of the general administration of the Agency (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2013^[68]).

Accountability relationship with Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)

As described in previous Chapters, Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) are county-level committees which bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people in Ireland. Since 2007, CYPSC provide a forum for joint planning and co-ordination of activities across agencies to ensure that children, young people, and their families receive improved and accessible services in every county (Children and Young People's Services Committees, n.a.^[71]). All counties in Ireland currently have an inter-agency forum dedicated to promoting the welfare and well-being of children and young people aged 0 to 24 years.

In the governance architecture set up to implement BOBF 2014-20, CYPSC were intended to foster inter-agency co-operation and to contribute to the achievements of the five national outcomes (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). The *CYPSC: Shared Vision, Next Steps* document, published in 2019 by the then DCYA (now DCEDIY), provides the road map for further developing their role over the period 2019-24 (Children and Young People's Services Committees, 2019^[72]). CYPSC were accountable to the CYPSC National Steering Group until 2020 and to the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium during the BOBF 2014-20 implementation period. Currently, oversight and operational issues are supported by a joint DCEDIY/Tusla working group, which meets every six weeks (Children and Young People's Services Committees, n.a.^[73]). Other government departments and the agencies operating under them are also expected to use CYPSC to deliver relevant programmes and services to children and young people. The DCEDIY provides policy and strategic direction for CYPSC, while Tusla guarantees operational leadership of CYPSC at national level (Children and Young People's Services Committees, 2017^[74]), having responsibility for the implementation of the initiative through the employment of a CYPSC National Coordinator (Government of Ireland, n.a.^[75]).

The CYPSC National Steering Group supported the operation of the CYPSC until 2020 at local level and provided guidance and advice on strategic, policy and operational issues relevant to the local committees. The Chair of the CYPSC National Steering Group was a member of the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium where pertinent issues that required a national response could be escalated. Chaired by an independent figure, the Steering Group comprises senior representatives from Tusla, Health Service

Executive, City/County Councils, Education and Training Board Ireland, the Community and Voluntary sector, DCEDIY, Department of Education and Skills, Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, a young person aged 18-24 years, personnel from local CYPSC (Chairperson, vice Chairperson and CYPSC Co-ordinator), and the National Co-ordinator for CYPSC (Children and Young People's Services Committees, n.a.^[73]). The National Co-ordinator for CYPSC is located in Tusla and exercises oversight of progress and impact of work undertaken by CYPSC and co-ordinates collective reporting to the national CYPSC Steering Group and DCEDIY, and hence fulfils an important function to promote accountability (Children and Young People's Services Committees, 2017^[74]).

In 2017, the CYPSC National Steering Group adopted the Planning and Reporting Framework to guide CYPSC stakeholders in their planning and reporting efforts (Children and Young People's Services Committees, 2017^[74]). Each local committee develops and oversees the implementation of a three-year Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), which is designed to improve outcomes for children and young people, by responding to national priorities and outlining local priorities that the CYPSC has agreed to address through a detailed action plan of activities (Children and Young People's Services Committees, 2017^[74]). So far, all CYPSC have produced such plans. Annual Programmes of Work are also developed by each CYPSC to support the implementation of their CYPPs (Children and Young People's Services Committees, n.a.^[76]).

Each CYPSC is tasked to produce a Mid-Year Progress Update and an Annual Progress Report for Tusla as a tool for mutual accountability and learning. The National Co-ordinator for CYPSC monitors progress in relation to the implementation of CYPPs and produces a report to the DCEDIY and the CYPSC National Steering Group to enhance the oversight on the CYPSC work (Children and Young People's Services Committees, 2017^[74]). Still, CYPSC (which develop their Plans on a 3-year basis), local authorities, and Tusla all operate on different cycles, which presents a barrier to align policy planning and promote accountability (see Chapter 4). Co-ordination with departments and local authorities is also reportedly limited, although the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 is expected to introduce a duty for departments and agencies to co-operate with CYPSC and attend their meetings.

Non-governmental accountability

The BOBF 2014-20 implementation structures also included an Advisory Council to ensure accountability towards non-governmental stakeholders (see Chapter 4). The Council advised the Policy Consortium and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on the implementation of BOBF 2014-20 and other child and youth well-being strategies. Comprising approximately 16 senior members under a Chair, the Advisory Council provided expertise and experience from the community and voluntary sectors, academia, and experts working with and for children and young people. As highlighted in the final report on the BOBF 2014-20 implementation (Government of Ireland, 2020^[65]), the Advisory Council participated at all levels in the BOBF implementation structures and gradually assumed a monitoring role in relation to specific strategies, including the *Participation Strategy*, *First 5*, and the *LGBTI+ Strategy*. The Advisory Council, officially renamed Children and Young People's Advisory Council, will continue to operate under *Young Ireland* with a more diversified membership, including representatives with expertise on key issues such as disability, mental health, inequality, child poverty, etc. (Chapter 8).

Stakeholder interviews conducted by the OECD indicated that there had been limitations on the involvement of civil society via the Advisory Council and the other BOBF 2014-20 implementation structures, at least at the beginning. Stakeholders also reported that the unpaid work of members of the Advisory Council reduced its potential to meaningfully engage with civil society. While the DCEDIY has been reported to showcase good practice in terms of consulting civil society, CSOs engagement across other departments was reported to be less developed and often disjointed.

In OECD interviews, some civil society organisations flagged that consultations on child and youth-related matters were perceived as *pro forma*, demonstrating an expectation that their role could be further

strengthened in promoting accountability. With the Advisory Council intended to provide a permanent forum to discuss the implementation of the DCEDIY-led frameworks, public consultations had especially been used by the DCEDIY to inform legislative reforms or policies (Government of Ireland, 2023^[77]).

Transparency can positively add to the accountability of policymakers and increase citizens' trust in public institutions, by enhancing access to information and promoting a sense of shared ownership (OECD, 2020^[2]). However, stakeholders interviewed by the OECD highlighted challenges in clearly identifying roles and responsibilities of the different governmental and non-governmental players involved in child and youth well-being policy in Ireland. Limited clarity on the roles and functions of different state and non-state actors further contributed to making accountability lines blurry and, eventually, reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of strategies and policies targeting children and young people.

Non-governmental stakeholders can also foster accountability by pointing to existing gaps in government action and proposing ways to improve results and outcomes. For example, since 2009, the Children's Rights Alliance, an umbrella organisation of over 100 Irish NGOs working to improve children's lives in Ireland, has issued an annual report on the performance of the government to improve child outcomes (Children's Right Alliance, 2023^[78]). In 2023, the Children's Rights Alliance Report Cards assessed the performance of the current *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*. Using an independent panel of experts from academia and NGOs, the government's performance is rated yearly on a letter scale for each promise from A (best) to E (worst). The summary assessment is a means to convey gaps and opportunities for improvement to government stakeholders and the wider public. Despite of partly being publicly funded, the Children's Rights Alliance performs an important function within the accountability ecosystem because of its capacity to draw on independent external expertise (Charities Regulator, 2023^[79]).

Accountability to children and young people (and their parents)

Parents, families, and communities must have the opportunity to hold governments accountable in relation to its commitments as set out in strategies and policies. Consultation and other forms of stakeholder engagement practices are important mechanisms to identify the needs of target groups of policy and to provide them with the opportunity to influence decision-making. The OECD Recommendation on Open Government underlines that stakeholder participation increases government inclusiveness and accountability, and calls on governments to “grant all stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted and actively engage them in all phases of the policy-cycle and service design and delivery” (OECD, 2017^[80]).

In Ireland several initiatives have been established to involve children and young people in decision-making at national and subnational levels:

- The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making for 2015-2020 (see Chapter 8) aimed to support children and young people to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes (Government of Ireland, 2015^[81]). The final review of the Strategy revealed concerted efforts from national departments and agencies to implement the Strategy with 93% of the actions completed or in progress (Government of Ireland, 2023^[82]). According to some governmental stakeholders' views, participation strategies have been a driver for children and youth participation and are considered a success.
- The National Participation Office (NPO) is a permanent office established in 2021 to work with the DCEDIY to manage and co-ordinate some of the main youth participation structures in Ireland – Comhairle na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg, the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, the National Youth Assembly of Ireland.
- The Comhairle na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 31 local authorities of the country, which give children and young people aged 12 to 18 the opportunity to be involved in the development of

local services and policies. The National Youth Assembly, which brings together 50 representatives aged between 12 and 24, also intends to create formal links with the local Comhairle na nÓg. Comhairle na nÓg have reporting obligations to national and local authorities. However, fact-finding meetings conducted by the OECD showed that Comhairlí na nÓg are not always clear about what they are expected to report on, leading to disparities and lack of clarity with respect to reporting and accountability lines.

- The **European Structured Dialogue Process** is a participatory structure established by the Council of the European Union to foster debate between young people (15-30 years) and decision-makers and give children and young people the opportunity to influence youth policy development at national and European levels (European Commission, n.d.^[83]). The EU Structured Dialogue seems to have strongly overlapping functions with the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive. Also, with a minimum age for participation at 15, there is limited engagement with children in early and middle childhood or non-governmental stakeholders representing their interests. During interviews, it was also reported that BOBF was intended to have a linkage with the Structured Dialogue, but that this process was not regular and it was not clear how input provided by the young people fed into policy development and implementation.
- In the framework of BOBF 2014-20, a successful consultative approach was undertaken in order to identify the goals and outcomes of interest of the policy framework. In fact, BOBF built on the learning gained through its predecessor National Children's Strategy, *Our Children – Their Lives* (2000-2010), and responded to the substantial public consultation that took place in 2012 to inform the government's direction for the following seven years. Additional information on this participatory approach for the identification of the national outcomes can be found in the OECD's Analysis of the Monitoring System of Child Policies and Outcomes in Ireland (OECD, 2024^[66]). Furthermore, the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium was an important structure for policymakers to engage with children and young people and to listen to their concerns (Government of Ireland, 2020^[65]). It was also intended to have linkages with other participatory structures but the extent to which these have been established is unclear.
- The Hub na nÓg was set up by DCEDIY to support the implementation of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 as a national centre of excellence and co-ordination on giving children and young people a voice in decision-making, with a particular focus on seldom-heard children (see Chapter 5). As stated in the Final Review of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020, the Hub has contributed to ensure that an increasing number of Government Departments and Agencies consulted with and included children and young people in policy development over the last years (Government of Ireland, 2023^[82]).

Despite the existence of multiple participative structures, there is still room for improvement in terms of ensuring accountability to children and young people in Ireland. OECD interviews and the final review report of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 pointed to limited understanding among policymakers of how to involve children and young people in decision-making in practice (Government of Ireland, 2023^[82]) and perception that consultations can be resource- and time-consuming. More in general, some interviewees also raised that the extent to which stakeholder engagement of children and young people is expected to contribute to policymaking and to the implementation of child and youth policy frameworks is sometimes unclear to policymakers and departments responsible for carrying public consultations out. Fact-finding meetings also demonstrated that the Comhairle na nÓg are not well-known among some departments.

Additionally, interviewees highlighted that consultation and dialogue processes are not organised regularly and that communication and understanding of how the views of children and young people informed policymaking remain limited. One stakeholder reported that trainings for civil servants in this area started in 2023 and could close this gap in the future. Although the National Framework for Children and Young

People's Participation includes a requirement to provide feedback to and follow up with consultation participants, there appears to be room for improvement in closing the feedback loop and, in some cases, addressing the reported resistance among policymakers to modify decisions in response to the consultation results. If feedback loops are not properly closed, public authorities risk discouraging stakeholders from participating in consultations again in the future and reducing the benefits of participation, such as increased public trust, efficacy, and agency (OECD, 2022^[84]). Aiming to address these challenges, *Young Ireland*, the new national Policy Framework for Children and Young People, foresees the development of a detailed *Cross Government Action Plan for Participation* led by DCEDIY, to progress high-level actions with the objective to embed the voice of children and young people in decision-making and build capacities to that effect (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]).

Besides participatory structures directly targeted to children and young people, ensuring accountability to younger children in particular implies accountability to parents and families. Complaints and feedback mechanisms can provide useful tools to enable children, parents, and families to raise concerns about policies and programmes affecting them. However, they may not always be accessible to all, particularly families and children who are marginalised or vulnerable. In the framework of BOBF 2014-20, feedback mechanisms were set up for young people but not for their parents or families.

An informative function directed to children and their families on matters related to the rights and welfare of children is played by the Ombudsman for Children that, as illustrated previously, plays an important role in strengthening accountability as independent oversight institution safeguarding the rights of children in Ireland. The Ombudsman for Children's Office Annual Report for 2022 published in May 2023 revealed that education was issue raising most complaints (30%), with bullying, expulsion or suspension, and special education resources featuring in many of the submissions (Ombudsman for Children, 2023^[85]).

Financial accountability

In the public sector, financial accountability refers to holding public institutions accountable for the way they manage and spend resources. Fostering financial accountability throughout the budget cycle can contribute to more efficient and effective service delivery (OECD, 2020^[2]), including in child and youth well-being. To ensure that public resources are dedicated to improving policy outcomes for children and young people, public finance management systems should allow to assess whether resources have been spent in the intended manner and whether they have been used efficiently and effectively to achieve their aim (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014^[86]). A variety of mechanisms should be put in place to strengthen financial oversight, such as accountability through the parliament, ministries, supreme audit institutions, ombudspersons, external bodies including independent human rights institutions, and citizen-led accountability mechanisms (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014^[86]).

In Ireland, the Constitution adopted in 1937 sets a series of provisions relevant to the Irish "system of accountability for public moneys" (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]), as briefly explained in Box 7.7.

Box 7.7. Provisions and budgetary principles relevant to public financial management in Ireland

According to the Irish Constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*), all government departments, including DCEDIY, have their expenditures managed through the government's treasury single account, the Central Fund. Expenditures are authorised by the Houses of the Oireachtas through the annual Estimates/Appropriations process or funded through standing charges on the Central Fund. Each year the government brings forward estimates of expenditures and receipts and presents these estimates in an Expenditure Report to Dáil Éireann, the chamber of the Oireachtas directly elected by the people, for consideration. The Oireachtas exercises some form of budgetary oversight through the review and approval of the budget, including for child and youth policies and services.

Source: (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]), Financial Reporting in Ireland.

The annual Expenditure Reports prepared by the government are publicly released and show expenditures by *Vote*. Each Vote is a coherent area of government expenditure, which falls under the responsibility of a single government department or office, with one or more Votes covering the functions of each government department or office within central Government (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]). Relevant Vote groups for child and youth well-being in the 2023 Budget Expenditure Report are: Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Education; Health; Justice; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Social Protection. The Report also provides details on the programmes included in the expenditures of each Vote (Government of Ireland, 2023^[88]). As pointed out by the OECD in a previous report (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]), although the Vote structure appears to be well known and understood by users, it still poses some challenges as it does not fully align with the responsibilities of government departments and offices. Notably, when a government department is responsible for more than one vote, there is no aggregated vision of their total resources and spending. As a result, information on spending allocated to government programmes targeting children and young people is difficult to obtain.

The past decade has seen some changes to the traditional budget system in Ireland (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]), such as the introduction of the performance budgeting initiative in 2011. Since 2017, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) prepares annual Public Service Performance Reports, which provide an overview of how public funds have been allocated for each vote group, how funds have been used and the impact of public spending on the Irish society (Government of Ireland, n.a.^[89]). As an example, in its section devoted to the spending of the DCEDIY, the 2021 Public Service Performance Report lists the high-level goals set by the Department in its Statement of Strategy 2021-2023. It then shows the Department's total expenditures by type and by programme and compares them to estimates and to the 2020 expenditures. It also displays some key measurable outputs (e.g., percentage of children in care who are in foster care placement) and impacts (e.g., percentage of children in care in full-time education). The Report also includes similar information on outputs and impacts for the main programmes run by the Department and included as part of its expenditures (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022^[90]). Since it provides information on some key outputs and impacts as well, the Performance Report is an important tool to support the Oireachtas Committees (see Box 7.4) in scrutinising spending and engaging in a dialogue with line ministers on performance. It also contributes to improving transparency by providing more information to legislatures and the public.

At the end of the financial year, each department or office is required to prepare a cash-based account, known as appropriation account, for each voted service administered by it (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, n.a.^[91]). The outturn for the year is compared to the sums granted by Dáil Éireann based on the cash amounts of payments and receipts (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, n.a.^[91]). Requirements exist also in relation to other State bodies and funds, which have to present their accounts or financial statements to their sponsoring government department every year (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]). The

Board of Tusla, for instance, produces annual financial statements to disclose the financial position of the Agency (Tusla, 2021^[92]).

The Comptroller and Auditor General, as mandated by the Constitution, audits the accounts of funds administered by or under the authority of the Oireachtas (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]), including, for what concerns child and youth well-being, the Appropriation Accounts and the funds administered by government departments (e.g., the DCEDIY, the Department of Education, etc.), as well as Tusla's financial statements. It is independent from both government and parliament. Audit reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General provide an assessment covering the accuracy and completeness of the accounts and ensure that the accounts have been prepared in the approved format (Moretti et al., 2019^[87]).

As stated in BOBF 2014-20, additional mechanisms were envisaged to promote financial accountability mechanisms for child and youth policy in consultation with DPER, which is mandated to serve the public interest through sound governance of public expenditure and by leading and enabling reform across the Civil and Public Service (Government of Ireland, n.d.^[93]). Financial accountability was envisaged to be strengthened by the development of a specific mechanism to track and analyse expenditures on children and young people across departments and agencies (Government of Ireland, 2014^[3]). Indeed, child and youth-sensitive budget planning, monitoring and expenditure tracking can help assess whether the amounts allocated are used for their intended purpose. It is therefore important to set up a robust budget classification system that allows the tracking of spending along administrative, economic, functional, and programmatic lines (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014^[86]). OECD countries have strengthened financial accountability in the field of child and youth policy by developing specific mechanisms allowing to track public expenditures on children and young people and to assess their effectiveness, as in the case of New Zealand (Box 7.8).

Box 7.8. Enhancing financial accountability in New Zealand

With the adoption of the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018, the main (budget) Appropriation Bill in New Zealand must include a report indicating progress made towards meeting the nine targets set in the Act and explaining whether and to what extent, the allocated budget is expected to contribute to reducing child poverty.

The latest figures released for 2022/23 by Stats NZ, New Zealand's official data agency, show that five out of nine child poverty measures have seen statistically significant reductions since the baseline year of 2018. By connecting policy implementation to specific targets and the annual government budget, financial accountability of the responsible Minister before the Parliament is strengthened through clear reporting and oversight mechanisms. Under the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018, the responsible Minister must present a copy of the Government Statistician's report on the latest poverty statistics to the House of the Representatives following its publication, and must also report any non-compliance with child poverty reduction targets that the Government sets.

Source: (The Treasury, 2023^[94]).

In Ireland, while there has been some work undertaken in this regard, the results of these efforts appear limited and do not meet the original BOBF 2014-20 aim. For example, although the Public Service Performance Reports show some details on departments' expenditures by programme, they do not contain conclusive and straightforward information, which would allow to track and quantify the investments made across the whole of government for the implementation of BOBF 2014-20 and other DCEDIY-led strategies focused on children and young people. In 2022, the DCEDIY published a pilot study to examine the

spending of the Irish government on children, focusing on the current expenditure of that same department for the year 2019 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth, 2022^[95]). This exercise was also conducted to support the implementation of the *Second Report for the Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework*, which aims to evaluate and improve the quality of life of people in Ireland. As such, the study is meant to be the first step of a longer-term process aiming to assess the adequacy of current and future expenditures to meet children's needs and, eventually, link government expenditures to outcomes. The study report highlights the main challenges encountered during the roll-out of the pilot, notably the difficulty to identify the overall budget share spent on children in Ireland. The report also suggests that a wider evidence-based change to government budget is needed in Ireland in order to align spending with policy goals (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth, 2022^[95]). To advance in this regard, the Blueprint of the Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028, published in August 2022, highlighted that the successor national policy framework for children and young people should include commitments with respect to, *inter alia*, piloting the introduction of child and youth budgeting and strengthening reporting to government on annual expenditures on children and young people (Government of Ireland, 2022^[96]). Indeed, *Young Ireland* commits to further developing the use of child budgeting to examine the allocation and outcomes assessment across its five National Outcomes (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]). Recently, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach also started co-ordinating spending plans on child poverty and child well-being across Departments and published a report outlining relevant actions and measures identified by twelve Government Departments in Budget 2024 to that effect (Government of Ireland, 2023^[97]).

Public accountability

Government transparency and tailored communication with youth and children and their parents is the first step to establish meaningful participation in the policy cycle (OECD, 2020^[62]). Results from the 2021 OECD survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD, 2021^[98]) indicate that there is a more general need to better communicate the results of government action to citizens across OECD countries. Transparency towards and effective communication with stakeholders can underpin accountability and provide legitimacy for the use of public resources (OECD, 2020^[62]).

In Ireland, the different strategies related to child and youth are all made publicly available online, including most of the action plans and reports. However, it is sometimes difficult to find updated documents for the current or past year. For example, concerning the *First 5* strategy, the annual implementation reports for 2020 and for 2021/2022 were made available only in June 2023 (Government of Ireland, 2023^[99]). For BOBF 2014-20, the strategy explicitly mentioned that public accountability would be achieved through the online publication of annual progress reports. Yet, CSOs reported during fact-finding interviews that they are having low visibility and knowledge of BOBF 2014-20, partially due to the proliferation of strategies and the lack of audience-focused documentation summarising the content and goals of each strategic document in an easy way. The same conclusion is reached in the OECD's Analysis of the Monitoring System of Child Policies and Outcomes in Ireland (OECD, 2024^[66]), which highlights that the communication and dissemination of findings from the monitoring of BOBF are still scarce and should be reconsidered under *Young Ireland*.

With a view to strengthening public accountability, *Young Ireland* includes communication and awareness raising as a key focus area (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023^[23]), as further discussed in Chapter 8.

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Note

¹ Further analyses of the monitoring and evaluation systems for child and youth policies and outcomes in Ireland are conducted as part of Output 3.2 of the project.

8

Implications for the governance arrangements underpinning *Young Ireland* and policy coherence in Ireland's child and youth policy context

This chapter analyses the development of *Young Ireland*, Ireland's National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (0-24) 2023-2028 through a benchmarking exercise employing the eight principles of the OECD Framework for National Youth Strategies. The analysis sheds light on the extent to which the governance arrangements of *Young Ireland* can be considered evidence-based, participatory, resourced, transparent and accessible, accountable, cross-sectoral, responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups, and supported by high-level political commitment. It also discusses current practice and potential to streamline the governance arrangements underpinning DCEDIY-led constituent strategies, including but not limited to First 5 and the European Child Guarantee National Action Plan, to foster policy coherence.

Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028

This section analyses *Young Ireland*, Ireland’s national child and policy framework, focused on tackling challenges that affect children and young people, and setting up structures to promote children’s rights in public decision-making. The analysis is made through the lens of the eight principles of the OECD Assessment Framework for National Youth Strategies (hereafter referred to as the “OECD Assessment Framework”). The analysis draws from findings in previous chapters of this Report to identify lessons learned, which shall inform the design of effective governance arrangements for *Young Ireland*. Given that the publication of *Young Ireland* is contemporary to this analysis, this chapter cannot assess whether the framework delivered on its commitments.

The OECD Assessment Framework identifies eight governance dimensions to guide policymakers in the elaboration and implementation of national child and youth strategies. Each dimension mirrors OECD instruments that codify OECD standards in public governance, notably the OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People and OECD Recommendations in the field of open government, gender equality in public life budgetary governance, policy coherence for sustainable development (OECD, 2016^[1]; 2022^[2]; 2017^[3]; 2015^[4]; 2019^[5]). In line with this framework, this Chapter will shed light on the extent to which *Young Ireland* follows an approach that can be considered evidence-based; participatory; resourced; transparent and accessible; accountable; cross-sectoral; responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups, and supported by high-level political commitment (OECD, 2020^[6]).

While each dimension is analysed separately in the following sections, findings under each are intertwined with each other and are hence mutually reinforcing. OECD findings indeed demonstrate that positive outcomes in one dimension are associated with positive outcomes in others. Therefore, policymakers should seek to consider and address possible gaps holistically (OECD, 2020^[6]).

Governance reforms under *Young Ireland*

The development of *Young Ireland* was informed by a series of consultative processes across government and with civil society groups, in addition to reports and reviews (the mid-term and final report most notably), of BOBF 2014-20 (DCEDIY, 2020^[7]). Most importantly, consultation with children and young people themselves were critical to the development of the policy, through the What We Think reports, and targeted consultations with groups who may not have been specifically consulted by Government before. While the DCEDIY determined early on in its inception that the five national outcomes would remain the same, significant effort was made to respond to challenges of the predecessor framework (e.g., narrowing down the scope and focus, strengthening policy co-ordination across departments and agencies) by introducing new governance arrangements and actions to foster an ‘enabling environment’ to deliver policies and services for children and young people. The Spotlights Initiative described in Chapter 4, for instance, was developed as part of these provisions.

As also discussed in Chapter 4, the governance structures developed under BOBF 2014-20 were originally designed to foster the efficient and effective implementation of the framework, ensuring accountability, and providing a forum for stakeholder engagement by consolidating existing consultative bodies and interdepartmental processes into three main groups. These included: the Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium, the Sponsors Group, and the Advisory Council. Other structures were also identified as playing a core part in the implementation of BOBF 2014-20, including the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy, the Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC) National Steering Group, the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, the Structured Dialogue working Group, and the BOBF 2014-20 Implementation Team. At the conclusion of BOBF 2014-20, relevant implementation structures were disbanded, and a review process was conducted to inform the reconsolidation of structures under *Young*

Ireland. Feedback collected by the DCEDIY through, for instance, the 2020 Annual Review and the Mid-Term Review of BOBF (DCEDIY, 2020^[7]), showed that while the structures had been generally useful, further work was needed to secure high-level commitment and representation, address challenges related to staff turnover, and improve inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination. The governance arrangements underpinning *Young Ireland* redefine responsibilities and membership under various structures are described as follows (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]):

- *The Cabinet Committee on Children and Education and Senior Officials Group*: The Cabinet Committee includes the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister), and 11 Ministers.¹ It oversees the implementation of Programme for Government commitments, including *Young Ireland*, with a specific focus on child poverty and well-being. It is supported by the Senior Officials Group on Children and Education, which is given a greater role under *Young Ireland* compared to its predecessor, as it is intended to act as the key structure driving cross-governmental measures in the strategy.
- *Children and Young People’s Policy Forum*: Chaired by the Minister of CEDYI with a Deputy Chair from the Department of the Taoiseach, the new Policy Forum sees changes in its membership requirements to include Assistant Secretary-level members from all government departments and relevant agencies. It also features representation from the Children and Young People’s Advisory Council. The Forum oversees and supports the implementation of policies impacting children and young people across government departments, agencies, and sectors, including through the development of (existing and future) “Spotlights” (see Chapter 4). As part of its remit, the Forum can establish interdepartmental or interagency subgroups to address cross-Government issues arising during the lifetime of *Young Ireland*. Terms of Reference and a Work Programme for the Forum were under development by DCEDIY as of February 2024. It was also decided to include representation from CYPSC and Local Authorities in the Forum, with specific arrangements unclear as of March 2024.
- *Young Ireland Advisory Council*: The Advisory Council was reestablished from its BOBF predecessor to serve as a forum to enable civil society groups, the voluntary sector, and experts to engage with the Policy Forum to advise on the development and implementation of policies. With the aim of increasing the representativeness and diversity of its 16 members from its previous iteration, the new Council seeks to broaden its membership, now including representatives with expertise on key issues including disability, mental health, inequality, child poverty, to name a few. Two members of the Youth Assembly also sit on the Council.
- *Children and Young People’s Participation Structures*: Child and youth stakeholders will be able to engage in the implementation of *Young Ireland* through the National Youth Assembly of Ireland, which includes delegates from Comhairle na nÓg, Young Voices: the EU Youth Dialogue, representatives from youth organisations, and guest delegates. Changes in this area include the development of new participation plans (see Chapter 5).
- *Implementation Team*: Composed of officials from DCEDIY, this (re-consolidated) Team supports the functioning of governance structures being established under *Young Ireland*, drives the delivery of initiatives to build an *Enabling Environment* (see below) for policy planning and delivery, including leading a new communications platform to promote the rights of children and young people.

As discussed in Chapter 4 and 7, the Sponsors Group, which served to gather lead departments in charge of individual outcomes under BOBF 2014-20, is disbanded and its co-ordination duties are transferred to the Policy Forum, whose members are tasked with coordinating all outcomes jointly. A visual of the Governance Structures of *Young Ireland* can be found below.

Figure 8.1. Draft DCEDIY Implementation Structures

Draft implementation structures to govern the implementation of *Young Ireland*



Source: DCEDIY, 2023.

In addition to these reforms and the introduction of the Spotlights initiative, eleven new actions are identified in *Young Ireland* to foster an *Enabling Environment* for policy planning and delivery for children and young people (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]). These actions aim to drive systemic change to place the rights and well-being of children and young people at the centre of government decisions. Actions include 1) strengthening the participation of children and youth in government decisions, 2) improving data collection and research development, 3) continuing the development of child and youth impact assessments, 4) developing the use of child budgeting, 5) performing a legislative review to comply with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child provisions, and 6) building capacity among public servants and wider society to realise the rights of children and youth across the lifetime of *Young Ireland*. Further actions outlined include 7) enhancing communication and promotion of their rights within government and across society, 8) adopting a whole-of-government approach to improving parenting support, 9) improving access to youth services and development opportunities for young people, 10) strengthening inter-agency co-ordination among existing co-ordination mechanisms relevant to them, and 11) building workforce capacity.

Relevant sections below analyse the reforms on governance arrangements as well as actions under the Enabling Environment through the lens of the OECD Assessment Framework and its eight governance dimensions. Such analysis is informed by the context of ongoing reforms in the child and youth policy

landscape in Ireland, including the proposed Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 and the new Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach, among others.

Supported by political commitment

Securing high-level political commitment to deliver for children and young people is essential to ensure buy-in across departmental portfolios and the effective mobilisation of resources.

For *Young Ireland* to be successful in continuing the work laid out by its predecessor, government-wide political commitment is critical. The following section maps documents attesting to manifestations of high-level political will that led to the publication of *Young Ireland*, falling under either of the following categories; 1) high-level statements to improve policy outcomes for children and young people as government priority, and 2) commitments to improve policy outcomes for children and young people in strategic government plans:

- **Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (2020):** The current Programme for Government commits, under its Mission “A New Social Contract” to developing a new framework to succeed BOBF 2014-20 for the voice and views of young people to be part of decision-making at community, county and national levels (Government of Ireland, 2020^[9]).
- **Statements and publications from the DCEDIY:** Leading the implementation of the new national policy framework, DCEDIY has issued statements and publications to address current policy planning and implementation gaps, including strengthening cross-sectoral co-ordination to respond to the complex needs of children and young people in vulnerable situations (e.g., child poverty). The *DCEDIY Statement of Strategy 2021-23* commits to developing a new framework, pointing to performance indicators including: 1) implementation of successor strategy to BOBF 2014-20, and 2) further development and refinement of cross-government, sectoral and inter-agency collaboration (DCEDIY, 2021^[10]). In January 2022, Minister Roderic O’Gorman publicly announced DCEDIY’s plans on the new framework, including maintaining the five national outcomes and reinforcing cross-sectoral co-ordination. This announcement was made as part of launching a public consultation on the new framework (DCEDIY, 2022^[11]).
- **The National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2030:** The NDP outlines several high-level commitments to address the needs of children and young people, particularly those living in vulnerable circumstances. Commitments include a wide thematic range, covering mental health, healthcare, homelessness, poverty, education, and engagement in sports (DPER, 2021^[12]).
- **Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office launched by the Department of the Taoiseach (2022):** Following an announcement in late 2022, the Department of the Taoiseach created a Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, placing child poverty at the top of the Taoiseach’s agenda. The aim of these efforts, as captured in the Office’s Programme Plan (2023-2025) is to focus cross-government attention on addressing child poverty (Government of Ireland, 2023^[13]).

Reports prepared by DCEDIY show that although the planning and early implementation of BOBF 2014-20 was driven by high political commitment, securing continued commitment at the highest level across departments proved to be a challenge across the lifespan of the strategy (DCEDIY, 2020^[7]). Findings from interviews conducted by the OECD pointed to dwindling high-level commitment from policymakers, most notably through decreasing attendance of senior decision-makers to inter-departmental implementation group meetings, among others. OECD interviews also suggested a lacking sense of ownership and accountability across Departments to address cross-cutting policy challenges faced by children and young people, including poverty, social exclusion, and mental health (see Chapter 4).

The newly created Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach, the Taoiseach’s leadership in the Cabinet Committee and co-chairing arrangements at Assistant

Secretary-level from the Department of the Taoiseach in the Policy Forum of *Young Ireland* denote a renewed impetus from Ireland's Centre of Government to place the needs of children and young people at the forefront of the political agenda. Further, OECD interviews suggest that the Taoiseach may also take a steering role under a proposed National Child Care Act Advisory Committee to see the implementation of priorities of the Child Care Act 1991, as outlined in the draft Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023. Strong engagement from the Taoiseach across such coordinating structures is crucial to leading a whole-of-government approach to delivering policies and services for children and young people. At the same time, it raises questions over ensuring that the information shared in, and roles of, such coordinating bodies does not lead to overlaps and redundancy. Reviews of BOBF 2014-20 and OECD interviews point to the need for clearer accountability lines across structures, as well as clearly assigned thematic priorities for each to define their strategic purpose.

OECD findings show that the location of the lead entity in charge of (child and) youth affairs within government can have an impact on its functions, resources, and scope of influence (OECD, 2020^[6]). In Box 8.1, the cases of New Zealand and Finland are discussed. Both countries have seen child affairs be led by the Centre of Government and through a dedicated ministry. These examples provide relevant considerations to Ireland in the context of rolling out the implementation of *Young Ireland*, led by DCEDIY, and the Programme Plan 'From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025', led by the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach.

Box 8.1. Placing child and youth policy at the Centre of Government

Finland: Moving ownership for child policy from the CoG to a line ministry can leverage policy expertise but may decrease convening power and ownership across stakeholders

In Finland, the government established a National Child Strategy Group under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, as well as a Secretary General under the Prime Minister's Office to drive planning and co-ordination of the *National Child Strategy* and to strengthen inter-agency and inter-ministerial co-operation. In 2022, the function of the Secretary General was transferred under the role of Leading Specialist under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, with the current structure of four staff being established in 2023.

According to OECD interviews, a higher level of commitment to achieve cross-cutting objectives set out in the Strategy was perceived across ministries when co-ordination was led by the Secretary General in the Prime Minister's Office. It helped establish a network of policymakers from across relevant ministries to consult and discuss policy priorities under the Strategy's implementation plans. OECD interviews suggest that this network has been successful in facilitating policy co-ordination and information sharing.

With the establishment of a National Child Strategy Group within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MoSAH), and the lack of continuous CoG involvement, OECD interviews suggest a possible risk that the *National Child Strategy* be perceived by line ministries as a sole responsibility of this ministry rather than a whole-of-government priority. At the same time, the consolidated Unit inside MoSAH reports increased capacity to leverage policy expertise from within the Ministry. Following the consolidation of the National Child Strategy Group it continues to keep some level of autonomy regarding the implementation of the *National Child Strategy*. This is most evident through the way in which overall achievements of the Strategy are communicated to other Ministries and the wider public, including a website that is detached from MoSAH.

New Zealand: High-level visibility and ministerial buy-in but changing political priorities may impact policy continuity

Tackling child poverty was established as a high-level policy priority in New Zealand in 2018, when a Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group (CWPRG) was established under the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to drive the country's *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* and child poverty reduction work programme. Strong commitment at the highest level was demonstrated by the near unanimous parliamentary support to pass the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018 and the Children's Amendment Act 2018, which set a statutory basis to ensure Ministerial commitments to reduce child poverty and improve child wellbeing. Since the Strategy was launched in 2019, the Minister for Child Poverty Reduction has provided ministerial leadership and oversight of the Strategy.

OECD interviews suggest that the focus of placing child wellbeing as a core policy priority at the highest political level resulted in strong convening power to engage relevant Ministries and agencies in the Strategy's implementation. Given its capacities and expertise, the Department of the Prime Minister has focused on driving co-ordination and reporting on progress on child wellbeing, while relying on Ministries to take policy-specific decisions as well as manage data collection and monitoring. Changes at the highest political level have at least temporarily impacted the priorities set around addressing child poverty and improving child wellbeing.

Source: (DPMC, 2022^[14]); (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022^[15]).

Cross-sectoral / transversal

As discussed in Chapter 4, given the transversal nature of child and youth policy, effective cross-sectoral approaches are critical to overcome administrative silos in the delivery of programmes and services by government departments, agencies, and other stakeholders. A cross-sectoral strategy is defined as a framework that covers all relevant policy and service areas, based on effective co-ordination mechanisms among different ministries, across different levels of government, and with the participation of public bodies responsible for, and working on, issues affecting children and young people (OECD, 2020^[6]).

Most national child and youth strategies across OECD countries acknowledge the importance of transversality in their design. However, countries often face practical challenges to collaborate across sectors, and to deliver holistic approaches (OECD, 2020^[6]). OECD findings show that some of the most important barriers to inter-ministerial co-ordination in youth policy include an absence of institutional mechanisms to encourage co-ordination (45% of central youth entities across OECD countries pointed to this as a key challenge). Common barriers also include insufficient capacities in line ministries (42%), insufficient capacities within the government entity leading on youth affairs (39%), and a lack of interest from line ministries (20%).

Strengthening cross-government and inter-agency collaboration is a core priority of the DCEDIY, as demonstrated by the Department's spearheading efforts to foster political commitment from line Departments throughout the elaboration and implementation of *Young Ireland*. As pointed by reviews of the predecessor framework, reforms on policy co-ordination structures under *Young Ireland* are motivated by the need to secure high-level, appropriate, and effective representation across Departments, simplifying organisational structures, strengthening cross-sectoral co-ordination and breaking silos, and streamlining governance processes across national, sectoral, and DCEDIY-led constituent strategies (see Chapter 4 and relevant sections in this chapter).

Involving Departments throughout the policy cycle

Involving key stakeholders early in the policy cycle can help foster a sense of (shared) ownership, co-operation, and accountability, as well as anticipate possible co-ordination and implementation challenges (OECD, 2020^[6]; DCEDIY, 2020^[7]). The DCEDIY has led efforts to involve relevant Departments in the planning and development of *Young Ireland*. Bilateral meetings between the DCEDIY and relevant Departments were conducted between October 2022 and January 2023 to discuss key areas of focus and actions to be put forward for inclusion in *Young Ireland*. Broad Framework objectives were also discussed at four meetings of a Government Reference Panel, convened in October 2022, and including high-level policymakers from across government departments relevant to the implementation of child and youth policies. In March 2023, the DCEDIY circulated proposed actions to Departmental representatives on the Government Reference Panel. Departments were also encouraged to include actions of their own. The proposals included a discussion on identifying key issues as presented in consultations, data, and research; setting out proposed outcomes; and proposing actions for each Department. Departments were invited to consider these, amend them, and put forward alternatives where these were considered necessary.

While commitments under the five national outcomes will be implemented by their respective Departments, establishing a sense of continued ownership and accountability throughout the implementation of *Young Ireland* is critical. The Policy Forum, discussed in the following sections, provides an opportunity for ongoing engagement from all departments to drive co-ordination and strengthen monitoring and evaluation practices across the whole of government.

Findings from the BOBF 2014-20 mid-term review and annual reports pointed to the need to narrow down the focus of policy areas of its predecessor and to strengthen policy co-ordination, particularly to address the needs of children and youth with complex needs (DCEDIY, 2020^[7]; DCEDIY, 2018^[16]). As discussed in Chapter 4, the Spotlights Initiatives were developed under *Young Ireland* to place complex challenges at the forefront of the policy agenda and to create a sense of shared ownership and accountability for these among all relevant departments and agencies. At the time of writing, no unified approach to developing spotlights has been identified, raising questions over disparities on implementation of currently identified spotlight priorities over time. According to DCEDIY, further spotlights beyond child poverty, mental health and well-being, and disability may still be identified in future if needed, based on (DCEDIY, 2022^[17]):

- The need for a coordinated approach and actions across Government;
- Significant areas of concern for children and young people identified in published data, and evidence from published sources;
- Feedback from consultations with children, young people, and other stakeholders, as well as reports on areas where action is needed.

The establishment of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach materialises the government's commitment to prioritise addressing child poverty and is listed under *Young Ireland* as the Spotlight on child poverty. The spotlight on child and youth mental health and well-being, as well as the disability services spotlight also brings together key stakeholders from across government departments and agencies to drive the co-ordination of relevant policies through working groups and other relevant co-ordination arrangements. In the development of these spotlights, adequate communication mechanisms between stakeholders coordinating these and the Policy Forum will be critical, as well as clearly defined membership, purpose, and roles to avoid overlaps. Further, the Spotlights Initiatives also provides an opportunity to identify incentives to drive policy co-ordination in the long term (e.g., financial incentives and pooled funding examples discussed in Chapter 4 as envisaged initially). Another opportunity the Spotlights model presents is to foresee future issues related to children and young people, and to develop a systematic approach to aligning long-term priorities with shorter term policy goals.

OECD evidence on the subject shows that developing incentives and interest to promote co-operation across institutions is a precondition to effectively drive cross-sectoral work. In fact, in 2017, according to the Survey on the Organisation and Functions of the Centre of Government, 40% of surveyed OECD countries (18) cited individual or collective performance targets as existing incentives for policy co-ordination across ministries or departments. In France, for instance, each Central Administration Director (*directeur d'administration centrale*) receives a mandate letter with co-operation objectives to be met. Further, 7 OECD countries confirmed the existence of financial incentives to promote horizontal co-ordination as of 2018, although in most cases this seemed to reflect funding available for cross-cutting projects (OECD, 2018^[18]). As shown in Chapter 4, interviews conducted by the OECD with line Departments and agencies in Ireland found that improving co-operation incentives is needed to encourage cross-departmental efforts and support positive change in the administrative culture. On the other hand, these interviews reflected that siloed funding streams were seen as significant barrier to encourage cross-Departmental collaboration. At the time of writing, it is not envisaged that financial incentives (e.g., pooling of resources) will be provided to strengthen co-operation across Departments in Ireland.

Establishing horizontal (inter-Departmental) co-ordination mechanisms

Most OECD countries have established some form of inter-departmental body, working group or focal point system to formalise inter-Departmental co-ordination in youth policy. For instance, several countries have established inter-departmental committees or interagency working groups. Slovenia and Belgium have appointed focal points to facilitate the co-ordination of youth affairs across agencies (in the Belgian example) and departments (OECD, 2020^[6]).

The success of co-ordination mechanisms partially rests on equipping line Departments with adequate administrative capacity (e.g., human, financial and technical) to collect age-disaggregated evidence, engage in inter-ministerial co-ordination, and mainstream policies to deliver on complex policy areas related to children and young people. Interviews conducted by OECD suggest that appointing representatives with decision-making responsibility, and leveraging these mechanisms to solve practical challenges rather than fulfil bureaucratic requirements is equally important.

Moving away from the structure of BOBF 2014-20 which saw specific departments leading on one of the five national outcomes, it is planned that department representatives under *Young Ireland* work collaboratively through the Policy Forum to drive cross-sectoral co-ordination across all outcomes. Success of the Policy Forum will rest on addressing challenges raised by departmental representatives at the conclusion of the previous national policy framework. These include, for instance, issues related to co-ordination fatigue, unclear allocation of responsibilities, low capacities to engage in governance structures, and a lack of ownership over cross sectoral issues. Further, broader challenges including policy short-termism and changing or unclear policy priorities under the predecessor framework, differences in budgeting and planning cycles across departments delivering on commitments under *Young Ireland*, unclear lines of accountability across coordinating structures, and ensuring that co-ordination meetings serve to *drive* the co-ordination of policy priorities beyond *enabling* information sharing were also noted (see Chapter 4).

Reforms under the new structure of the Policy Forum seek to address several of the challenges above mentioned, including a clear requirement to secure high-level representation of departments in coordinating meetings, and fostering a shared ownership of policy priorities. The development of the Terms of Reference of the Policy Forum provides an opportunity to address issues raised by department representatives on, for instance, defining the expected impact (e.g., sharing an understanding of policy challenges and priorities, driving policy co-ordination) and regularity of meetings of the Forum (e.g., quarterly, annually). This also serves as an opportunity to clarify the extent to which departments can have an impact and influence over other departments' work and on cross-sectoral issues through consultation or lobbying, as well as the role of the centre of government in harmonising priorities across departments

on complex and multisectoral issues. Further, and in alignment with broader OECD findings on good practice, the Terms of Reference could set specific mandates and performance targets for the Forum to drive the implementation of periodic Work Programmes (e.g., through mandate letters from the CoG and the DCEDIY to departments with objectives to be met) (OECD, 2024_[19]). Managing relationships between departments and with the legislative, both through formal and informal channels, (e.g., foreseeing and coordinating opportunities for consultation within government, incentivising partnerships between departments) is also key to ensuring effective and streamlined co-ordination and would be an appropriate responsibility of the Forum. Examples from across the OECD show that the effective implementation of national integrated child and youth strategies relies on the establishment of co-ordination mechanisms to drive policy objectives horizontally and vertically. The following box illustrates examples to coordinating the implementation of national child and youth strategies in Finland and Spain.

Box 8.2. Coordinating the implementation of national child and youth strategies

Finland: Taskforces, Ministerial Working Groups, and Civil Servant Networks

Representatives across different administrative branches were consulted in the elaboration of Finland's *National Child Strategy* in 2020 to define expected outcomes in line with existing work streams across government. Their work was complemented by a working group formed by representatives from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, international organisations (e.g., UNICEF) and civil society organisations.

A Working Group on Children, Youth and Families, established at Minister level oversees the *National Child Strategy*. It includes the Ministers of Education, Social Security, Agriculture and Forestry, Social Affairs and Health, Science and Culture, and the Interior. Further, a Civil Servants Network was created to carry out cross-ministerial work to support the preparation and implementation of the Strategy. It was closely involved in the preparation of the first follow-up report to the Strategy and is involved in preparing the new Implementation Plan, which is expected to be published in Winter 2024.

This Network includes representatives from all Ministries, apart from the Ministry of Defence, and hosts regular meetings (approx. 8 meetings per year). Discussions are focused on the Strategy's Implementation Plan. OECD interviews suggest that the Network has been instrumental to identify potential areas of overlap and ensure policy co-ordination at technical level.

Spain: Strengthening co-ordination between the national and subnational level

In Spain, policy planning and delivery is largely decentralised to the subnational level through the Autonomous Communities. The Sectoral Conference on Childhood and Adolescence, set up in 2021, is the main co-ordination mechanism to coordinate child and youth policies across regions, and to strengthen policy coherence between the national and subnational level.

This Conference brings together the Ministry and Social Rights and Agenda 2030 (the lead entity of child and youth policy), Autonomous Communities, and local authorities. It meets every semester, and is chaired by the Ministry, with vice-chairing from representatives from the Autonomous Communities and the High Commissioner against Child Poverty. Each Autonomous Community sends a representative to the Conference, who has decision-making power over, and expertise on, child and adolescent policies. Established by law, the minimum required rank for this representative is that of Deputy Director General, which ensures regular participation of high-level representatives across regions. A representative from the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces is also present at meetings.

At least twelve Agreements have been reached by the Conference through this co-ordination mechanism to distribute and employ central funding to finance initiatives for children and adolescents

across regions. These Agreements serve to harmonise practices and create joint agreements on the implementation of initiatives, from their planning to their implementation, to their monitoring and evaluation.

Source: (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030, 2023^[20]); (Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020^[21]); (Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021^[22]).

Establishing co-ordination mechanisms at subnational level, and between national and subnational levels of government

Most government services critical to children and young people in Ireland are provided locally. Collaboration at a subnational level, and between national and subnational government levels, is hence critical to translate policy commitments into effective programmes and tailored services on the ground, notably for children and young people from marginalised backgrounds (OECD, 2020^[6]).

The revamping of co-ordination structures underpinning the implementation of *Young Ireland* provides an opportunity to address challenges presented in Chapter 4 in relation to strengthening co-ordination among providers of services for children and young people at subnational level in Ireland. For instance, differences in planning and funding cycles between key local actors (e.g., Children and Young People's Services Committees and Local Community Development Committees), discrepancies between high-level policy priorities and service delivery practices, limited budgets dedicated to programming and administrative support for local implementation structures, and the duplication of local coordinating structures were all considered by OECD interviewees as key challenges to delivering more tailored and responsive programmes and support.

According to the interviews conducted, the lack of effective co-ordination tends to disproportionately affect children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds and with more complex needs. For instance, variance in capacities and resourcing of local service delivery across local authority areas has led to geographical disparities in access to coordinated services. Further, two high-level cases documented by the Ombudsman for Children Office highlighted that those with complex needs often face challenges to access adequate services at an agency level (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2020^[23]; Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2018^[24]) (see Chapters 2 and 4). These cases denote important challenges regarding setting clear accountability lines in cases where children and young people present needs that require integrated responses from multiple government agencies.

The CYPSC National Steering Group of BOBF 2014-20 will not be reinstated under *Young Ireland*. According to DCEDIY, local authorities and CYPSC will instead be represented under the Policy Forum as discussed in previous sections. Further, as part of the 'Interagency Co-ordination' stream of the 'Enabling Environment' actions, a set of initiatives are to be taken forth by DCEDIY to strengthen co-operation between national and subnational government bodies. For instance, in January 2024, the Centre for Effective Services (CES) launched a review of CYPSC commissioned by DCEDIY. The review seeks to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of CYPSC and inform a three-year roadmap to guide the direction and resourcing of the Committees and support them to implement commitments under *Young Ireland*. The Review, to be completed by end of 2024, includes desk research exercises, surveys to the entire CYPSC membership, and focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders. DCEDIY also plans to continue developing and supporting Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) by providing trainings and guidance to CFSN members and ensuring that these can provide feedback to local and national planning in a regular and structured manner.

Participatory

Adopting a participatory approach, or the process of engaging all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the policy cycle, from the elaboration and implementation to monitoring and evaluation, is key to ensuring that

Young Ireland is informed by the needs and interests of children and young people from diverse backgrounds (OECD, 2020^[6]). As discussed in Chapter 5, the DCEDIY has established several frameworks, tools, and structures to foster child and youth consultation and engagement, notably the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-20 and its successor strategy currently in development (DCEDIY, 2019^[25]). Harnessing these structures, in the development of *Young Ireland*, DCEDIY engaged extensively with stakeholders that may influence or may be impacted by the new Framework.

Three reports summarising consultation activities leading to the development of *Young Ireland* are published on the government's website along the new Framework. These include a *Final Report on Public Consultation*, a *Minority Ethnic Young People Consultation*, and a *Young Carers Consultation Report*. The development of consultation activities informing *Young Ireland* and the contents of these reports are analysed in the following sections.

Meaningful participation of youth organisations, youth workers and non-organised youth

The meaningful involvement of child and youth stakeholders in the development of the new Framework includes a range of steps, including identifying the issues at hand and defining expected results of the participation process (OECD, 2022^[26]). The results of previous relevant consultations can also be a useful reference when identifying key issues, and taking these into account when drafting new consultation plans can be an effective way to ensure stakeholders see the impact of their voice on government plans and decisions and avoid 'consultation fatigue'.

Prior to the development of *Young Ireland*, DCEDIY led an extensive consultation in 2021 with children and young people to inform Ireland's reports on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Universal Periodic Review. According to DCEDIY, this consultation process, along with a literature review of other consultations with children and young people related to BOBF 2014-20, informed the planning of the consultation process for, and the drafting of, *Young Ireland*.

Further, in January 2022, the Minister for CEDYIY launched an online public consultation to inform *Young Ireland* (DCEDIY, 2022^[27]). The consultation included 12 open ended questions centred around the five national outcomes, guiding participants to provide their positive and negative perceptions on outcomes for children and young people, as well as give feedback on what they thought should be the priorities for the new framework. The survey collected a total of 236 responses, of which 58% were from professionals and service providers, 22% were from children and young people, and 20% were from parents. The feedback also included 43 written responses from civil society organisations. Findings from this consultation were summarised into the Final Report on Public Consultation, which includes several measures underlining the transparency of the consultation process. For instance, a summary of responses is provided for each question, as is information on the methods included to conduct the consultation and the types of respondent profiles. A table comparing the ranking of priorities that each group (children and young people, parents, and professionals/service providers) is also included, marking an interest from DCEDIY to consider intergenerational perspectives in the making of *Young Ireland*.

To strengthen the legitimacy of findings and better contextualise responses, future reports could include a more detailed account of efforts to outreach to and recruit participants (e.g., channels used to raise awareness of the consultation and incentivise respondents to provide input). Further, to ensure that policymakers can deliver meaningful responses to feedback and identify gaps in representation, more detailed information on participants (e.g., geographic spread, socioeconomic background of respondents) could be useful. The Report could also refer to the findings of consultations led by the DCEDIY outside of the online survey (including to government bodies and civil society groups as discussed below) and identify areas of convergence and divergence in feedback. Future consultation exercises could also embed an evaluation of the participatory process by, for instance, setting targets to measure the representativeness

of the respondent group, asking respondents on their perceptions of the survey process, among others. Finally, further clarity could be provided to participants and the wider public on how their feedback informed *Young Ireland* (e.g., including clear references to feedback received in the Framework, providing information in the report on how respondents were informed of their impact).

Meaningful participation requires public officials to seek out the views of diverse stakeholders that may be impacted by policy decisions, to address information gaps and strengthen awareness of constituents' varied needs (OECD, 2022^[26]). Alongside the online consultation mentioned above, two consultation exercises were executed to capture the voices of those lesser heard. The DCEDIY National Participation Office (NPO) and the National Youth Council Ireland's Equality and Intercultural Team designed a consultation activity to specifically target children and young people from ethnic minority groups. The consultation included 102 young people aged between 11 and 25, identifying with different ethnic minority backgrounds including Roma, Traveller, African, and Asian communities. Findings of this consultation can be found in the Report on the Consultations with Minority Ethnic Young People (DCEDIY, 2022^[28]). In addition, the National Participation Office and Hub na nÓg prepared a consultation for young carers, or young people with caring responsibilities (e.g., helping care for siblings with special educational needs or disability, helping with the day-to-day care of an ill parent). 15 young carers aged between 7 and 23 years took part in the consultation, whose findings are captured in the Report on Consultation with Young Carers (DCEDIY, 2022^[29]). Questions for both reports did not follow the five national outcomes as it was the case for the general consultation, but instead asked participants to provide feedback on how young people saw their lives and what could be done to improve it. As is the case for the general consultation, future reports could include how feedback considered in the decision-making process.

Beyond the online survey and targeted consultations discussed above, the DCEDIY consulted with a wide range of stakeholders in the process of designing and planning *Young Ireland*, including:

- Government agencies including Tusla, HSE, An Garda Síochána, and the Health Information and Quality Authority.
- Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC).
- Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs), engaged with as part of consultations with Tusla.
- The BOBF National Advisory Council (including academic representatives and key organisations focused on children and young people).
- Organisations focused on children and young people beyond those in the National Advisory Council, including six targeted consultations with civil society carried out by the Children's Rights Alliance, and a presentation to the Prevention and Early Intervention Network.
- Youth participation structures, which included a consultation with Comhairle na nÓg (local child and youth councils) through a meeting of the Youth Assembly members in December 2022.
- Inter-governmental organisations including the January 2023 UN Committee hearing in Geneva.

The varied consultation exercises discussed above demonstrate a commitment to include a holistic array of perspectives and experiences into *Young Ireland*, from high-level political figures to service providers, civil society, young people, and children. In line with OECD evidence on the subject, to strengthen future participation exercises of this nature, the DCEDIY could develop a Participation and Consultation Plan establishing a criteria for who to involve, at what stage, what information/consultation material is available to the public and relevant stakeholders, outreach and closing the loop methods to different population groups depending on the forecasted impact of decisions on their lives, among other elements (OECD, 2022^[30]).

In this respect, a key element to meaningful consultation includes identifying at which stage of the policy cycle stakeholders should be engaged to ensure that their voices are impactful (OECD, 2022^[26]). The efforts discussed above show how stakeholders have been involved in the early stages of developing

Young Ireland, but the framework does not provide an indication on how different constituents would be engaged in the implementation and monitoring and evaluation stages of the Framework.

Varied tools and channels to ensure meaningful participation

Employing diverse tools and channels ensures that stakeholders have options to engage in a way that works for them. The DCEDIY has employed a wide range of consultation methods to engage stakeholders, such as:

- **Face-to-face public meetings** including a roundtable event with Tusla, a cross government roundtable event on data, a youth services forum, and a cross-government workshop on workforce.
- **Virtual meetings** including online consultations with CYPSC, civil society, and a virtual presentation to the Prevention and Early Intervention Network.
- **Advisory and expert group meetings** including virtual meetings with the National Advisory Council
- **One-on-one consultations with senior public officials**, including bilateral meetings with every Department at PO level (other than Department of Foreign Affairs) in person where feasible.
- **Targeted consultations with children and young people**, including an in-person meeting of the youth assembly in December 2022, and in person consultations with young people from minority groups and young carers.
- **An online survey** including a public consultation targeting children, young people, parents, and people working with children and young people and everyone with an interest in this area.

Employing adequate communication channels to advertise opportunities to have a say, including among children and youth (stakeholders) from marginalised backgrounds, is key to an inclusive public consultation process (OECD, 2022^[26]). Reaching minority groups to include in public consultations is a commonly cited challenge across OECD countries, therefore, care should be taken to design targeted outreach efforts through channels commonly used by these groups (OECD, 2018^[31]). Hub na nÓg and the NPO team worked with the National Youth Council of Ireland's (NYCI) Equality and Intercultural Team to recruit ethnic minority young people to provide feedback to inform *Young Ireland*. Young carers, on the other hand, were recruited by Hub na nÓg and the NPO team working with practitioners from Family Carers Ireland, a non-government organisation supporting carers in Ireland. Both consultations also demonstrate responsiveness to the needs of young people during the consultation, by using inclusive engagement methods.

Beyond targeted efforts to recruit young people from ethnic minority groups and young carers, the DCEDIY performed a number of activities to inform the wider public about opportunities to have a say on *Young Ireland*. The Irish Government issued a press release when the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth launched the main public consultation on the new Framework (DCEDIY, 2022^[32]).

OECD interviews with civil society organisations in November 2022, however, denoted that these were not always aware of opportunities to influence the development of the new Framework. This finding reflects a need to develop a stronger communication component from the outset and throughout the implementation of the Framework, which was also noted in conclusions of the Mid-term Review and 2020 Annual Report of BOBF 2014-20 (DCEDIY, 2020^[7]; DCEDIY, 2018^[16]).

Engaging vulnerable and marginalised groups

OECD evidence shows that when young people are systematically engaged in policymaking, from defining, drafting, and reviewing thematic areas of national youth strategies, for instance, they are more likely to express satisfaction with policy outcomes (OECD, 2020^[6]). Further, ongoing youth and child engagement

is key to corroborate available evidence and findings informing decisions related to the provision of services for children and young people, particularly those with complex needs (see Chapter 5).

The above-mentioned reports capturing the voices of young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and young carers represent significant efforts to improve the inclusiveness of public consultations in Ireland. Interviews held with Departments and agencies in November 2022, however, pointed to gaps in their capacity to map the needs of, and engage with, young people and children in vulnerable circumstances. Interviewees discussed that such gaps may lead to lower satisfaction with services among these groups, and a higher likelihood that their concerns will not be considered or be underrepresented in policy and programming (see also Chapter 3, under Youth Outcomes from a Public Governance Perspective). Interviews conducted by the OECD with academics and government stakeholders also pointed to the need to build further capacities within the Department to organise inclusive consultations across all DCEDIY-led strategies. To this end, the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020 was referred to as a good practice example, as young people from less represented backgrounds were involved throughout the development and implementation process, from being part of initial consultations, to sitting in oversight committees.

Resourced/budget

The adequate allocation of resources to stakeholders involved in the implementation and monitoring and evaluation of national child and youth policy frameworks is an important determinant of their outcomes and impact (OECD, 2020^[6]). Resourcing refers to funding, human resources, and supportive measures – from training schemes to funding programmes – to building the capacities of relevant actors.

While the implementation of actions under the five national outcomes of *Young Ireland* rests under the responsibility of individual Departments, the DCEDIY has earmarked resources to support the running of structures developed specifically to govern the Framework (e.g., the Policy Forum, Implementation Team, Advisory Council). Funding has also been allocated to support the development of action under the Enabling Environment initiatives led by *Young Ireland*. At the time of writing, no funding was allocated to incentivise inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination to implement action under the Spotlight initiatives.

Departments are responsible to secure funding to support the implementation of their respective commitments in *Young Ireland* through their own estimates process, which may risk resulting in under investments in addressing cross-cutting policy challenges in the absence of clear policy leadership.

In terms of staffing, out of 619 full-time staff employed by DCEDIY in 2023, three were assigned to develop the new Framework according to DCEDIY, similar to the number of staff assigned to First 5 (3 full time staff) and the European Child Guarantee (2 staff). However, the staff developing *Young Ireland* have had, at times, concurrent responsibilities for other areas. OECD Interviews also pointed to capacity challenges in this regard due to concurrent responsibilities, high workloads, and under-staffing.

Strengthening staffing capacities to deliver on core policy areas also rests on the implementation of skilling programmes and opportunities to gain experience. The DCEDIY's investment in training increased from €354k in 2019 to €569k in 2022, which is aligned with the sixth goal of the Statement of Strategy, which states that the Department will “maintain high standards of performance and corporate governance with engaged motivated and supported staff”.² Staff can access a range of training opportunities, including learning practical skills to use relevant software, workplace management courses, Department-specific learning opportunities and organisational knowledge learning, tertiary education degrees and trainings to access existing resources. In 2022, the DCEDIY provided 3009 training interventions and supported 46 staff members through their Education Support Scheme. Further, over 25 teams were supported with training in the same year.

Ensuring the allocation of sufficient resources to deliver on *Young Ireland* at local level is also key to ensuring national-level strategic priorities are implemented locally. As discussed in Chapter 4, CYPSC are

considered essential to the implementation of the new Framework. Debates in the context of the proposed amendments of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 as they pertain to CYPSC have raised questions within DCEDIY over measures needed to address the capacity challenges faced by the CYPSC Committees. Findings from the public online consultation conducted during the initial phases of the Review of the Child Care Act 1991, reflect concerns from independent reviewers, pointing to a lack of capacities and resources in CYPSC. The DCEDIY is conducting a review to better identify and address these challenges. In particular, the review will seek to understand issues related to varying capacity levels across CYPSC, funding differences, lack of administrative support, planning and reporting concerns, visibility and awareness of work and role of CYPSC, and articulating functions of CYPSC regarding inter-agency co-ordination. The review is expected to inform how *Young Ireland* will govern the work of CYPSC and is expected to feed into a three-year roadmap to support the implementation of recommendations from the ongoing CYPSC diagnosis, secure resourcing, and capacity building for CYPSC, and support the implementation of child poverty pilots.

OECD findings show that in countries where the implementation of the National Youth Strategy, including the core implementation team, is considered to be adequately resourced, respondents are less likely to report lack of human and financial capacities as a barrier to effective cross-governmental co-ordination (OECD, 2020^[6]). In 2020, 17 out of 25 OECD countries reported having budget earmarked to support the implementation of their national youth strategy. Box 8.3 provides comparative accounts of resourcing the implementation of child and young people's strategies in Finland, New Zealand, and Spain.

Box 8.3. Allocating adequate human and financial resources to the implementation of national child and youth strategies

Finland: Incentivising collaboration through seed funding

In Finland, the National Child Strategy Group under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in charge of coordinating the *National Child Strategy* receives half a million euros per year, which goes in large part to staff costs. The Unit is staffed by four civil servants: a lead expert, a legal expert on child rights, a specialist on participation and communication, and an administrative assistant.

Unlike Spain and New Zealand, Finland also uses financial incentives to encourage inter-ministerial co-ordination. In the country's previous administration, according to OECD interviews, the Unit managed a significant budget to provide funding across 30 measures in the Strategy. Due to the large number of projects to track and manage accountability for, the Unit's work was strongly focused on project management, which reportedly detracted from its original purpose to lead on whole-of-government co-ordination. Recent government changes have scaled back the Unit's project funding to enable a stronger focus on co-ordination. Co-funding activities by different Ministries had also been piloted in this strategy.

Spain and New Zealand: Staffing and funding central co-ordination operations

In New Zealand, the Business Unit in charge of implementing the country's *Child and Youth Strategy* is staffed by twelve officials with backgrounds in policy, communications, data, and public consultation and engagement. Yearly funding for this Unit, which amounts to about 1.6 million New Zealand dollars (882,000 EUR approx.), goes to staff salaries and ancillary costs. The Strategy does not use financial incentives to drive cross sectoral co-ordination.

In Spain, the development and implementation of the Strategy for the Rights of Children and Adolescents is staffed by a team of 15 civil servants from the Directorate General for the Rights of Children and Adolescents. As for the *National Youth Strategy 2030*, a team of five civil servants and a number of temporary consultants are in charge of planning and coordinating the implementation of the

Youth Strategy. OECD interviews point to a rough estimate figure of 600,000 EUR per annum is allocated to salaries of relevant personnel in these structures.

Source: OECD peer interviews, September 2023 and (DPMC, 2023^[33]); (Jefatura del Estado, 2022^[34]).

Transparent and Accessible

Transparent and accessible strategies are essential to building trust with citizens and to promoting government legitimacy. Among others, this includes the extent to which policy frameworks clearly state which government authority or authorities has or have the overall co-ordinating responsibility for implementation, whether responsibilities over each policy area are clearly assigned to different stakeholders, and whether the strategy or framework is laid out in publicly accessible documents (OECD, 2020^[6]).

Ensuring the new Framework is easily accessible

Using online channels and laying out *Young Ireland* through public platforms can engage relevant stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring process (OECD, 2020^[6]). Interviews conducted by the OECD with civil society organisations prior to the publication of *Young Ireland* point to the need to better raise awareness and publicise the framework for children and young people, including by giving it a more telling name than its predecessor BOBF, to ensure its coherent and cohesive implementation. These findings are aligned with reflections in the 2020 Annual Report, which pointed to a low level of awareness and visibility of BOBF 2014-20 across sectors, as well as among children, young people and the general public when comparing with other government plans (DCEDIY, 2020^[7]).

From its inception in August 2022, a Blueprint of *Young Ireland* was made publicly available by the DCEDIY through the official government website (DCEDIY, 2022^[17]). OECD interviews conducted in November 2022 with government stakeholders across departments, however, showed limited awareness of the process to elaborate the Blueprint into the new Framework.

Perhaps as a response to these observations, *Young Ireland* includes, as part of its Enabling Environment actions, prominent efforts to build communication and awareness on policies and services delivered under the Framework. These efforts engage varied government and non-government stakeholders to increase communication on *Young Ireland*, as well as promote the rights of children and young people from a whole-of-society approach. A communications action plan has also been published, including short-, medium- and long-term (2024-2028) actions. Overall, *Young Ireland reflects the following communication priorities:*

- The development of an **online Communications Platform** to raise awareness of child and youth rights and wellbeing in the public mind. This platform will serve as a central point for information sharing and as a channel for communication between the Government and the general public (including children and young people), including the development of a campaign website, a social media campaign, and reoccurring events. It is envisaged that the Platform will improve public accountability by gathering strategic documents such as frameworks, implementation plans and reviews, as well as updated information on the Government's agenda related to child and youth (see Chapter 7).
- A **Communications Youth Advisory Panel** will be established to guide the direction of the Communications Platform.
- A **Network of Champions** composed of NGO representatives incentivised through their Service Level Agreements to ensure that children and young people's rights are promoted through their organisations. The DCEDIY will also use this Network to engage organisations who do not normally consider themselves in the children and young people space.

- The publication of **child-friendly versions of policies and strategies** relevant to children and young people.

Clearly defining responsibilities for implementation, monitoring and evaluation

In the absence of a monitoring and evaluation framework at the time of its adoption in November 2023, *Young Ireland* does not clearly allocate responsibilities for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) across its governance structures. This challenge was also raised in OECD interviews conducted with government and non-government stakeholders in Ireland on their perceptions of the predecessor Framework, BOBF 2014-20, who cited needing more clarity regarding the allocation of responsibilities over implementation, and monitoring and evaluation duties, particularly for transversal policy challenges such as child poverty. The development of the Spotlight Initiatives provides a framework to clearly define responsibilities for implementation on complex issues where several departments may need to coordinate. It is, however, unclear whether M&E responsibilities will be also clearly allocated under this model (see section below).

Results of surveys, consultations and reports are publicly available

The publication of results of consultations leading to the development of *Young Ireland*, as mentioned in previous sections, is an important element to increasing transparency and accountability of the Framework. The Communications Platform, once established, will mark an important step towards increasing the accessibility of publications and information to the public, by acting as a hub to centralise relevant findings that may be useful to departments, agencies, and the wider public. Observations on the predecessor framework, BOBF 2014-20, point that the publication of periodic reviews, as well as ensuring that consultation opportunities are well communicated on, are key learnings to be brought forward into *Young Ireland*.

Evidence-based

The OECD qualifies a national youth and child strategy or framework as *evidence-based* when all stages of policy development and implementation are based on reliable, relevant, independent and up-to-date data and research that reflects the needs and realities of children and young people (OECD, 2020^[6]).

As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6, the DCEDIY has developed instruments and initiatives to better measure the needs and realities of children and young people, develop evidence-based policies, and track progress across key policy areas. Existing DCEDIY projects such as the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study and the What Works initiative (see Chapter 5, as well as the two progress reports resulting from the BOBF 2014-20 Indicator Set, now renamed to the Children and Young People Indicator Set,³ also provide a strong evidence basis to build on and inform *Young Ireland*.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 the Children and Young People Indicator Set will guide, as it was done for the predecessor Framework, the direction of *Young Ireland* across the five national outcomes. While the CYP Indicator Set remains relatively unchanged from its predecessor, there are a number of actions under *Young Ireland* to strengthen government capacities to collect, disaggregate and use data on children and young people. These are discussed in the sections below.

Regularly conduct research on children and young people

Regularly conducting research on children and young people throughout the cycle of *Young Ireland* is an important determinant to delivering evidence-based policymaking and programming (OECD, 2020^[6]).

In the context of uncertainty and unforeseen developments, such as proven by the COVID-19 pandemic, a responsive Framework depends on the continued and systematic collection of evidence and publication

of the challenges faced by children and young people to re-prioritise government action if needed and ensure progress is measured over time.

For instance, as noted in Chapter 6 the systematic collection and use of data on child and youth outcomes remains uneven across the 70 indicator areas of the Set, with particular challenges reported in terms of mapping the needs of vulnerable children and youth (DCEDIY, 2022^[35]). Further, OECD interviews suggest that capacities to conduct research on a regular and ongoing basis across Government departments and agencies in Ireland are often limited by a lack of resourcing, the need to professionalise and streamline data collection and research efforts, gaps regarding research co-ordination and standardisation across governmental, agency and other stakeholders, and challenges to collecting data at a county level. As a way to tackle these challenges, the DCEDIY is planning to publish an Equality Data Strategy 2023-2027, which is also cited in *Young Ireland*. This Strategy's purpose is to "advance the collection, standardisation, use and monitoring of all equality data, including data relating to children and young people, to highlight inequalities that may otherwise remain hidden" (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]).

Setting and coordinating research priorities across different stakeholders was raised by OECD interviewees as a key area requiring further work, particularly regarding regularly mapping the needs of children and young people living in vulnerable circumstances. A Cross Government Research Programme is being established to drive research co-ordination as part of Young Ireland commitments to strengthen the evidence base available to inform policymaking and address data gaps (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]).

Age-disaggregated data is collected and used systematically by relevant Departments and agencies

Collecting age-disaggregated data to inform the work of Departments across each of the five national outcomes is key to ensure *Young Ireland* is responsive to the needs of children and young people. The development of the BOBF Indicator Set included meetings with a range of government departments and agencies to consult on the priorities and appropriate data measures across each of the 70 indicator areas included (DCEDIY, 2022^[35]). Findings from a workshop held by DCEDIY in October 2022 with government departments and agencies, however, showed gaps regarding the capacity to collect age-disaggregated data on domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, homelessness of children and young people, education of children in care and those with family members in prison, and a range of other relevant healthcare indicators (DCEDIY, 2022^[35]). Workshop participants also called for better collection of data disaggregated by other factors, including ethnicity, a task which raises important ethical and practical considerations.

The DCEDIY has been gathering data about the needs of children and young people to inform *Young Ireland* through different methods. According to DCEDIY, these include the direct collection of evidence by units in DCEDIY, government agencies (e.g., Tusla, HSE), the National Statistics Office, other Departments, and from insights from consultations with children and youth stakeholders. Challenges, however, have been reported on the collection of age-disaggregated data for at least ten indicators across the five national outcomes. The Equality Data Strategy may serve to advance these efforts throughout the lifetime of the Framework.

Table 8.1. Challenges to collecting age-disaggregated data on the needs of children and young people in Ireland

Outcome	Challenges
Active and Healthy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CSO's National Travel Survey is a household survey on the travel behaviour of respondents and provides detailed information on the domestic travel patterns of Irish residents. There is currently no data, however, on the journeys of those aged 0-18, such as journeys to school, or their use of active travel. The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) measures the participation in sports and physical activity for those aged above 16. Gaps exist, however, regarding the collection of disaggregated data specifically on those in different age cohorts up to 24, as well as measures of those under 16.
Achieving full potential in learning and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaps exist regarding the consistent collection of data related to satisfaction with, and enjoyment of, school. More consistent data collection on the extent to which third level students feel they belong in a third level institution was identified as a need.
Safe and protected from harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaps were shown regarding the collection of periodic data on engagement with gambling.
Economic security and opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CSO's Survey on Income and Living Conditions presents data on poverty among 0–17-year-olds, but the next age range is 18-34, combining those who are young people (18-24), with those who are adults (24+). Collecting disaggregated data for these categories was identified as a need. Gaps on the collection of periodic data on the proportion of Defence Forces personnel who are young people (18-24 years of age) were identified.
Connected, respected, and contributing to their world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaps were shown regarding the periodic collection of data related to satisfaction with mental health services from patients.
Potential spotlight on child poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CSO's Survey on Income and Living Conditions also presents data on poverty among 0–17-year-olds but collecting further disaggregated data for relevant categories was identified as a need.
Other areas of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collecting periodic data on the proportion of the national budget spent on children and young people (0-24), under the age criteria of equality budgeting, was identified as missing.

Source: 22IE17 OECD Policy Questionnaire answers received from DCEDIY in April 2023.

Systems to facilitate information exchange

Developing systems to facilitate information exchange across stakeholders involved in the implementation is paramount to the well-coordinated and efficient roll-out of *Young Ireland* both at national and subnational levels. As in many OECD countries, the interviews conducted by OECD suggest that the Government in Ireland faces important challenges to facilitate information exchange across departments and agencies when working on issues related to child and youth policies. Among the main barriers cited, government departments and agencies note the need to develop overarching infrastructure systems to share and coordinate data across government bodies, building better relationships across departments to enable the transfer of information, the need to ensure connectivity across datasets, issues to sharing and receiving data from the private sector, and to better coordinate data collection cycles across departments (DCEDIY, 2022^[35]). Interviews conducted by the OECD in April 2023 also pointed to risks and uncertainties when the collection and sharing of personal information of minors is concerned, particularly in the context of the EU General Data Protection Regulation.

OECD interviews further suggest that children with complex cases and needs falling under the remit of several departments and agencies are most affected by the shortcoming in data co-ordination. A possible solution to help address this challenge included the development of a national health identifier by the Department of Health to act as a recipient for data of files across relevant bodies.

Efforts cited under *Young Ireland* to address these challenges include:

- **Data linking capacities:** The DCEDIY and the Central Statistics Office plan to advance initiatives to strengthen data linking across relevant departments, including publishing findings on a project focused on linking data related to children in care with school enrolment and providing guidance to departments and agencies on developing cross-government data linking projects.

- The DCEDIY plans to leverage the **What Works Evidence Hub** to promote the use of evidence-informed approaches to early intervention programmes, as well as use geo-special tools to map children’s services and inform policy delivery. Among the tools provided, What Works has developed a Data Measurement Toolkit and an Early Intervention Foundation Guidebook, which provide guidance on how to gather insight from data to improve services for children, young people, and their families.
- **Governance Group of the Outcomes for Children National Data and Information Hub:** The DCEDIY sits in the Governance Group of the Outcomes for Children National Data and Information Hub along with Tusla, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and Barnardos, a children’s charity in Ireland working for children and families from vulnerable backgrounds. This Hub is a joint initiative to provide a national standardised technical solution for mapping outcomes and indicators for children and young people across the five national outcome areas. The Hub is currently in re-development to become a centralised space to host a range of published data from various agencies involved in the provision of services to children, young people, and their families. Part of the workstreams of this project include training and support to personnel to utilise this system and better inform policies under *Young Ireland*. The Hub is continually updated when new progress reports become available.

Despite these notable initiatives, the CYP Indicator Set is likely to continue showing gaps across significant dimensions, as no initiatives are currently in place to develop indicators to measure access to, take up or quality of services, or to assess the effectiveness of the state in adopting a rights-based approach to delivering for children and young people. Finally, given the nature of the Indicator Set – whose purpose is to set the direction of policies rather than measure the effectiveness of actions – a further development of the indicator set would be needed to support the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and impact of *Young Ireland* (see following section).

Strengthening monitoring, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms

Sound Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems enable policymakers to better understand what works and what does not to ensure policy choices are rooted in evidence-informed decisions (Box 8.4). In fact, OECD survey findings show that 95% of responding OECD countries set up specific mechanisms to monitor and evaluate their national youth strategies, albeit through varying approaches (OECD, 2020^[6]). However, M&E continues to be an important challenge across OECD countries. One in every four countries with national youth strategies monitors these on an ad-hoc basis rather than regularly. Around half of strategies do not include key performance indicators linked to policy objectives and targets. Mechanisms to ensure the quality of data collected are also infrequent, with only 8% of countries using quality control or assurance mechanisms and developing staff competences. Moreover, less than one in four countries applies specific mechanisms for both ex-post and ex-ante evaluation, and one in three countries report not to use the evidence generated from M&E reports to inform policymaking (OECD, 2020^[6]).

Box 8.4. Results-based Monitoring and Evaluation systems to inform policymaking

Comprehensive results-based Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems can help to investigate whether a certain project, programme, or policy has led to the desired medium- and long-term results they were initially designed to achieve (Kusek and Rist, 2004^[36]). An M&E system can also provide information on how progress towards those achievements has taken place and identify any challenges that may have arisen in the process.

The wealth of information provided by a functioning, comprehensive M&E system is useful for both internal and external stakeholders. Internally, an M&E system is an essential public management tool that can help policymakers to track progress and demonstrate the impact of a particular policy or intervention. But M&E results are also important to the public, who are interested in the impact from their government's actions and who are expecting certain results from those actions. A well-built M&E system can help in clarifying and articulating policy goals, identifying promising practices, and even detecting programme weaknesses and potential actions to correct those weaknesses. As a result, M&E systems are a crucial tool to promote transparency and accountability of policymaking.

While there is no unique way to build and maintain a results-based M&E system, there are some key and necessary steps to be considered when designing such a system. The OECD's Analysis of the Monitoring of Child Policies and Outcomes in Ireland (OECD, 2024^[37]) provides overall guidance and an overview of the sequential steps that should be considered when building a robust results-based M&E system for child and youth policies in Ireland, building on good practice examples in other OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2024^[37]), Analysis of the Monitoring System for Child Policies and Outcomes, *forthcoming*, OECD Publishing.

The OECD's Analysis of the Monitoring System for Child Policies and Outcomes (OECD, 2024^[37]) identified gaps in the BOBF monitoring framework and suggests areas that could be considered for improvement when developing a M&E system for *Young Ireland*. In particular, the report calls for a more comprehensive articulation of the logic of change that underpins the policy framework. Neither *Young Ireland* nor its predecessor BOBF make it explicit why and how the government's commitments and transformational goals, if realised, are expected to contribute to the identified policy outcomes, making it difficult to evaluate the impact of government action under either of the frameworks. Other challenges identified include insufficient human and financial resources allocated to the M&E of *Young Ireland*, which was reflected in BOBF as well. Further, it was noted that there was an ineffective dissemination of information on the outcomes and impact of BOBF across relevant departments, agencies, civil society organisations and the wider public. These dissemination challenges will likely be present in M&E processes of *Young Ireland*, given the similar issues both frameworks face.

The Annual Reviews of BOBF showed a need to embed M&E considerations from the start of the policy planning process, all the while ensuring that monitoring practices do not impact the ability of government bodies to be responsive to complex and unforeseen challenges. These Reviews called for improved M&E practices to standardise policy implementation cycles, as well as implementing quality standards, across all five national outcome areas. *Young Ireland* presents an opportunity to address these challenges, although the new Framework does not cite specific developments in these areas.

Findings from interviews conducted by the OECD with stakeholders involved in policy M&E in Ireland reflected calls to standardise reporting systems across bodies in charge of implementing the successor Framework. Developing mechanisms to understand the impact of public spending on child and youth

outcomes was also raised as an area of possible future work. Further, strengthening M&E practices to measure the impact of procurement of civil society organisations (CSOs) was raised as being key to building a trusting relationship between government and non-government organisations. To this end, while the communications component does mention civil society organisations in the context of service delivery, it is unclear how *Young Ireland* will strengthen engagement with CSOs in the M&E process.

OECD interview findings also reflected the need to revise existing legislative frameworks underpinning current M&E practices to ensure these realistically reflect the staffing and resources available to conduct M&E across policy areas. These proposed revisions were framed as a way to strengthen the legal basis for better cross-sectoral collaboration to monitor and evaluate child and youth policies across the new governance structures, as well as leverage the role of entities outside of these (e.g., Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, Ombudsman for Children’s Office) as reflected in the 2022 Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection (Mahony, 2022^[38]). Finally, as aligned with the 2020 Annual Review of BOBF, OECD interviews reflected a need to embed monitoring and accountability considerations into the policy design process, by establishing measurable goals from the outset. Strengthening monitoring and accountability mechanisms was also seen as key to align national-level policy design with policy implementation at the subnational level.

As the DCEDIY will seek to review the role and functions of governance structures under *Young Ireland*, there is significant scope to clarify M&E responsibilities, both for the Framework and also to guide the harmonisation of M&E practices on child and youth policies across government departments.

Introduction to DCEDIY-led constituent strategies

Young Ireland has been elaborated in a complex landscape of DCEDIY-led policy frameworks and governance arrangements (Table 8.2). The following sections discuss the governance set-ups underpinning the implementation of the European Child Guarantee (ECG) National Action Plan (NAP) and the *First 5* strategy, which addresses a sub-set of the target group of *Young Ireland*, namely children up to five years of age. The assessment covers the human and financial capacities dedicated to the implementation of the ECG NAP and *First 5*, the structures established to encourage inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination, as well as other governance aspects to evaluate the level of policy coherence and potential overlaps. Similar discussions on other relevant DCEDIY-led strategies are included in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Table 8.2. Overview of DCEDIY-led strategies focused on improving child and youth outcomes in Ireland

Name of the strategy/framework	Timespan	Focus	Governance structures	Indicator set
First 5	2019-2028	Babies and children up to 5 years old	BOBF 2014-20 structures + First 5 Inter-Departmental Group (<i>Young Ireland</i> structures as of 2023)	No <i>ad hoc</i> indicator set but references to the one developed in BOBF 2014-20
European Child Guarantee National Action Plan	Not specified	Children and young people in need up to 18 years old	<i>Young Ireland</i> implementation structures	Actions to be incorporated in the indicator set developed for <i>Young Ireland</i>
National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making	2015-2020	Children and young people	BOBF 2014-20 structures + Hub na nÓg	No <i>ad hoc</i> indicator set but actions implemented in the framework of BOBF 2014-20
National Youth Strategy	2015-2020	Young people aged 10-24 years	BOBF 2014-20 structures + National Youth Strategy	Key indicators relevant to the youth cohort

Name of the strategy/framework	Timespan	Focus	Governance structures	Indicator set
			Lead Team	developed in BOBF 2014-20
LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy	2018-2020	LGBTI+ young people	BOBF 2014-20 structures + Oversight Committee + Youth Advisory Group	No indicators, but actions identified and assigned to “owners” and relevant “partners”
Migrant Integration Strategy	2017-2020 (extended until 2021)	Migrants and persons of migrant origin	Migrant Integration Strategy Monitoring and Co-ordination Committee	<i>Ad hoc</i> set of indicators
National Disability Inclusion Strategy	2017-2021 (extended until 2022)	People with disabilities	Disability Stakeholders Group + the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group + National Disability Authority + National Disability Strategy Interdepartmental Committee	<i>Ad hoc</i> set of indicators
National Strategy for Women and Girls	2017-2020 (extended until 2021)	Women and girls	Strategy Committee + inter-departmental teams	<i>Ad hoc</i> set of indicators
National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy	2017-2021	Traveller and Roma people	National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy Steering Group	<i>Ad hoc</i> set of indicators

Source: Developed by the OECD (2023).

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families 2019-2028

First 5's focus, actions, and financial resources

First 5 is a ten-year whole-of-government strategy developed by DCEDIY focused on babies, young children, and their families. *First 5* aims to ensure that all children have positive early experiences and get a strong start in life. The strategy was adopted in 2018 during the implementation of BOBF 2014-20 and runs up until 2028 (Government of Ireland, 2019_[39]). Introduced initially as a commitment to develop an Early Years Strategy by the Government of Ireland under BOBF 2014-20, *First 5* remains one of the constituent strategies of the successor policy framework for children and young people, *Young Ireland* (Government of Ireland, 2023_[40]). The strategy document has so far been complemented by a first implementation plan for 2019-2021 and a second one for 2023-2025, launched in November 2023. Implementation reports have also been published for 2019, for 2020, and for 2021-2022 (Government of Ireland, 2023_[41]).

First 5 complements BOBF 2014-20 and *Young Ireland* by focusing specifically on the age group up to 5 years old (Government of Ireland, 2019_[39]). It reinforces commitments made in BOBF 2014-20 to deliver improvements across the five national outcomes and identifies five major areas for policy action – what are described in the strategy as the *First 5* Big Steps (Government of Ireland, 2019_[39]):

1. Access to a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring, including extending parental leave for both mothers and fathers;
2. A new model of parenting support;
3. New developments in child health via a dedicated child health workforce;
4. Reform of the early learning and care system;
5. A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

The *First 5* strategy is more detailed than BOBF 2014-20 was in terms of the specific actions identified. Yet, objectives and actions in *First 5* do not refer to BOBF 2014-20 except when it comes to governance structures and mechanisms. As explained in the text of the strategy itself, the actions proposed in *First 5* aim to complement and add to the pre-existing initiatives and policies, acknowledging the multidimensional benefits, both immediate and long-term, of investing in early childhood (Government of Ireland, 2019^[39]). The drivers for the development of this strategy are similar to those identified for BOBF 2014-20, notably the need to improve co-ordination across different agencies, departments, NGOs, and other stakeholders involved in the delivery of programmes and services to improve the wellbeing of children and young people. Leading and partner structures responsible for implementing the strategic actions identified in *First 5* mostly match the stakeholders that were also responsible for the implementation of commitments under BOBF 2014-20, including all main departments and Tusla (Government of Ireland, 2019^[39]).

Compared to BOBF 2014-20, *First 5* is focusing on inputs rather than measurable outcomes. The major areas for action make no mention of new indicators to track progress in the outcomes for this age group, but rather refer to the set developed for BOBF 2014-20 to monitor progress and identify changes and trends (Government of Ireland, 2019^[39]). In turn, BOBF 2014-20 included clear outcome targets to tackle child poverty, address social exclusion and improve wellbeing of children and young people. By way of comparison, despite one of the Five Big Steps being about addressing early childhood poverty, no policy target is mentioned in the strategy. With the adoption of *Young Ireland* and the beginning of Phase 2 of *First 5* implementation in 2023, some of the actions initially included in the strategy and addressing needs across the whole of childhood have been extracted. They will be integrated into the future implementation and monitoring arrangements for new national policy framework with the aim to promote a more streamlined and targeted approach (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]).

Governance arrangements for the implementation of First 5

The implementation of *First 5* relied on the same governance structures established for BOBF 2014-20 (Government of Ireland, 2019^[39]) until 2023, and will now be continued under the arrangements underpinning the implementation of *Young Ireland* (Government of Ireland, 2023^[40]). Such a common governance structure is explained by the nature of the *First 5* strategy – being a constituent strategy of BOBF 2014-20 and then *Young Ireland* – and the possibility to create synergies between them.

Under BOBF 2014-20, the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Services was in charge of overseeing implementation and promoting accountability, while the Children and Young People's Policy Consortium had the responsibility to oversee cross-government implementation in co-operation with several structures at different levels – e.g., sponsors group, advisory group, committees. In the current configuration, as explained in the strategy's Implementation Plan 2023-2025, the oversight of and accountability for the implementation of *First 5* will rest with the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, supported by the Senior Officials' Group for what concerns its work in this area (Government of Ireland, 2023^[40]), as in the case of *Young Ireland*.

A *First 5* Inter-Departmental Group chaired by DCEDIY and bringing together representatives from various Government Departments and State agencies was established to oversee the development of the 2019-2021 Implementation Plan (Government of Ireland, 2019^[39]), and will continue to work for the 2023-2025 period (Government of Ireland, 2023^[40]). The Group is mandated to raise awareness and ownership of *First 5* within and across Government Departments, State agencies and among other key stakeholders, as well as to report on progress on the implementation of *First 5* on a bi-annual basis (Government of Ireland, 2019^[42]). Between 2019 and 2021, it also provided guidance and advice to the *First 5* Implementation Team (see below) on approaches to monitoring and reporting, infrastructure to be put in place to support implementation and strategic, policy, legislative and operational issues of relevance to *First 5* and its implementation. By gathering representatives of several departments and agencies, the

Inter-Departmental Group constitutes a forum for discussing challenges and potential solutions, which cut across different departmental portfolios.

At the beginning of the strategy, a *First 5* Implementation Team was established in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCEDIY) to coordinate and monitor the implementation of *First 5* and liaise with the DCEDIY unit, which was in charge of implementing BOBF 2014-20 (Government of Ireland, 2019^[39]). The Implementation Team is currently responsible for leading the co-ordination and monitoring of the implementation of *First 5*, by communicating with stakeholders, developing indicators, and preparing annual reports (Government of Ireland, 2023^[40]). In terms of human capacities, in 2023, three people were reportedly working full-time on *First 5*, with no expectations for an increase in the team size in the following year.

OECD interviews highlighted challenges stemming from the governance arrangements established under Phase 1 of *First 5* implementation until 2023, pointing to concerns regarding their effectiveness and coherence. In fact, while relying on other strategies' governance structures can be an advantage to ensure policy coherence, it also requires effective co-ordination with the national Framework. In this respect, DCEDIY reported that the engagement between the *First 5* Implementation Team and the BOBF 2014-20 Advisory Council was delayed due to a re-prioritisation of the work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Similarly, the Inter-departmental Group was unable to meet as frequently as envisaged due to reprioritisation of the work owing to the COVID-19 crisis.

Additionally, designing a ten-year strategy (2019-2028) on the basis of a six-year national policy framework (2014-2020) poses the risk of potential long-term issues in terms of coherence and effectiveness, particularly as the national framework's implementation period concludes. *First 5* operated independently of BOBF 2014-20 concerning its implementation period but was reliant on its governance structures until 2023. In practice, the expiration of BOBF 2014-20 in 2020 led to the disappearance or operation of some key implementation structures under limited terms of reference. The lack of continuity in the governance structures was reported by DCEDIY as one of the reasons for the delay in the implementation of government commitments under *First 5*. For this, Irish authorities during OECD interviews acknowledged the importance for the successor Framework to BOBF 2014-20 to have due regard to the *First 5* strategy both in terms of implementation and accountability structures. Indeed, *Young Ireland* and the most recent *First 5* Implementation Plan, both released in November 2023, refer to the same implementation arrangements, which is envisaged to streamline procedures and contribute to increased policy coherence.

European Child Guarantee National Action Plan

The European Child Guarantee

The implementation of child and youth policy in Ireland is embedded in a broader EU context of improving policy outcomes for children and young people, notably through the European Child Guarantee (ECG). The ECG was adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2021. It aims to address issues of social exclusion by guaranteeing universal access of children in need to a set of key services, including:

- Free early childhood education and care;
- Free education (including school-based activities and at least one healthy meal each school day);
- Free healthcare;
- Healthy nutrition; and
- Adequate housing.

The Council Recommendation defines children in need as “persons under the age of 18 years who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion”, referring in particular to children living in households at risk of poverty, or experiencing severe material and social deprivation, or with very low work intensity (Council of the

European Union, 2021^[43]). As stated in the text of the Council Recommendation establishing the Guarantee, while most children in the EU already have access to these services, inclusive and truly universal access results to be critical for ensuring equal opportunities for all children, especially those experiencing poverty or other forms of disadvantage such as homelessness, severe housing deprivation, disability, mental health issues, and children from a migrant or minority ethnic backgrounds, in alternative or institutional care, and in precarious family situations (Council of the European Union, 2021^[43]).

To support the implementation of the ECG, EU Member States are required to nominate a Child Guarantee coordinator and submit action plans, covering the period until 2030 and considering national, regional, and local circumstances as well as existing policy actions and measures to support children in need. The national action plans should identify children in need, the barriers they face in accessing and taking up the core services identified by the Guarantee and identify existing and planned policy measures at national and subnational level to improve their access. EU Member States are advised to involve relevant stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations, in the implementation of the plans and to regularly monitor implementation progress through the development of relevant indicators (Council of the European Union, 2021^[43]).

Ireland's Child Guarantee National Action Plan

To support the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, the Government of Ireland submitted its National Action Plan (NAP) to the European Commission in May 2022. An interdepartmental group convened by the DCEDIY drafted the Plan (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]). The government also established an EU and International Unit within the DCEDIY to, *inter alia*, lead the co-ordination and implementation of actions under the European Child Guarantee. As of 2023, two full-time staff within the DCEDIY worked on the European Child Guarantee, however, they both had additional work-related responsibilities. The head of EU and International Unit acts as the European Child Guarantee coordinator.

The NAP includes data and statistics on children in vulnerable cohorts in Ireland such as, for example, the share or number of children living in consistent or at risk of poverty, those with disabilities or mental health issues, children with a migrant background, and those who are members of the Traveller community (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]). Moreover, as recommended by the EU, it identifies the main barriers to accessing key services that vulnerable children and their families can face in Ireland, based on inputs received from civil society and other relevant stakeholders as part of the consultation process organised for the development of the NAP. The online consultation was organised by the DCEDIY between December 2021 and January 2022 and was open to everyone. The Department received 21 submissions in total. The drafting process of the NAP was also informed by consultations with experts organised by relevant departments in the formulation of policy priorities that would have taken place outside of the actions related to the European Child Guarantee (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]).

The NAP outlines the existing and planned initiatives aiming to remove barriers which impede children to access key services. Each universal or sectoral intervention is accompanied by the indication of the European Child Guarantee action it refers to, as well as the specification of the target group, the number of children and families impacted, and the stakeholder leading within the government. As universal actions, the NAP highlights the commitment to piloting Local Area Child Poverty Plans in four CYPSC areas in co-operation with their corresponding Local Community and Development Committees, as well as the promotion of awareness campaigns regarding the provision of key services referenced under the European Child Guarantee (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]).

There is no specific budget allocated to support the co-ordination of the NAP. Still, the Plan provides some details on the yearly expenditures made on programmes led by different departments, which are aligned with the objectives of the European Child Guarantee, amounting to a total of €7.8bn (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]). The NAP highlights that the majority of funding for the implementation of the initiatives included in the Plan comes from the Irish Exchequer, the government's main accounting fund. Relevant

departments are responsible for securing funding for the implementation of their initiatives targeting children and young people in need. It also clarifies that some other projects are being considered for funding under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) – the EU’s main instrument for investing in people, including children – and that new EU-funded projects could emerge after the adoption of the new national policy framework for children and young people, *Young Ireland* (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]).

Implementation of the European Child Guarantee National Action Plan

While the DCEDIY is in charge of coordinating the implementation of the NAP, the Plan also identifies the Departments of Education, Health, Social Protection, and Housing, Local Government and Heritage as leads in driving specific projects in line with their respective mandates to provide relevant services (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]). As stated in the NAP, its implementation (and monitoring) should fall under the umbrella structures created for the new national policy framework for children and young people (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]). With *Young Ireland* in place, the NAP is expected to align with its strategic objectives (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]). In particular, focusing the NAP on a sub-set of the target group covered by BOBF 2014-20 and currently by *Young Ireland* (namely, children and young people in need), it will use the same governance and monitoring structures as *Young Ireland*. This integration will allow its actions to be considered within a broader policy context and help enhance service delivery in areas not explicitly addressed by the ECG (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]).

BOBF / Young Ireland constituent strategies

During the implementation phase of BOBF 2014-20, three whole-of-government constituent strategies were elaborated to support and further develop governance capacities to deliver for children and young people, in alignment with BOBF transformational goals. Leadership, co-ordination and monitoring of these strategies fell under the remit of the DCYA/DCEDIY. Despite *ad hoc* structures being established to support the development and implementation of these strategies (see Table 8.2), each relied essentially on the structures established for BOBF 2014-20 – e.g., the Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium and its supportive structures such as the Sponsors Group, the Implementation Team, the Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC), the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and the EU Structured Dialogue Working Group (Government of Ireland, 2014^[45]). As constituent strategies of BOBF 2014-20, their key achievements were integrated into the BOBF final implementation report (Government of Ireland, 2020^[46]).

- The **National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020** (Government of Ireland, 2015^[47]) was developed by the Citizen Participation Unit of the DCYA in 2015 to ensure that the voices of children and young people are taken into account individually and collectively in their everyday lives. To support the implementation of the strategy, the DCYA funded and oversaw the Comhairle na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg and the Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team, which comprised the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit, three regional Participation Officers and a Children’s Participation Administrator. A centre of excellence, the Hub na nÓg was established under the strategy to ensure capacity building and provide resources for service providers and policymakers to better enable children and young people’s participation. In 2021, the centre also published the National Framework for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (Government of Ireland, 2021^[48]) to provide tools and guidance and focused funding to support departments, agencies, and organisations to improve their engagement practices (see Chapter 5). According to the final review of the Strategy published in January 2023, 93% of the actions were completed or in progress (Government of Ireland, 2023^[49]). A public consultation for developing the successor strategy was conducted in January 2023.

- The **National Youth Strategy 2015-2020** was adopted by the Government after a comprehensive consultation process to improve outcomes for young people aged 10-24 years. It set out government's commitments to ensure a supportive environment for children and young people to achieve their full development potential in terms of health, education, and economic security outcomes. It included a list of outcomes and related actions and identified stakeholders responsible for their implementation. DCYA/DCEDIY provided leadership at the national level to ensure national policy dovetailed with local implementation. To this end, DCYA established a National Youth Strategy Lead Team as central point of contact, to communicate the Strategy and its implementation framework to stakeholders, develop a project plan, coordinate, progress and monitor its implementation and support stakeholders. To monitor progress, key indicators relevant to the youth cohort developed for BOBF 2014-2020 were utilised and progress was recorded in annual reports of BOBF 2014-2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015^[50]).
- The **LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020** (Government of Ireland, 2018^[51]) was a cross-governmental strategy aiming at further enhancing the lives of LGBTI+ young people and addressing key challenges they face in their everyday lives. The publication of the Strategy itself was considered as a specific achievement for BOBF outcome 5. *Ad hoc* structures were established at the stage of the development of the strategy – an oversight committee comprising representatives from government departments, LGBTI+ organisations of young people and experts supporting the development of the Strategy, and a Youth Advisory Group (YAG). Additionally, a representative of the Oversight Committee established to develop the strategy was nominated to BOBF Advisory Council to represent specific LGBTI+ issues (Government of Ireland, 2020^[52]). A LGBTI+ Youth Forum comprising LGBTI+ people aged from 16 to 22 was also established to ensure their participation in the implementation of the strategy (Government of Ireland, 2019^[53]). An implementation report dedicated to the reviewing the LGBTI+ strategy was published by the DCYA in 2019. The report mentions that ensuring full implementation of the actions was a key challenge that required collaborative efforts between leads and partners. The lack of clear roles in the implementation of each action was considered a challenge. Ultimately, a broader LGBTI+ National Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021 (Government of Ireland, 2019^[53]) was developed by the Department of Justice and Equality. An implementation committee chaired by the Minister of State for Equality, Immigration and Integration was established to lead the strategy. Although it was intended to complement the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy, available information suggests that there were no formal links between the two strategies in terms of governance structures.

Other DCEDIY-led strategies

In addition to *Young Ireland, First 5*, the EU Child Guarantee NAP, and BOBF constituent strategies analysed above, there exist several other DCEDIY-led strategies in Ireland that directly or indirectly impact on child and youth outcomes (see Table 8.2) (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021^[54]). Such strategic documents all target specific population segments who may face additional challenges and need additional support, in line with the assessment of children and young people's circumstances presented in *Young Ireland* itself. These strategies and the governance arrangements in place to drive their implementation are mapped and discussed below.

Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020

The **Migrant Integration Strategy (MIS) 2017-2020** (Government of Ireland, 2017^[55]) was adopted in 2017 by the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI) within the Department of Justice. Its objective was to enable migrants or persons of migrant origin, including children and young people, to participate on an equal basis with those of Irish heritage.

The MIS was a whole-of-government strategy involving actions by all Departments. More broadly, it was directed at Government Departments, public bodies, the business sector, community, voluntary, faith-based, cultural, and sporting organisations as well as families and individuals. Most of the actions concerned education under the leadership of the Department of Education and Skills. DCYA/DCEDIY led on one action on inclusive youth work and youth work funding for children and young people from ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers.

In 2020, responsibility for migrant integration, including the oversight of MIS, was transferred under the remit of the DCEDIY (Government of Ireland, n.a.^[56]). The Migrant Integration Strategy Monitoring and Co-ordination Committee, chaired by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, was set up to oversee implementation and provide recommendations on actions to be adjusted or added. The Committee included senior officials from government departments and agencies, as well as representatives from NGOs (Government of Ireland, n.a.^[56]). Although this strategy fell under the remit of DCEDIY, there were no links made with BOBF 2014-20. A mid-term review of MIS highlighted the importance of the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to successful integration. However, it found that monitoring cross-cutting actions was difficult due to the variety of Government Departments and Agencies involved. Moreover, engagement of all members of the Monitoring and Co-ordination Committee has been varied due to competing priorities. Similarly, awareness among local authorities on implementation obligations and migrant communities on opportunities provided by MIS has been uneven despite their critical roles (Government of Ireland, 2019a^[57]).

The strategy was extended until 2021 to allow its actions to continue to be implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to facilitate the development of a new strategic policy approach to migrant integration (Government of Ireland, 2020^[58]). A joint review of the implementation processes underpinning the Migrant Integration Strategy, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy and the National Strategy for Women and Girls (see below) has been commissioned by the DCEDIY and published in May 2023 (The Centre for Effective Studies, 2023^[59]). The results of the review will support the Government in developing a successor framework to the MIS. Public consultations to inform the development of a new strategy have been launched in October 2023.

National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021

The **National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021** (Government of Ireland, 2017^[60]) was adopted in 2017 as a cross-sectoral framework by the Irish Government to address the needs of people with disabilities. The strategy refers to BOBF 2014-2020 as containing a number of commitments from across Government that are relevant to children and young people with a disability (Government of Ireland, 2017^[60]). Key actions were defined under each theme and objective, and responsibility for implementation spelled out across departments, with shared responsibilities identified for cross-cutting actions. The strategy also invited departments to include actions to be delivered by the agencies under their remit and specified that the strategy should be reviewed regularly including for adding new actions.

The strategy was developed through a consultative process involving already existing structures specialised on disability – the Disability Stakeholders Group (DSG), the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group (NDISSG), the National Disability Authority (NDA) and the National Disability Strategy Interdepartmental Committee (Government of Ireland, 2017^[60]). The NDISSG comprised key government departments, the NDA, and the DSG, and was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Strategy. The NDISSG worked on annual plans and met four times a year. Departmental consultative committees (DCC) were established within each government departments to oversee and monitor the strategy, which reportedly helped promote accountability within and across departments and facilitate inter-departmental co-ordination. Still, the independent assessment of the Strategy's progress made by the NDA in 2019 identified the need to further enhance structures to improve collaboration and delivery of cross-sectorial actions (Government of Ireland, 2019^[61]). The DCC submitted progress reports to the National

Disability Authority, which worked on identifying issues ahead of NDISSG meetings. The Minister of State with special responsibility for Disability Issues chaired the NDISSG and played a central role in ensuring cross-sectoral co-operation. As a member of the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Service Reform, the Minister of State contributed to ensuring the involvement of the Taoiseach and the co-operation with other ministers, whenever needed to avoid blockages and keep all parties informed (Government of Ireland, 2017^[60]). The mid-term review of 2019 identified improved communication and engagement by Governments Departments on disability issues but highlighted the need to raise awareness on the strategy in the society. It also found that implementation at the local level could have benefited from sectoral plans, more concrete people-centred actions, and adequate resources (Department of Justice and Equality, 2020^[62]). The strategy was extended to 2022 and adapted in the aftermath of the 2019 mid-term review. The government is currently working on a successor strategy and to this effect has launched a public consultation initiative at the end of 2023 (Government of Ireland, 2023^[63]).

National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020

The **National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020** was adopted in 2017 to advance gender equality in Ireland under a whole-of-government policy framework aiming at supporting Ireland's implementation of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[64]). Developed through a consultative process with public stakeholders and civil society, it set out a series of actions to promote women's equality, diversity and leadership in the politics, business, in sport, in politics, in the arts and local communities, and targets women of all ages and from all communities, rural and urban. By focusing on girls as well, and aiming to advance socio-economic equality, improve their physical and mental health, and ensure their visibility in society and their equal and active citizenship, the Strategy aligns with the Five National Outcomes included in BOBF 2014-2020 and in *Young Ireland*.

The implementation of the Strategy was overseen by a Strategy Committee chaired by the Minister for Justice and Equality with special responsibility for Equality, Immigration, and Integration. Members included various Government Departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Social Protection or the Department of Health, and further stakeholders, such as the Health Service Executive, the County and City Management Association or the National Women's Council of Ireland (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[64]). The role of the Strategy Committee was to advise the Department of Justice and Equality on the preparation and implementation of the Strategy, including on identification of priorities and relevant issues for the implementation, and developing indicators for monitoring progress on individual actions and across objectives on gender equality. Based on the Strategy Committee's work, annually progress reports were presented to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Service Reform. The Strategy Committee was supported by the Gender Equality Division in the Department of Justice and Equality who also co-ordinated the implementation of the Strategy. In addition, inter-Departmental teams were established to facilitate the Strategy's implementation (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[64]). In 2019, a cross-sectoral Period Poverty Sub-Committee of the National Strategy for Women and Girls Strategy Committee was established to assess the Strategy's framework on addressing period poverty in Ireland (Period Poverty Sub-Committee, 2021^[65]).

Despite high-level engagement of the stakeholders and buy-in from senior officials, such as the Minister chairing the Strategy Committee, it was reported in a progress report that the visibility of the Strategy and its recognition outside the equality sector among public, private and community actors could have been increased, especially with regards to embedding gender equality in decision-making (Department of Justice and Equality, 2018^[66]). It was also noted that vaguely defined actions made it difficult to develop adequate indicators, and that a number of actions were significantly delayed due the lack of (human) resources. However, according to the Department of Justice and Equality, continuous reviews and adaptation of measures helped ensure that actions could be delivered (Department of Justice and Equality,

2018^[66]). Considering the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on planned work, the implementation of the strategy was extended until end of 2021 (The Centre for Effective Studies, 2023^[59]).

National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021

The **National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021** was adopted in 2017. Recognising the fact that Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Ireland, and developed with insights drawn from a consultative process, it set out objectives targeting children and youth across the whole of government, such as in education, health, gender equality and anti-discrimination and equality (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[67]).

Until 2020, the Department of Justice and Equality led the implementation of actions, co-ordinating with relevant Government Departments on the implementation of actions and compiling periodic reports on the state of implementation. As of 2020, DCEDIY was established as lead department for the Strategy's implementation. The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy Steering Group was responsible for highlighting priority actions, discussing output indicators to monitor the performance and publishing annual reports on progress (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[67]). The Steering Group consisted of members from relevant Government Departments, such as DCEDIY, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health, the Department of Social Protection, Tusla and Traveller and Roma representatives and stakeholders (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[67]).

While not containing any references to BOBF 2014-2020, the national policy framework on children and young people specifically mentioned the Government's commitment to promoting the inclusion of Roma and monitoring the National Travellers and Roma Strategies hereto. The Strategy contained several direct references to seek complimentary with other government initiatives related to children and youth, such as the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, or relevant structures, such as Comhairle na nÓg, the Children and Young People's Participation Hub, and the Education and Training Boards (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017^[67]).

Although the Steering Group comprised a wide range of Government representatives, it was reported in OECD interviews that the implementation of the Strategy could have been strengthened by greater trust, communication, as well as stronger clarity of leads and ownership across all stakeholders. Providing more administrative support to the Steering Group and concerned Departments could have improved some of these aspects and facilitated inter-departmental co-operation to advance the timely implementation of actions under the responsibility of line Departments, such as individual implementation plans or rigorous monitoring and evaluation obligations. According to OECD interviews, this was partly mitigated by an inclusive implementation process with Traveller and Roma representatives that allowed for actions to be appropriately adapted to local contexts. However, an evaluation report funded by the European Commission also reported potential to improve Roma participation in policy development (European Commission, 2022^[68]).

Strategies pertinent to children and young people in specific policy sectors

In Ireland, some relevant policy frameworks with important commitments to children and young people focus on specific policy areas and are mainly led by Departments other than DCEDIY, as briefly illustrated in Box 8.2. Due to the proliferation of relevant strategic documents, the list does not claim to be complete but focuses on the most relevant sectoral strategies.

Box 8.5. Relevant sectoral strategies and plans shaping child and youth outcomes

- In education policy, there are at least nine strategies covering children, such as the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2019, Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying, Ireland's Whole Education Approach to preventing and addressing bullying at school, the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 and the DEIS Plan 2017 – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools. For young people, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 focuses on teaching and learning, research, and engagement.
- In health policy, there are at least fourteen strategies, including the Child Health and Nutrition Policy, the National Drugs Strategy Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery 2017-2025, the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025, and the National Traveller Health Action Plan 2022-2027. The Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan, running from 2021-2023, promotes a healthcare system, where the majority of services are delivered in the community and access is based on need, not on the ability to pay.
- Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-25 and Pathways to Work 2021-2025: they are, respectively, Ireland's national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion, and Ireland's national employment strategy. Both strategies cover issues of poverty and exclusion for children and young people, either directly, for young people, or by addressing the outcomes of families, for children.
- Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022: this document set out a strategic vision to improve child protection and welfare services in Ireland through six specific interconnected objectives. It aimed to provide an appropriate, proportionate, timely response to children “at risk/in need”, sharing responsibility and control with families and communities through co-created solutions and interagency collaboration. This approach promotes a strong focus on participative safety planning as an effective means of preventing children from entering alternative care. While officially launched by Tusla, the Strategy's design and implementation occurred under the governance of DCEDIY.
- National Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027: developed under the guidance of an expert Steering Group chaired by the Minister of State at the Department of Justice, this Strategy focuses on the need to maximise opportunities to promote positive behavioural change. It includes a wide range of issues relevant to children and young people at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system, such as: early intervention and preventative work; family support; diversion from crime; court processes; supervision and support in the community; detention and support post release.
- Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027: launched in March 2023 by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, this plan seeks to embed creativity at the heart of young people's lives, from birth up to 24 years old, where it can contribute to their happiness, wellbeing, and personal development. As part of its main strategic objectives, the Plan aims to “strengthen equity of access to creative activities for the most seldom heard children and young people”.
- Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025: promoted by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, this three-year strategy aims at ending homelessness for young people aged 18-24 through prevention and exit strategies and improving the experience of young people assessing emergency accommodation.

Sources: (Department of Education, 2022^[69]); (Department of Education, 2017^[70]); (Department of Education and Skills, 2011^[71]); (Department of Education, 2022^[72]); (Department of Health, 2017^[73]); (Department of Health, 2021^[74]); (Department of Health, 2021^[75]); (Department of Health, 2022^[76]); (Department of Social Protection, 2020^[77]); (Department of Social Protection, 2021^[78]); (Tusla, 2017^[79]); (Department of Justice, 2021^[80]); (Government of Ireland, 2023^[81]); (Government of Ireland, 2022^[82]).

Moreover, Ireland has developed several frameworks and standards of direct relevance to children and young people:

- **National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework:** this framework aims at improving mental health and well-being of young people. The framework is supplemented by an implementation guide including good practice actions and a list of resources for each issue. It covers a range of areas such as prevention, early intervention, and crisis support (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2020^[83]).
- **National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work:** this framework provides standards to improve the effectiveness of youth work service provision in Ireland. It includes performance indicators to assess the standards' implementation, as well as monitoring tools (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010^[84]).
- **National Quality Standards Framework for Volunteer-led Youth Groups:** this framework provides core principles and standards for staff-led youth work projects and services. It includes indicators and guidance to facilitate the implementation of the principles. The standards aim at ensuring that all programmes and practices are young person-centred and promote safety, wellbeing, and the development of young people (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013^[85]).
- **Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025:** this framework aims to improve the health and wellbeing of people with a focus on prevention, on children and young people, and on keeping people healthier for longer periods of their life (Department of Health, 2021^[74]).
- **Draft National Standards for Children's Social Services:** these standards provide a framework for the provision of high-quality services for children in Ireland. They cover a range of areas, including child protection, education, health, and social care (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2021^[86]).

Promoting policy coherence in a complex policy and governance landscape

Overall, the above discussion has shed light on a complex policy landscape in Ireland directed, either wholly or partially, towards tackling poverty and improving policy outcomes for children and young people. Indeed, children and young people have specific needs and interests across all policy and service areas including in education, health, justice, housing, transportation, sports, gender equality and environment, among others (OECD, 2020^[6]), which may lead to the development of various initiatives, programmes, strategies, and policy frameworks.

However, such a proliferation of strategies brings about several challenges – information overload for policymakers and stakeholders, complex governance arrangements, risk of limited accountability, overlaps – that might result in a diffusion of responsibilities to the detriment of the effectiveness of those strategic documents. Ensuring that these strategies are aligned, complementary, and effectively implemented is an ongoing challenge for policymakers. This is particularly relevant in the current Irish context, with the recent launch of *Young Ireland* aiming to provide a national overarching framework for the development of child and youth policies, and the ongoing efforts to develop new equality strategies with an impact on children and young people. In the OECD area, countries have adopted various approaches to promote coherence across the various efforts to address child poverty and to improve policy outcomes for children and young people, while fostering effective co-ordination and collaboration, as illustrated in Box 8.6.

Box 8.6. Promoting coherence in the implementation of child and youth policy frameworks

New Zealand's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy: A national framework to align policy development

Prior to the adoption of New Zealand's *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, the “fragmentation of efforts” represented a key problem in addressing children and young people's needs. The Strategy acknowledges the need to address fragmentation and lack of co-ordination across national agencies (ministries or departments), and between national and local government, as well as between government and non-governmental stakeholders in terms of service delivery.

Various areas of work and action plans implemented across the government complement and support the aims of the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy*, including the Maternity Whole of System Action Plan; the Review of the Well Child Tamariki Ora programme; the Education System Transformation; the Welfare System Overhaul; the Youth Plan; the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan; the Learning Support Action Plan; the Disability Action Plan; the Strategy and Action Plan to Eliminate Family Violence and Sexual Violence; and others. Many of these are explicit about the way in which they contribute to the Strategy.

The *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy* aims at promoting policy coherence by providing an overarching framework for policy development at national level and for aligning the work of governmental bodies and other relevant stakeholders through joined-up planning. It also aspires to better align government action with community action to create the transformative change required for the Strategy to achieve its vision and make New Zealand “the best place in the world for children and young people”. This is done through governance structures (such as the Strategy Ministerial Group, Social Wellbeing Board, etc.). At each level, part of the function is to ensure that the broader work across the children's space aligns with the overarching outcomes of the Strategy. One of the functions of the CWPRG is to promote understanding and use of the Strategy through communications and engagement, including [guidelines for engagement](#) and [webinars in various topics](#).

Spain's National Strategy for the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence: A framework encompassing all other national child-related strategies

In Spain, three main strategies exist to address the needs of children at the State level: the State Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee 2022-2030 (*Plan de Acción Estatal para la Implementación de la Garantía Infantil Europea 2022-2030*); the Strategy for the Eradication of Violence against Children and Adolescents (*Estrategia de Erradicación de la Violencia contra la infancia y adolescencia*); and the National Strategy for the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence (*Estrategia Estatal de los Derechos de la Infancia y de la Adolescencia 2023-2030*).

The National Strategy for the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence is intended to be the framework that integrates the other two child-related strategies, as well as other strategies and action plans, such as the Strategy for People with Disabilities 2022-2030; the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma People 2021-2030, the Development Strategy, the III Strategic Plan for the Effective Equality between Women and Men 2022-2025, the State Strategy to Combat Gender-based Violence 2022-2025, and the Youth Strategy 2030, which in turn have their own plans and implementation arrangements.

Despite having their own plans and implementation arrangements, these sectoral strategies all feed into the monitoring, evaluation and accountability process of the *National Strategy for the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence*. The Strategy's first intermediate implementation report will be published in 2024.

Source: (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019^[87]); (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales y Agenda 2030, 2023^[88]).

As discussed in the previous sections, in Ireland there is a myriad of strategies and frameworks related to child and youth well-being, which involve the same stakeholders responsible for their implementation, including government departments and agencies, NGOs, and community groups. This broad ecosystem of umbrella and constituent strategies raises a considerable risk of information overload for policymakers and stakeholders involved in the delivery of policies and services for children and young people. In addition, such proliferation of strategies is accompanied by a complex governance environment, pointing to a need to streamline mechanisms for inter-departmental and inter-agency co-ordination, as well as to establish effective mechanisms for data collection and sharing, and strong (shared and department-specific) accountability systems. This is particularly critical to promote collective responsibility and avoid a diffusion of responsibility (O'Toole Jr, 1985^[89]) (Liu, 2022^[90]) and “social loafing” (Simms, 2014^[91]) – the tendency of individuals to put forth less effort when they are part of a group. Ultimately, with such a proliferation of strategies, there is an important risk of overlap between them. Ensuring coherence of existing and future frameworks and alignment with international standards and good practices also contributes to their effective implementation and coherent evaluation. This challenge is well acknowledged by the Government of Ireland, which notes in the EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan itself “a significant degree of overlap between the objectives of the strategies and policies [...] and the various [age] cohorts they are seeking to serve” (Government of Ireland, 2022^[44]).

Lessons learnt and Young Ireland's potential to address remaining challenges

Against this backdrop, *Young Ireland* has been developed with the aim to improve alignment of strategic approaches as well as to strengthen lines of accountability to promote better outcomes for children and young people across the whole of government. This aligns with the other recent legal and institutional reform efforts aimed at strengthening policy and governance systems in the child and youth sector, as discussed earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 4.

As described previously, the implementation of *Young Ireland* and other relevant child and youth policies and strategies will rely on governance structures similar to the ones established under BOBF 2014-20, albeit with adjustments in composition, members' recruitment, and turnover (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]). A greater role assigned to the Senior Officials' Group – gathering with members from across relevant Government departments – is expected to bolster cross-governmental measures and contribute to driving their implementation. Furthermore, the identification of “Spotlights” – as the greatest challenges for children and young people requiring focused action across Government in a time-bound way (DCEDIY, 2023^[8]) – is expected to foster a cross-government approach and bring a strategic focus to a select set of priority commitments to accelerate implementation and progress.

Going forward, to ensure the enduring sustainability of this collective agenda, it would be important to accompany these efforts with the development of a culture of collaboration among all relevant departments and agencies. This cultural shift would prevent isolated efforts and promote comprehensive approaches to addressing the diverse need of children and young people. Fostering a stronger collaborative culture would not only enhance the effectiveness of policies but also pave the way for improved outcomes, ultimately benefiting children and young people in Ireland.

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Notes

¹ The Ministers attending meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education include the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence; Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Minister for Transport; Minister for Health, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Minister for Education; Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; Minister for Finance; Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and Community Development; Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Other Ministers or Ministers of State may be invited to participate in Cabinet meetings as required.

² Idem.

³ The Indicator Set tracks progress for people aged 0–24 across the five national outcomes outlined in BOBF 2014-20. While not purposed to provide a causal relation between commitments undertaken by the government and measured outcomes, it supports public bodies to track progress, identify needs, set priorities and inform policy evaluation.

OECD Public Governance Reviews

Together for Children and Young People in Ireland

TOWARDS A NEW GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Ireland has shown a strong commitment to addressing child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people. Responding to the needs of children and young people, particularly those most vulnerable, requires integrated policies and services. This report is part of a joint project between the OECD and the European Commission to strengthen policy and governance arrangements for tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people based on a whole-of-government approach.

The report assesses recent policy, institutional and legislative developments in Ireland and compares outcomes for children and young people with those in other EU and OECD countries. It finds that despite progress, Ireland still has room for improvement on child poverty reduction, and more can be done to address the trust gap between young people in Ireland and their government. The report recommends Ireland to adopt measures to enhance inter-departmental and inter-agency co-operation, strengthen evidence-informed approaches, reinforce policy monitoring tools, and improve accountability mechanisms. It also recommends measures to support the effective implementation of Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023-28), and to ensure policy coherence.



Funded by
the European Union



PRINT ISBN 978-92-64-93857-1
PDF ISBN 978-92-64-89165-4



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