



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being

Initial Programme Plan:
July 2023 - December 2025



Department of the Taoiseach
Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office
gov.ie

Taoiseach's Foreword

Ending child poverty is a core ambition of this Government. This is important not only because we want every child to be happy and well-cared for, but also because happy childhoods are the foundation for realising broader economic, environmental, and social goals. When I announced the establishment of a Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office, I did so because I believe stronger coordination across government will help us to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child.

Progress in recent years shows us that it is possible to provide every child with the best start in life. I am very proud of all we have done to help children and families, but I know that we can do more. We can do more to ensure that every child is happy and healthy and has the opportunity to meet their potential. In fact, we must do more if we are going to meet the challenges of the coming years and decades.

In establishing the unit, I wanted to prioritise action in those areas that will have the greatest impact, especially for children who are more likely to experience poverty and who face greater challenges in overcoming it. This is an initial Programme and it focuses on six areas. There are other challenges facing children in Ireland and we will work also in these areas, including on child mental health and disability services.

In developing this programme, we spoke to a range of government and non-government stakeholders, but we also drew on government's ongoing work to hear the voices of children. That is why we have decided to focus our initial energies on making sure that every child and their family has access to: the income they need; early learning and care; reduced cost of education; prevention and mitigation of family homelessness; pathways to access the services they need; and, arts, culture and sports opportunities.

If we make progress on these six areas, we will be much closer to a society where poverty does not undermine any childhood. The role of the Department of the Taoiseach is to coordinate and focus government action. This programme is intended to drive implementation of a broad range of commitments that will impact on the six areas, but the Office will also undertake a small number of strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of cross-government responses.

This approach includes ensuring a specific focus on child poverty at budget time. The annual budget is a critical moment in which Government articulates its ambition for the coming year. Given the Government's commitment to reducing child poverty, I will make sure that the budget reflects our ambitions for children.

We must give everyone the best start in life, empowering them to make the most of that start through education, equal opportunities, and good jobs to work towards a better future. Child poverty undermines that start and steals futures, and that is why I am determined that in the coming years we will make a lasting and life-changing difference across all six of the areas identified in this programme.







Leo Varadkar T.D.
Taoiseach



A Programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being

This plan is about helping children in Ireland and making their lives better. The Government want to make sure that every child has enough money, is well looked after, and is able to enjoy and take part in the things they like to do outside school like playing sports, doing art and other activities that they like. Poverty means not having enough of what you need. Because it is so important that every child has enough of what they need, the Taoiseach decided to set up a Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office.

The Taoiseach wants the Office to make sure that all the different parts of Government work together to help all children have what they need to be healthy, happy and safe. The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office has made a plan. In this first plan, the Government has picked a few things that will make a big difference to children. Over the next 2.5 years, we especially want to:

-  **Help families who need more money and make sure they have enough to buy what they need.**
-  **Make sure there are enough spaces in crèches, playschools and afterschool clubs where kids can go to play, learn, make friends and have fun.**
-  **Make it easier for families to buy things that children need for school like books, lunches and uniforms.**
-  **Help families to make sure that every child has a home and to stop families from becoming homeless. We want to make sure that homeless families can get a new home as soon as possible.**
-  **All kids are different, and they need different things. We want families to be able to easily find out who can help them. Sometimes it can be hard for families to get the help they need because different services are not working together. We want to change that.**
-  **Help kids join in activities outside of school like art, music and sports without worrying about how much it costs.**

Every year, the Government decides how to spend its money. The Office want to make sure that when the Government is deciding how to spend this money that it will do everything it can to help children who do not have enough of what they need. To do a good job the Office will need to work with lots of different people including people in Government and people in organisations that help children and families.

We will also want to hear from children about what they think about how we can help children and families. Every year, the Office will tell people about how this plan is going and what is working and what is not working. This plan will take some time, but we will work hard to make sure that children and families will not need to worry about having money to buy the things that kids need to grow up happy and well.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Child Poverty in Ireland	6
2.1 Children’s voices - <i>what is poverty like?</i>	8
3. Purpose of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office	9
4. Six priority focus areas and the established policy ambition	13
4.1 Income assistance and joblessness	13
4.2 Early learning and childcare	14
4.3 Reducing the cost of education.....	15
4.4 Family homelessness.....	16
4.5 Consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services.....	16
4.6 Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty.	18
5. Programme Plan July 2023 - December 2025	18
5.1 Monitoring, coordination and reporting.....	18
5.2 Cross Government systemic initiatives	20
5.2.1 Focus on Child Poverty in Annual Budget.....	20
5.2.2 Change programme to support service integration for children and families	21
5.2.3 Cross-government tools to enhance policy and implementation focus on child poverty	21
5.2.4 Initiative on child services workforce development	22
5.3 Evaluation and impact assessment.....	22

1. Introduction

The Taoiseach announced in December 2022 his intention to establish a unit focused on child poverty and children's well-being. In Spring 2023, a Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office was established in the Department of the Taoiseach to bring focus to a select number of priority commitments and contribute to their accelerated implementation.

Over time, Ireland has made substantial progress in addressing child poverty and supporting well-being. Today our income supports, public services and community infrastructure all play an important role in protecting children from poverty and promoting child well-being. However, there is still work to do to make sure that all children have happy childhoods and the opportunity to reach their full potential.

As many international and national commentators have pointed out, Ireland has made significant progress in relation to income poverty, and while we cannot be complacent about such gains, we also need to prioritise broader aspects of well-being and the services and supports that make children's lives better. Experience of recent decades has shown us that it is possible to make lasting changes in the lives of children and families struggling with poverty.

In April 2023, Government decided that the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office should focus on six initial priority areas. These areas were selected because they are areas of intervention that have the potential to bring about significant change for families and children living in poverty. These are:



The six priorities reflect the dual and interconnected nature of the remit of the Programme Office mandate in that they focus both on child poverty and child well-being. Living without material resources undermines a child's potential to thrive and will impact on well-being. However, guaranteeing income is not sufficient to ensure well-being, which requires a focus on a range of other supports and services which promote physical, mental, emotional and social well-being.

This initial Programme Plan sets out the ambition and focus of the Programme Office in its first 2.5 years, to the end of 2025. The first part of this Programme Plan begins by defining

the challenge that continues to face all of society in ending the negative consequences of child poverty (section 2). The Plan then defines the specific purpose of the Programme Office, using a 'theory of change' model to explain how the Programme Office will build on past and current initiatives to add value in driving cross-government action (section 3). This theory of change relies on the core assumption that by growing a cross-government response we can not only enhance delivery but also focus on unlocking shared challenges, such as promoting a high-quality, valued child-services workforce and ensuring that services can work together to meet the needs of all children. Section 4 describes the ambition for change for each of the six key priorities areas and highlights key issues that require particular attention.

The final part of this plan sets out a specific, focused and time-bound programme of work which the Programme Office will drive forward (section 5). The Office will ensure coordination across government, monitor the delivery of the key relevant strategies and commitments, and promote a focus on the identified specific challenges which require more attention and action (section 5.1). The Programme Office will also undertake a small number of projects which will seek to build cross-government capacity to resolve some of the shared systemic challenges that undermine implementation (section 5.2). The key milestones for Year 1 of the Programme plan are summarised in section 5.3; year 2 milestones will be included in the first annual update report due in mid-2024.

2. Child Poverty in Ireland

Over time, Ireland has made substantial progress in addressing child poverty and supporting well-being. Today our income supports, public services and community infrastructure all play an important role in protecting many children from poverty and promoting child well-being. However, there is still work to do and still today there are children who are living in poverty and deprivation.

In April 2022, there were 1.22 million children in Ireland, making up 24% of the population. 185,000 children (15.2%) lived in households that were at risk of poverty (income less than 60% of the median disposable income). 92,000 children (7.5%) lived in households where income was below this level and where there was also enforced deprivation, meaning that these households had to go without some basic items because they could not afford them.

Children are more likely than any other age group to experience deprivation or consistent poverty. This disproportionate poverty burden can be due to the additional costs of raising a family, as well as the challenges of combining care and employment. There are some groups of children who are significantly more likely to live in poverty – families headed by a lone parent, Traveller and Roma families, larger families, families where the mother has a low level of education, and families headed by a person with a disability or who is unemployed. Barriers in accessing services can amplify the impact of living in poverty including for those children facing language barriers or who live in rural settings, including children who experience poverty in Gaeltacht areas. There are also variations by age, with primary school aged children (6-11 years) and those at second level having the highest consistent poverty rates (approximately 9%), while preschool children (0-5 years) have the lowest (5%).

Unexpected life events, that can face anyone at any time, such as the breakdown of relationships, job loss and inability to work due to disability or illness can also make families

particularly vulnerable to poverty. In addition, the high cost of rental accommodation has been linked to higher poverty rates in recent years (ESRI, 2022).

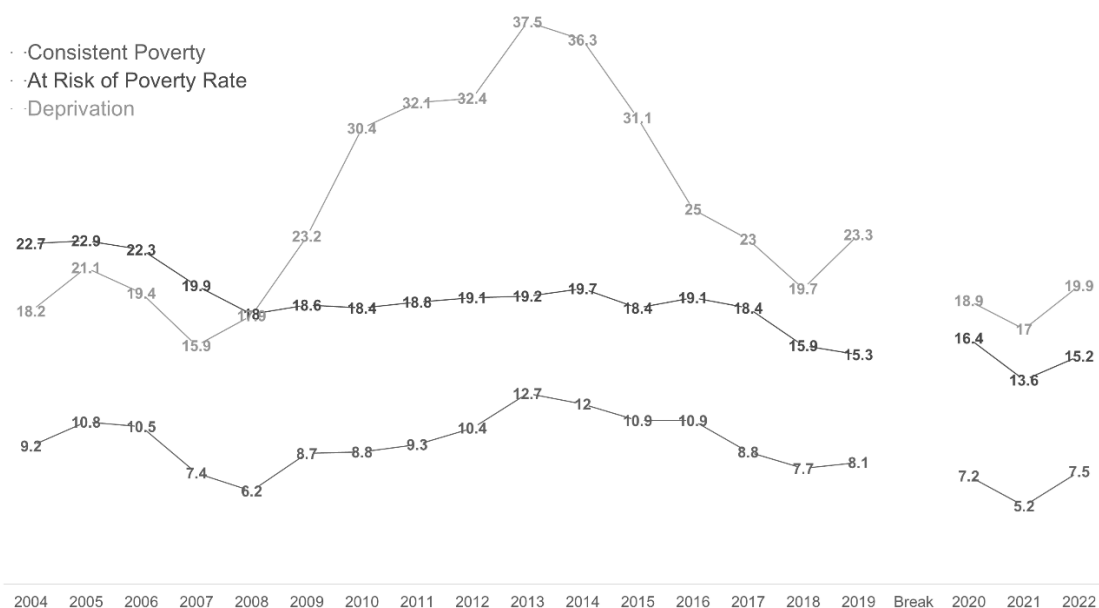
The 92,000 children who live in consistent poverty, are the most disadvantaged children in Ireland and many of these children have always lived in poverty (ESRI, 2021). In other words, they have never known a life where all their basic needs can be met without stress or worry. However, the OECD has also pointed out that Ireland has high levels of non-income poor households who experience deprivation, so households which have an income above the poverty line but yet their children do not have everything they need.

While calculated in a different way to the national measure, compared to the EU, Ireland's rate of poverty and social exclusion for under 18-year-olds is slightly below average – 22.8% for Ireland in 2021, compared to 24.4% for the EU27 (Eurostat). However, this is no reason for complacency. In 2021, there were 16 European countries with lower child poverty rates than Ireland.

Given the states investment in building knowledge regarding child poverty, we now have a better understanding of the long-term negative consequences of child poverty. We know that childhood poverty can result in lower educational achievement and employment rates, as well as poorer health, and damaging psychological impacts on self-concept and life satisfaction. These consequences reinforce the inter-generational (ESRI, 2022) and contextual dimensions of poverty, creating reinforcing cycles of deprivation and exclusion.

The success Ireland has had in driving down child poverty rates in recent years show that substantial progress is possible (Figure 2.1). However, as international experience reveals, progress can be vulnerable and requires continuous focus and energy. SILC data from 2022, which refers to 2021, shows an increase in poverty over the 2021 (2020 levels).

Figure 2.1: Child poverty rates in Ireland 2004-2022 (time series break in 2020), source: SILC, CSO



2.1 Children's voices - what is poverty like?

While national data collection, particularly through the annual SILC survey, provides substantial insights into the prevalence of poverty in Ireland, it cannot tell us about the lived experience of those families and children who live in poverty and the choices they make day-to-day. Since the publication of the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives* in 2011, Ireland has developed a significant knowledge infrastructure which is contributing to better understanding of the short and longer term consequences of childhood poverty. In parallel, Government has also focused on building capacity to hear the voices of children in decision-making.

Since the publication of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making*, there has been an increasing emphasis on hearing the voices of children and young people and ensuring that these voices impact on policy decisions. Children living in poverty face a myriad of additional barriers in making their voices heard, but the DCEDIY has included a strong focus on vulnerable children. These efforts have and will continue to give us insights into what responses to poverty are the most important to children themselves.

In 2022, DECDIY published an analysis of the responses it received to a public consultation on the development of the new National Strategy for Children and Young People (DCEDIY, 2022). These responses included insights from more than 50 children and young people. These children pointed to the inequalities which poverty can create:

"Ireland is a wealthy country and is therefore quite capable of catering to all of children's needs, however there is still immense gaps that need to be accounted for." (Young Person)

"Students from disadvantaged areas or that feel less comfortable in a social environment such as school should have help provided to them so that they aren't missing out on education or opportunities based on the fact that they might think they are not able or equipped to partake with the rest of society". (Young Person)

"Education is supposedly free, but it is not fully free. School books, materials, transport to schools, school lunches and uniforms are all added costs that many families cannot afford, I believe these need to all be subsidised". (Young Person)

In 2021, the Ombudsman for Children conducted an online survey and received more than 5,000 responses from children and young people. This survey was followed up by a series of online focus groups. These children also raised their concern about the impact of poverty, including when asked for ideas about how Ireland could be made a better place:

Boy: Give help to children who are poor and homeless, give them money and homes. (Age 12, lives in the countryside)

Boy: Free health and dental care for all kids. Maybe more nurse or doctor visits to the school. Some children I know never get to go to a doctor when they are sick or if something is wrong. (Age 11, lives in a town)

Girl: Like even because we all lived in the flats, there's people that look down on people that live in flats, like landlords who are looking down at, 'Aw, they're poor', so we don't want them in our apartments'. (Child in Alternative Education)

Boy: But I think the real young people that we need to give a voice to are young people from poorer backgrounds or young people who spend majority of the time on the streets just hanging around. *(Age 16, lives in a village)*

Girl: If you have a mental illness and you want to go to a therapist and you don't have the money for one, it does come back to money quite a lot in Ireland. *(Child in Secondary School)*

Boy: Cost of housing. My family have rented in the same place for years and are now being asked to move because they are selling the house. I cried, I don't know where I am going to live. Things are very expensive and my mam sometimes has little money. *(Age 11, lives in a city)*

Girl: Having more places to visit that does not cost too much money as I have 4 sisters and my mammy cannot afford to bring us all to places that cost too much. *(Age 8, lives in the countryside)*

Boy: More housing for people with children and more affordable houses. These children can't afford to spend all their lives in different hotels every night with nowhere to play or be loud as they want. More services for these children also. *(Age 17, lives in the countryside)*

Girl: And just on that as well though, I think it's really important when we're talking about like the whole Leaving Cert and the Irish education system, like it's not equal. So many people spend so much money on things outside of school like grinds, just to get those points to get into the courses they want. And that's not feasible for everybody... and it's just really not fair. *(Child in Secondary School)*

3. Purpose of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office

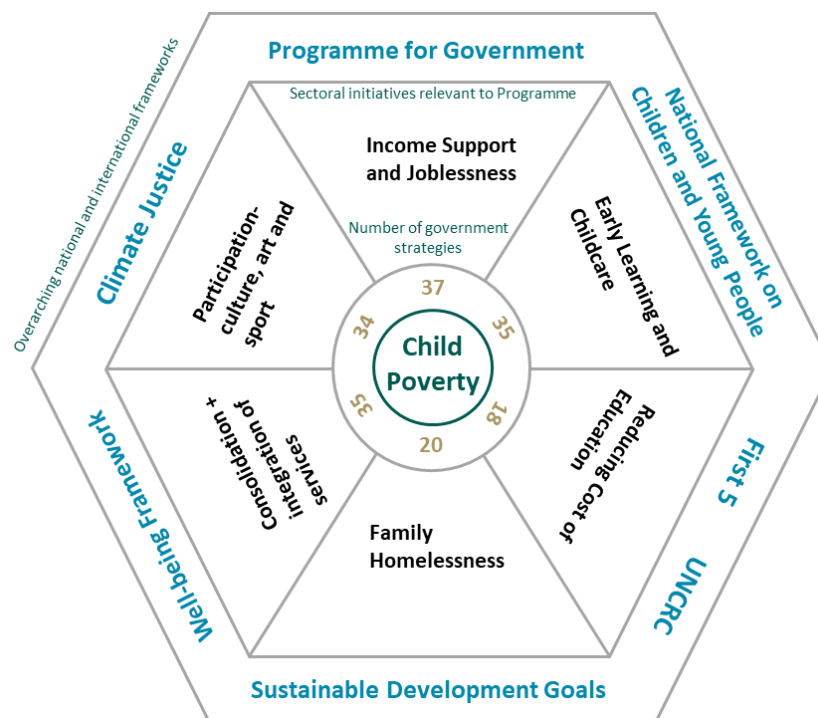
The Government's vision is to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child. This is important because we want every child to be happy and well-cared for, but also because childhood is the foundation of realising broader economic, environmental and social goals.

Over the history of the State children have not always enjoyed the benefits of focused, sustained and progressive state or societal attention; however, the experience of recent decades has seen a radical turn around in the focus on children's rights. The challenge to deepen policy and service responsiveness to child poverty is complicated by the sometimes busy policy landscape with a myriad of ambitions and goals. This complexity is evidence of a growing ambition for children and for childhood; however, in order to realise that ambition, focused strategic attention is required, as well as new ways to create shared purpose and vision, and coherent delivery.

Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the policy landscape relevant to the six initial priority areas for the Programme Office. This diagram captures the overarching policy frameworks which underpin action on child poverty. These include the Programme for Government, international commitments, as well as broad initiatives on children's lives. The inner section of the diagram illustrates the complexity of the policy landscape across each of the six key

priority areas by highlighting the total number of relevant strategies, some of which speak to more than one priority area.

Figure 3.1: Overview of the existing policy landscape



Ireland will shortly publish its third national policy framework for children and young people (2023-2028), which builds on its predecessor to define a comprehensive and outcomes driven agenda for realising the rights of all children and young people from the age of 0 to 24. This framework will build on progress to date and seek to create the environment whereby children and young people are at the very heart of the decision-making that impacts on their lives. Complementing this wider approach, the Programme Office on Child Poverty and Well-Being will provide a single-minded focus on child poverty, in order to bring about lasting change in the lives of the children who are in most need. That is why, this Plan represents a ‘Spotlight’ action in the new strategy, and the Department of the Taoiseach will work closely with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to help deliver on the five national outcomes of the wider Framework for children who experience poverty.

The previous children and young people’s strategy’s, *Brighter Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, also included a specific focus on child poverty in its 2017 paper on a *Whole of Government Approach to Tackling Child Poverty*. Many of the aims and ambitions of that paper have been realised, though the key overarching action areas remains a priority focus and are reflected in the priority areas for this initial Programme Plan.

This first Programme Plan of the Child Poverty and Well-Being Office will focus on six key areas. Each area requires short-term immediate action, as well as long-term ambition. It is necessary to focus now on the ‘difference that will make a difference’ for every child living in poverty today, but also to build longer term capabilities to hold focus, energy, and innovation. These areas were selected for initial focus because they have the potential to bring about significant change for families and children living in poverty. Achieving results

in each area is a precondition for broader lasting change; because each of these priorities are necessary but not sufficient to realise the government's ambition to make Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child.

Achieving these results will be more challenging for certain groups and some areas will require greater attention and focus, but by moving forward across all six we will move closer to being the best country in Europe to be a child. That is not to suggest that other areas are not equally significant, however our underlying assumption is that an enhanced whole-of-government approach can be complemented by a sharper strategic focus and prioritisation on a limited number of issues.

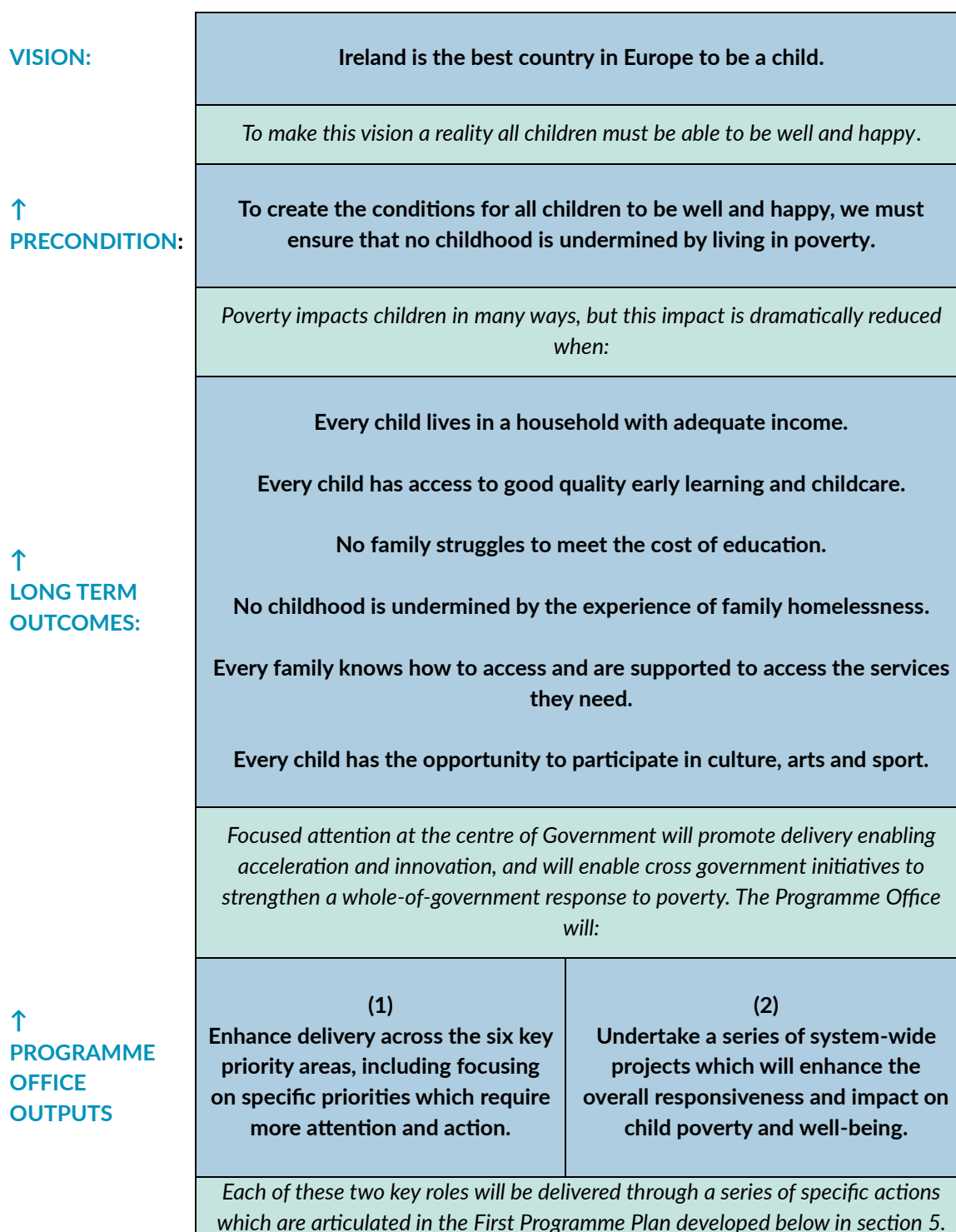
This Programme Plan recognises that poverty intersects with wider well-being challenges facing children in Ireland, not least for those children with a disability or who face mental health difficulties. In its focus on the initial six priorities areas, this Programme acknowledges the urgent need to make progress in these areas and welcomes the strategic and focused approach which will be driven through the National Framework on children and young people, including through the other Spotlight initiatives which are being developed under the Framework.

The objective of this initial two and a half year Programme Plan is to enhance delivery across these six key priority areas, provide a focus on specific issues that require urgent attention and action, and to support strategic initiatives that will amplify the impact of these initiatives on reducing child poverty.

The approach and ambition underpinning this programme is further explained in Figure 3.2 which sets out the Theory of Change which informs the overall approach of the Programme Office. This Theory of Change starts with the high-level vision and then describes the preconditions that are needed to realise that vision, and the role of the Programme Office in delivering these outcomes.

The Theory of Change assumes that to make progress on the vision of being the best country in Europe to be a child, all children need to be supported to be well and happy; however, this ambition will not be possible while some children continue to experience poverty and deprivation. While poverty undermines child well-being in a myriad of ways, the Theory of Change articulates six key goals, reflecting the Programme's six priority areas, which must be in place before wider ambitions can be realised.

Figure 3.2: Theory of change informing the focus and deliver of Programme on Child Poverty and Well-Being



4. Six priority focus areas and the established policy ambition

As described above the Programme Office will initially focus on six priority areas and will monitor delivery by the Departments and/or Agencies to ensure accountability and timely implementation. As elaborated in the sections below, these areas were selected because they have the potential to bring about significant change for families and children living in poverty.

As we saw above (Figure 3.1) each of these areas is already the focus of considerable government action and attention. The role of the Programme Office is to support Departments and Agencies in their ongoing efforts to translate these ambitions into action.

The following paragraphs describe why these priorities have been identified as needing overall focus, as well as identifying a smaller number specific problems or target groups which need particular attention and action.

As acknowledged in the description of the Theory of Change, addressing these six priorities are necessary but not sufficient in terms of realising the well-being of children. There are other challenges. The new National Framework includes additional Spotlights which will drive focused cross-government action to bring about progress on specific challenges facing children. Mental health and disability intersect with experiences of poverty in complex ways, and this Programme will need to ensure it complements and responds to initiatives across both of these areas.



4.1 Income assistance and joblessness

International and domestic research shows that adjustments to the welfare system can have a significant impact on child poverty. There is also a strong correlation between work and a lower risk of poverty. Ireland already performs well in terms of social transfers and there is a careful balance to be struck in ensuring that welfare supports are combined with incentives and supports for training, education, and work. However, as has been pointed out by the OECD, there are children living in non-income poor families but who continue to experience deprivation in their daily lives. Consequently, alleviating material deprivation requires a strong focus on income, both for families who are not in the labour market, but also those who are working and on low incomes, to be complemented by a range of other social supports and services.

The Office will monitor delivery of initiatives to financially support low-income families, and support parents to access family-friendly employment, including through employment and training interventions as well as access to childcare (elaborated in below section 4.2).

In addition to supporting delivery on existing strategies and initiatives, the Programme Office will work with the key relevant Departments in order to bring additional strategic focus to developments in the following areas:

- Ensuring that key income supports, such as the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC) and the Working Family Payment, are not undermined by cost-of-living increases and

continue to contribute to realising child poverty targets (Department of Social Protection).

- The income and employment situation of lone parents, who face ongoing challenges and for whom there are particularly high levels of poverty and deprivation (Department of Social Protection/Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science).
- Promote labour market inclusion for those families who are furthest from the labour market or where there are low levels of work intensity, including Traveller families and families headed by a person with a disability (Department of Social Protection/DETE).
- Families who need specific recognition in order to allow them to benefit from the range of supports that could be available and may reduce poverty (Department of Social Protection).
- The development of an ambitious yet realistic new child poverty target (Department of Social Protection).



4.2 Early learning and childcare

The benefits of high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) are widely acknowledged. ELC allows parents to participate in training and employment in the knowledge that their children are safe, happy, and well cared. It also provides opportunities for children to play, interact with their peers and promotes children's overall well-being, and good physical and mental health. Participation in ELC benefits all children, but has the greatest benefit for children living in poverty, and is a critical intervention in breaking cycles of intergenerational exclusion and deprivation.

The Government is taking a range of steps to ensure that high-quality early learning and childcare is affordable and accessible to all children and especially children from vulnerable backgrounds. Budget 2023 introduced major reforms to substantially improve the affordability of early learning and childcare for families. The budget allocation was increased by €346 million bringing the total annual allocation for early education and childcare to €1.025 billion. The Programme Office will provide an opportunity to monitor progress on this work including the sufficient supply of suitably qualified personnel and the interplay between ELC and other assistance critical to protecting families and children at risk of poverty.

The Programme Office will monitor delivery of the government's ambitious change programme for ELC, and will work closely with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that families and children who are living in poverty have the opportunity to realise the potential which ELC brings. The Office will bring a particular focus on:

- Continuing state investment in Early Learning and Care, aimed at ensuring high quality and accessible ELC places to all children, but particularly very low cost or free

childcare for the families with the lowest incomes and the expansion of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (DCEDIY).

- Promote the provision of ELC places where they are needed, particularly in areas of socio-economic deprivation, including through supporting the programme of capital investment in ELC buildings and monitoring progress on the development of a qualified workforce (DCEDIY).
- Development of the Equal Participation Model (EPM) which will ensure a specific focus on supporting vulnerable families and children to access and sustain their involvement in ELC (DCEDIY).

4.3 Reducing the cost of education



For families living in poverty, meeting the cost of education for children in both primary and post-primary settings remains challenging. While there have been important recent developments, issues raised include costs of schoolbooks, general 'back to school' expenses, the pressure on parents to make voluntary contributions, and the challenge for children to engage in education who are suffering from food poverty at home.

These costs can be reduced in a variety of ways including expanding the free-books scheme, increasing the back-to-school allowance, and extending the hot-meals programme. As part of Budget 2023, over €50 million is being allocated to provide free schoolbooks to primary school children and young people within the free education scheme from September 2023. The free primary schoolbooks scheme will benefit up to 558,000 pupils in approximately 3,230 primary schools, including over 130 special schools. Additional funding was also provided for the Hot-Meals Programme.

There are a range of existing government commitments which are relevant to the cost of education for disadvantaged families. The Programme Office will monitor the implementation of these commitments and help identify next steps. The Programme Office will provide a particular focus on:

- Expanding the provision of free school meals, particularly for those children at greatest risk of food poverty (D/Social Protection).
- Alleviating the costs of education for secondary school students, including the costs of specific resources such as schoolbooks, uniforms and equipment (D/Education).
- The costs of Transition Year for students from low-income households, as a barrier to realising the ambition of TY Transition Year for all children (D/Education).
- Pressure on parents to make voluntary contributions and the consequences where parents or guardians are unable to make such contributions (D/Education).
- Continuing to close the education attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.
- Ensuring that parents and children who live in poverty are supported in accessing further and higher education, including alternative education and training for those who have left school early (D/Education and DFHERIS).

- Enhancing access to further and higher education for lone parents. For example, by extending access to free fees and maintenance grants to part-time students will support those with caring responsibilities.



4.4 Family homelessness

The most recent figures (April 2023) for family homelessness show approximately 1,733 families are in emergency accommodation, with 56% of these being one-parent families, and 3,594 child dependents. It is now well established that even relatively short periods of homelessness can have both short and longer term consequences for child well-being.

The Government recognises that helping families and children experiencing homelessness involves a multi-agency approach. *Housing for All* is committed to enhancing early intervention services for children and their families through a multiagency and coordinated response. This includes prioritising the exiting of families from homelessness; providing sufficient help for families experiencing homelessness; and preventing homelessness through the provision of suitable accommodation. €215 million, a 10% increase on 2022, was allocated to local authorities and NGOs under Budget 2023 to provide homeless prevention services, emergency accommodation and other services for families experiencing homelessness and to contribute to the target of creating 1,300 new Housing First tenancies, over the course of the National Implementation Plan 2022-2026.

The Programme Office will support implementation across all relevant policy commitments, and will seek to enhance action that prevents and reduces the impact of childhood experience of homelessness. The Programme Office will provide enhanced focus on children and their needs in policy and service provision, and in particular will focus on:

- Identifying the causes of family homelessness and implementing preventative strategies for those families at risk of homelessness.
- The important role of wider family support services in helping those in homeless services as they transition to more stable housing arrangements (DCEDIY/DHLG).
- Need to facilitate child and family responsive decision making across homeless services, including to the extent possible in the allocation of temporary accommodation (DHLG).
- Promote policy innovation aimed at generating creative and lasting solutions to family homelessness (DHLG).
- High rates of poverty and deprivation amongst families in receipt of housing support payments (DHLG/DSP).



4.5 Consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services

Children and families have a wide range of needs, from once-off short term supports to longer-term interventions. Consequently, the services landscape to meet children's needs is inevitably a complex one with many specialist responses, provided across

statutory services, commissioned services, and grant services. This variety is necessary in order to meet the needs of all children; however, there are disparities in the level of provision, local practice models, and the formal or informal integration of services and referral arrangements.

Recent years have seen the emergence of many innovative and impactful practices for service coherence, such as in the areas of parenting supports, Multidisciplinary Teams in educational settings, and Tusla's Meitheal approach; however, there is a clear opportunity to further enhance a national approach. Enhancing a national approach to integrated services will build on these innovations as well as universal services, and well-established strategies such as Home School Liaison, in order to identify and create pathways for children and families which require additional assistance and ensure that those in need of protection are identified early and get an appropriate response.

Service integration/coherence is an important and recurring theme across many government strategies and yet evidence suggests that weak service integration continues to undermine day-to-day experiences for children and families. The challenge is to close the gaps between this policy intent and local level innovation to ensure that children and families consistently access the services they need.

The Programme Office will work with relevant Departments and Agencies to develop such an approach. The overall objective is to facilitate parents and families to understand the range of services on offer and how to access them; to support providers (both statutory and non-statutory) in developing clearer multi-agency referral pathways; and to promote consistency of access to effective assistance. Furthermore, such a focus will allow for identification of best models of service of families in high need and to assess gaps in service provision and consequent funding requirements. The success of an integrated service model will also require an emphasis on the support needs of parents and guardians in accessing services and for those who are further from the labour market, such as access to adult literacy and life-long learning.

The Programme Office will seek to amplify existing commitments on services integration in order to realise such an approach. The Office will specifically focus on:

- Scaling and replicating existing examples of good practice, statutory and non-statutory, with reference to developing an overall coherent reference framework for service integration.
- Supporting the development of the dedicated child health workforce, as envisaged under *First 5* (Department of Health), including promoting the value of home visiting.
- Realising the ambition of *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Service*, and enhancing the overall provision of statutory and non-statutory family support services (DCEDIY).
- Ensuring that cost is not a barrier to access to essential community services which act as a pathway to specialist supports, such as expansion to free access to GP care (D/Health).
- Supporting the development of four pilot child poverty local action plans, as envisaged under the EU Child Guarantee Action Plan (DCEDIY/DRCD).

Further initiatives of the Programme Office to support the development of measures to consolidate and integrate child-orientated services are described in section 5.2 below.



4.6 Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty.

Play is essential to children's development and well-being, and sporting and cultural activities in particular play a crucial role in children's well-being. Research evidence reveals the significant impact that participation in hobbies and activities has on child well-being and longer-term outcomes; however, participation in structured activities is often tied to parental income.

There are several existing Government commitments in this area. The recently published *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027* is committed to strengthening equality of access to cultural and artistic life. The *Sports Ireland Participation Plan 2021-2024* focuses on creating opportunities for young people of preschool and school age. The Programme Office will build on this momentum and work towards increasing the exposure of children who experience poverty to such activities by promoting specific measures which remove barriers such as cost, availability, and transport. As well as monitoring implementation of existing commitments, the Programme Office will specifically focus on:

- The potential of youth work to engage with young people in deprived neighbourhoods, as a means to encouraging engagement in a range of activities that are of interest to young people (DCEDIY).
- The development of safe, creative and family orientated spaces and facilities for play and sport in areas which experience socio-economic deprivation (DCEDIY/DRCD).
- Supporting a specific focus on arts and culture participation for children who have not previously been exposed to such opportunities (TCAGSM).

5. Programme Plan July 2023 - December 2025

The role of the Department of the Taoiseach is to co-ordinate and focus Government action. In line with this, the purpose of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office is two-fold:

1. Monitor the delivery of policy commitments by Departments and their Agencies across the six key priority areas, and to focus on specific areas of action as identified in section 4.
2. Undertake a small number of strategic initiatives which have the potential to increase the impact of current and emerging measures to fight child poverty and support child well-being. These initiatives will respond to key challenges which impact widely on responses to poverty and which can amplify the impact of government action.

5.1 Monitoring, coordination and reporting

The overall ambition of the Programme Office is to drive implementation, and to bring greater coherence and integration to Government action aimed at addressing child poverty.

The Programme Office will act as a source of cross-government analysis and offer expert support and insight for those developing or implementing policy initiatives relevant to addressing child poverty. It will support cross-fertilisation nationally and internationally, and will access external practice and academic expertise as required to enhance evidence informed decision making in this key area of government policy.

In addition to monitoring overall delivery of initiatives relevant to the six priority areas the Programme Office will provide a specific focus on priority areas identified in section 4.

In order to achieve its monitoring role, the Programme Office will manage a network and governance structure which will report to the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, which is supported by the Senior Officials Group on Children and Education. This overarching governance structure is summarised in Figure 5.1.

The Programme Office will coordinate a cross government network on child poverty which will enhance a whole-of-government response to child poverty across each of the six priority areas. This network will include all government actors, agencies and local authority representatives with responsibility for relevant delivery and policy development in the specific priority areas. This network will feed into the development of an annual child poverty summit and will contribute to the development of the annual update report.

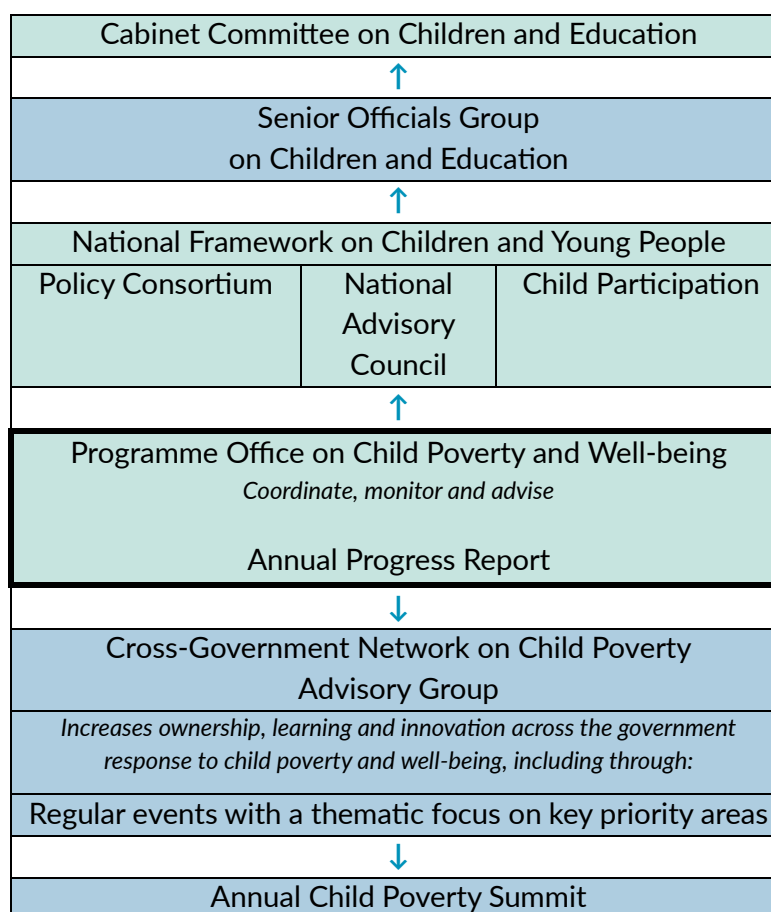
The Programme Office will work closely with DCEDIY to contribute to the work and structures of *Young Ireland*, including providing regular updates on progress to the Policy Forum and the National Advisory Council. The National Advisory Council will continue to be a key mechanism by which government engages with the broader community and voluntary sector.

Ensuring that the Programme Office is informed by, and responsive and accountable to children is of critical importance. The Office will use the established government child participation structures to ensure that children are aware of and feed directly into cross government action on child-poverty and well-being. The Programme Office will produce child friendly versions of key outputs.

The Programme Office will produce an annual report documenting progress and highlighting key areas of priority for the following year. Drawing on the *Young Ireland* Indicators Framework, the Progress report will include the development of a tailored set of measurements which will track overall progress in relation to the six key priority areas.

The annual report will also include an annual milestones table which will identify activities cross government for each of the six priority areas, as well as the governance and reporting activities of the Programme Office.

Figure 5.1: Overview of monitoring, coordination and reporting structures for the Programme Office



5.2 Cross Government systemic initiatives

In addition to its monitoring and coordination activities, the Programme Office will undertake a small number of strategic initiatives which have the potential to increase the impact of current and emerging measures to fight child poverty and support child well-being. These initiatives will respond to key challenges which impact widely on responses to poverty and which can amplify the impact of delivery across the key areas of focus. In this first programme, the focus will be on: developing an annual focus on child poverty in the annual Budget, developing national framework to support service integration for children and families, promoting key tools to enhance policy and implementation focus on child poverty, and supporting the cross-Government focus on the children’s services workforce.

5.2.1 Focus on Child Poverty in Annual Budget

While the annual budget is one element of the broader budgetary cycle each year, international practice has shown the enhancing a specific focus on child poverty at budget time can have a significant impact on delivery and innovation.

The annual budget is a critical moment in which Government articulates its ambition for the coming year. Given the Government’s commitment to reducing child poverty, the extent to which the national Budget reduces child poverty and strengthens children’s well-being is an important area of work for all concerned.

In order to prepare a child poverty budget, Departments will be asked to outline how their overall spending will impact on child poverty, as well as their spending in relation to the six

priority areas. Information on the impact of such spending on the situation of children in particular disadvantage (e.g., Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, children of lone parents, children who are homeless) could usefully be highlighted. The budget may build on existing analyses, such as the distributional analyses currently published by the Department of Finance, and performance and equality budgeting activities led by Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform.

5.2.2 Change programme to support service integration for children and families

First Five and Young Ireland, along with a range of other strategies relevant to children stress the importance of integrated services for providing optimum outcomes for children and families. As described in section 4.5 above, while there is widespread consensus that enhancing service coordination is critical to ensuring the best possible outcomes for children, lack of coherence and coordination remains a significant frustration for service providers, policy-makers, as well as families and communities.

Enhancing service integration is one of the six key priority areas for the Programme Office, and as well as monitoring progress across the system, the Office will aim to accelerate the emergence of a culture and practice of service integration, by undertaking a number of specific focused actions.

- Support the development of a framework for existing data to map both service needs and service availability at local level (working with Central Statistics Office).
- Profile good practice in interagency cooperation and highlighting transferable learning from these initiatives.
- Profile and encouraging innovation to enhance integrated services and monitor the impact of new integration initiatives (including exploring the impact of innovations such as local area coordination, legislative basis for service integration, pooled budgets, shared targets and accountability, protocols for cooperation and data sharing, use of shared services).
- Encouraging institutional support and leadership through the designation of high-level organisation leads with responsibility for coordination of all child-relevant activity. High level leads would play a key role in facilitating the Cross-Government Network on Child Poverty (see section 5.1)
- Development of an indicator to measure service integration and its impact on children and families.

5.2.3 Cross government tools to enhance policy and implementation focus on child poverty

In Ireland and internationally, there are a range of specific policy implementation tools which aim to enhance responses to child poverty and well-being. These tools include regulatory and other impact assessments, targets to reduce child poverty, child and equality budgeting, legislative and other policy development instruments.

From a child poverty and well-being perspective the overarching goal of these tools is to the drive focus and responsiveness to the broader ambition. The Programme Office will promote the use of existing tools, to strengthen and deepen their utility across the policy-making system, and explore how such tools can be enhanced for impact.

The Programme Office will:

- Work with DCEDIY and other Departments to enhance existing initiatives to monitor expenditure on children, including bring a focus on how this expenditure drives outcomes on child poverty and well-being.
- Work with the DSP and DCEDIY to develop and monitor a new national child poverty target to the end of 2025.
- Work with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform to promote use of existing policy development tools in order to enhance their effectiveness in bringing a focus on children and child poverty.

5.2.4 Initiative on child services workforce development

A key challenge identified across a range of children's service and initiative is the recruitment and retention of qualified personnel to work with and support children and families. Across government there are a range of projects aimed at enhancing the public service workforce, including into roles that work directly with children. These initiatives share common challenges in terms of training, recruitment and long-term retention and development of the children's services workforce.

The aim of the Programme Office is to support the accelerated delivery of existing recruitment initiatives and to promote greater coherence.

The Programme Office will:

- Support the development of workforce initiatives in the context of the new National Framework on Children and Young People.
- Support DCEDIY and the Department of Health to realise the ambition in First 5 to develop a dedicated child health workforce.
- Work with DFHERIS to develop a longer-term ambition for a training/workforce strategy for the children's services workforce.

5.3 Evaluation and impact assessment

The Programme Office annual report will seek to track progress in relation to the six key priority areas, as well as to articulate the role and impact of the Programme Office.

The Programme Office annual progress report will include the development of a tailored set of measurements which will track overall progress in relation to the six key priority areas. Where gaps emerge, the Office will present the case for enhanced data collection.

Additionally, the Programme Office will develop an internal evaluation framework to monitor cross government action, as well as the Office's own activity and impact.



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