

## **The Parenting Support Actions outlined within ‘*First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*’: An Overview**

This is the second of three briefing papers produced by The Parenting Network to help inform decision-making and policy development and implementation on the island of Ireland, in relation to supporting parents in their parenting role. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the parenting support actions outlined in *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 - 2028*.

### **What is the Parenting Network?**

In 2010, the Centre for Effective Services (CES) established ‘The Special Interest Group – Supporting parents in their Parenting Role’. This group was re-branded in 2015 to become The Parenting Network (which will henceforth be referred to as ‘The Network’). The Network is an all-island group including agency Directors, CEOs, professional bodies, practitioners, academics and researchers in the relevant sectors.

Along with promoting the value of parenting support in its broadest sense, The Parenting Network has had a crucial role in advocating support for parents in their parenting role as a policy specific area since its inception. In Ireland, The Network has welcomed, ‘*First 5 – A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*’ (First 5) and subsequently its implementation plan. Equally its members in Northern Ireland have been actively involved in consultation processes contributing to the finalisation of the Family and Parenting Support Strategy (FPSS) NI.

Further information about the Parenting Network is available on the website – [www.theparentingnetwork.net](http://www.theparentingnetwork.net)

### **What is Parenting Support?**

As outlined in Briefing Paper 1, we adopt here, the definition of parenting support provided below.

*“Parenting Support refers to a range of information, support, education, training and counselling. There are also other measures or services that focus on influencing how parents understand and carry out their parenting role”* (Daly, 2012).

Many state services provide supports to parents more generally, e.g. child benefit; childcare subsidies; maternity, paternity and parental leave. While these provide support to parents, they are not considered to be supports targeted at the task of parenting itself. The Parenting Network, in addition to the above definition, believes that parenting support refers to practice approaches, services and interventions that:

- Empower parents by developing parenting confidence and competence.
- Enable parents to foster optimal child wellbeing and development outcomes through knowledge of children’s development and of parenting skills/competencies.
- Increase enjoyment and satisfaction of parenting.

## First 5 – A whole systems approach to the Early Years

In 2019, *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* (First 5) Implementation Plan was launched by the Government of Ireland. Whilst this is first and foremost an early years’ strategy, parenting support is a central component (Figure 1 below).

The ‘First 5’ strategy is an ambitious and detailed cross-government strategy with 170 actions organised across four main goals:

- ✦ Strong and supportive families and communities
- ✦ Optimum physical and mental health
- ✦ Positive play-based early learning
- ✦ An effective early childhood system.

The First 5 Strategy adopts a systems perspective/approach as it consolidates all of the services that a child and their family may encounter in the first five years of life. It has a strong focus on early learning and care (ELC) and child health, as well as parenting. In addition, it explores the governance and service delivery landscape required to address a range of systemic actions.



Figure 1 Parenting and other services encountered in first 5 years of life

## Parenting Support Actions in First 5

Many of the actions within First 5 are designed to support parents and their families by enhancing, amongst other things: child health service delivery; ELC; family-friendly working; maternity/paternity and parental leave; and family-friendly planning for local communities. However, from a parenting support perspective (and defined above) the following actions will be explored here:

1. Parenting information
2. Parenting supports – direct supports such as home visits/support programmes/education
3. The structural/foundational actions influencing the service delivery landscape for parents to access, receive and benefit from such supports.

### 1. Information actions to support parents in their parenting role

The importance of providing clear evidence-based information to support parents in their parenting role is clearly articulated in the strategy. These actions are delivered by specific government departments and central to these activities is the development of a single online platform where parents can go to find evidence-based resources and information (Figure 2 below).

The [mychild.ie](http://mychild.ie) Health Service Executive (HSE) website is a crucial element for the provision of health-specific information to parents, to support them in their parenting role. Along with other information campaigns, it will support child health-specific actions involving:

- family planning & reproductive health care
- healthy eating
- physical activity / sedentary behaviour
- screen time
- oral health
- cancer care
- child safety
- immunisation

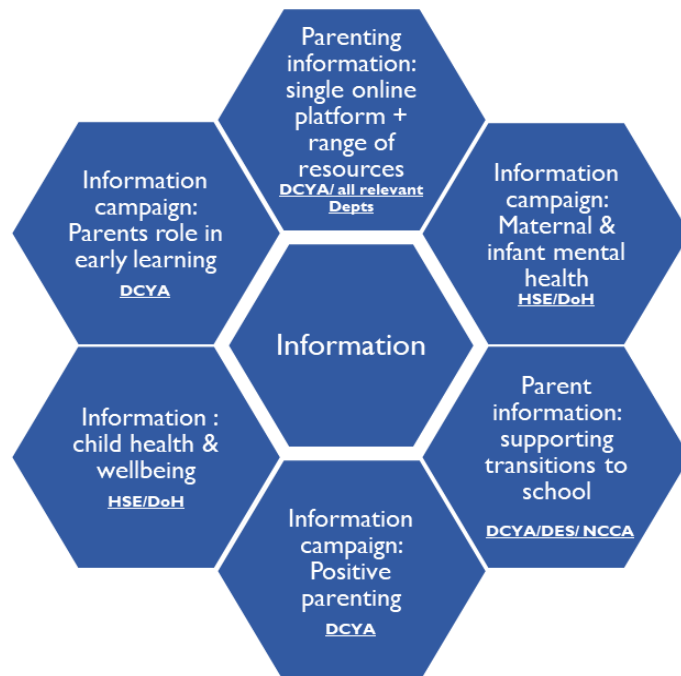


Figure 2 Range of information actions supporting parents in their parenting role

For the first time in a policy context, the essential role that parents play in their child’s development and home learning, has been clearly articulated and with an attendant commitment to enhancing information for parents in their parenting role. Additionally, in line with many other European countries and the European Commission, there is a clear commitment to provide information to promote positive parenting. A public information campaign will support these actions along with dissemination of information through all statutory and voluntary partners. These actions are welcome, and coupled with supportive services, will considerably enhance the support provided to parents in their parenting role.

## 2. Parenting supports and services to support parents in their parenting role

The actions shown in Figure 3 below reflect several new service delivery mechanisms as well as the expansion and enhancement of existing service provision. These actions are led by various Government departments and across disciplines within the service delivery infrastructure. The new actions are to:

1. Develop a tiered model of parenting supports based on progressive universalism for all families, including an approach to home visiting
2. Explore Early Learning and Care settings as a natural hub for collaborative, integrated work with families
3. Pilot the development of Family and Early Childhood Centres that bring together a range of services to support parents and children
4. Expand the role of libraries as community hubs for parenting supports
5. Explore extending PHN home visits antenatally, resources permitting.
6. Enhance the targeting of antenatal care to vulnerable populations
7. Pilot ‘baby boxes’ and ‘book bags’.



Figure 3 Summary of the range of parenting support actions within First 5

### **Infant Mental Health and Mental Health Supports to Parents**

There is also a strong policy commitment to meeting the mental health needs of both parents and children, with a specific focus on infant mental health. These actions outline enhanced health services (rather than new supports) and an information campaign. However, they propose that infant mental health becomes a vital component of a new interagency 'to-be-developed' training programme called the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative.

### **3. Developing the systems and structures for successful implementation**

First 5 also addresses some of the more extensive systemic reforms required to deliver effective services to children and families, including parenting support services. These include:

- Governance, leadership and collaboration
- Regulation, inspection, and quality assurance
- Skilled and sustainable workforce
- Research, data, monitoring and evaluation
- Strategic investment

#### **Governance, leadership and collaboration**

First 5 has a robust whole-of-government structure in place to oversee the delivery of the strategy and implementation plan. It also seeks to enhance the foundational infrastructure supporting an integrated child and family services infrastructure by implementing the following key leadership actions:

- Set up a Parenting Support Policy Unit
- Establish a Healthy Ireland Office.
- Undertake a range of other actions to enhance cross-departmental leadership in terms of child poverty, food poverty
- Implement cross-departmental joint working arrangements between, for example, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and focused on specific named actions.

Additionally, First 5 promotes service collaboration and integrated service development through two bottom-up approaches:

1. Research to explore the development of joined-up and integrated collaborative early years work located within ELC settings - ELC family hubs (DCEDIY)
2. Research to explore the development of Family and Early Childhood Centres (DCEDIY).

### **Regulation, inspection, and quality assurance**

Many actions are proposed to enhance a consistent and systematic approach to parenting support including:

- Quality standards for parenting supports and services - DCEDIY/Tusla/HSE/Voluntary Sector
- Enhancement and consolidation of the Family Resource Centre (FRC) Programme - Tusla/DCEDIY
- Review of assessment tools used for children aged 0-5 years across disciplines - DCEDIY/ All Government Depts.
- Standardised antenatal education curriculum and training – HSE
- ‘No Wrong Door’ policy principle in services - DCEDIY/Tusla

### **Skilled and sustainable workforce**

First 5 introduces a unique bottom-up approach to interagency working through the development of an Early Childhood Workforce (Lead-DCEDIY /Partner-All relevant Government Dept/State Agencies). This is significant in terms of parenting support, because some staff across different sectors who work with children aged 0-5 years (e.g. health, social care, ELC and education), will train together, thereby promoting a consistent approach to parenting support. This action is linked with Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health and the development of a cross-service ‘No Wrong Door’ policy approach. There is also an interesting action to map the range of assessments and screening tools currently being used within and across the early years sector; this will, in turn, feed into the training of an early childhood workforce.

An approach to ensure that there is a Dedicated Child Health Workforce (Lead – Department of Health (DOH)/Partners - DCEDIY and TBD) is also proposed. This will be important for parenting support in terms of consolidating essential information and supports within the early years’ health service workforce.

### **Strategic Investment**

In terms of parenting support, the commitment under First 5 is predominantly focused on linking investment to performance monitoring. More broadly, there are actions exploring expenditure in early childhood, such as the development of an indicator set to measure and monitor public investment in early childhood, and the continuation of Social Impact Assessments. However, of particular relevance to parenting support, is an action designed to align commissioning, funding and performance monitoring of parenting support services with quality standards.

### **Research / Data / Monitoring and Evaluation**

There is a wide range of actions contributing to research, data and evaluation systems underpinning parenting support infrastructures. Figure 5 below outlines some of these. Those described have particular relevance for parenting support including, for example, those which will contribute to enhancing the evidence base and informing both commissioning and the performance evaluation of parent supports.

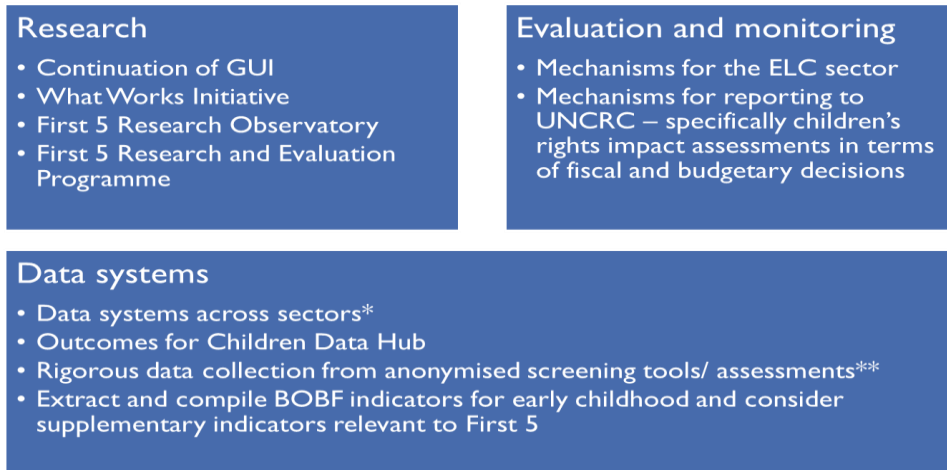


Figure 1 Sample of research, data, and evaluation/monitoring actions of relevance to delivering parenting supports nationally.

## Summary

First 5 is a long-awaited early years’ strategy. It is comprehensive, ambitious and well considered in terms of implementation. It recognises key structural and foundational ‘building blocks’ which are necessary to deliver on the aspirations within the actions. The strategy was widely welcomed when published and particularly because it outlined, for the first time, the breadth of actions, services and agencies involved with a child and their parents over the first five years.

All of the actions are relevant to the lives of parents, even if they are targeting structural changes which subsequently enhance life experiences. The strategy moves closer to enabling parents to stay at home for the first year of their child’s life. It also addresses family-friendly work practices and promotes the uptake of breastfeeding by tackling issues facing parents who are returning to work. Furthermore, it seeks to encourage family-friendly communities.

The strategy also includes a package of measures to address early childhood poverty including issues related to homelessness, direct provision and the quality of housing for all, including families from the Traveller Community, as well as food and energy poverty. In addition, it proposes substantial changes to the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector, which will provide supports to all parents of young children.

While this current paper has identified those actions relevant to parenting support, the boundaries between where ‘parenting supports’ begin and end, are blurred and perhaps rightly so. It reminds all of us who work with children and families across all sectors (health, justice, education, children & families, welfare and local government), that parenting does not happen in isolation, or in a community space for one hour a week. Parenting is shaped and informed by the many encounters which parents have with all services.

In summary, First 5 marks a considerable milestone. It is comprehensive, ambitious and aims to enhance services, supports, legislation and structures to ensure children and their families have the best start in life.