

## PRESS RELEASE

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An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
Disability, Integration and Youth

### **Minister Foley publishes 2024 progress report for First 5, the whole of government strategy for babies, young children and their families**

- €1.3 billion investment in early learning and childcare this year, which builds on the €1 billion investment target that was met in 2023, five years earlier than anticipated
- 95% of 2024 commitments expected to be delivered by year end
- Further milestones include extra two weeks of paid Parent's Leave and an additional payment of €280 for a new baby among others

The Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley, has today published the First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2024.

First 5, the ten-year Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families was published in November 2018. The strategy includes 125 actions to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families in their "First 5" years of life. The strategy is delivered by a wide variety of stakeholders whose contributions are vital to its success including ten Government Departments, the HSE, Tusla, as well as 31 delivery partners.

The report published today summarises recent progress in implementing the strategy, with 56% of all 2024 commitments met at this point and 95% expected to be met by year end. In particular, the report details €1.3 billion of investment for early learning and childcare, which builds on the €1 billion investment target that was met in 2023, five years earlier than anticipated

The report contains details on all the milestones reached so far, as all Departments, Agencies, Partners, and stakeholders work together to implement the First 5 Big Steps. Some of the key achievements from 2024 that have already been achieved include:

- Parents with a child under two years of age are each entitled to an extra two weeks of paid Parent's Leave and Benefit.

- A 24% increase for early learning and childcare in Budget 2025, bringing funding up by €266 million to over €1.3 billion.
- Launch of the Parent Peer Support Fund to help organisations promote the sharing of information and improve parental wellbeing with €100,000 of available funding.
- The 'New Baby Grant', which is an additional payment of €280 for a newborn or adopted child, was announced as part of Budget 2025.
- The progression of several measures and supports encouraging optimal health behaviours such as breast feeding, healthy eating, physical activity, and child safety.
- The extension of the Access and Inclusion Model to children in the universal two-year pre-school Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) programme. This involves providing targeted supports to children with disabilities outside of time spent in the ECCE programme, throughout the year.
- The Building Blocks Expansion Scheme allocated €1.3m to services to undertake renovations or to upgrade existing space to cater for more children. It is expected to deliver up to 300 new places for one to three-year-olds.
- Childminder-specific regulations were introduced to allow registered childminders to be covered by the National Childcare Scheme.
- Equal Start, a new model of state supports, was launched to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare.

Speaking about today's publication, Minister Foley said she was pleased with the: *"considerable progress that has been made to deliver on the commitments in the First 5 Strategy by Government departments, state agencies and the community and voluntary sector."*

*"I believe a lot can be accomplished in this term of Government to improve services and supports to young children in their "First 5" years of life. Our new Programme for Government includes important steps to improve accessibility and affordability of early learning and childcare, to professionalise its workforce, improve quality and to alleviate childhood poverty."*

*"As we move towards the final phase of implementation of the First 5 Strategy, I strongly believe that we can create positive change to ensure all children can get the best start in life and reach their full potential. I look forward to continuing to work with stakeholders to bring us closer to this reality."*

**ENDS**

### **Notes to the Editor**

The First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025 was launched in November 2023. It includes 125 actions to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. Some key achievements for 2024 include:

#### **A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring**

- From August 2024, parents with a child under two years of age or who have adopted a child within the last two years will each be entitled to an extra two weeks of paid Parent's Leave and Benefit.

- The right to request flexible working for parents and carers, which was introduced through the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023, was commenced on 6 March 2024.

#### **A new model of parenting support**

- A total of €75,000 was distributed among 37 organisations under the 2023/24 Parent Peer Support Fund. This funding facilitated delivery of parent peer support projects by organisations who provide a diverse range of services such as domestic violence, kinship care, breastfeeding, disability, and migrant supports. In 2024/25, the total funding available has increased to €100,000.
- Ten Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) participated in a pilot of a Parenting Support Awareness Fund, funding CYPSC to promote existing parenting support services in their local areas. The learnings from the pilot were incorporated into the fund in 2024 which was then rolled out to all 27 CYPSCs.

#### **New developments in child health**

- The HSE launched the updated National Infant Feeding Education Programme for healthcare providers, with a focus on standardising the delivery of breastfeeding education and skills training, maximising blended learning, and ensuring health care staff are up to date with emerging evidence. To date five thousand staff have enrolled and over 70 staff have been trained to deliver breastfeeding skills training sessions within maternity and public health nursing services.
- During 2024, 11 additional Home Visiting Programmes were approved through the Children's Fund in partnership with Tusla.
- A Project Officer was appointed to spearhead work on a dedicated child health workforce.

#### **Reform of the Early Learning and Care system**

- Budget 2025 allocated an additional €266 million for early learning and childcare, representing an increase of 24% from 2024.
- The Building Blocks Expansion Scheme allocated €1.3m to services to undertake renovations or to upgrade existing space to cater for more children. It is expected to deliver up to 300 new places for one to three-year-olds. The €25 million Building Blocks Extension scheme was opened for applications in November 2024.
- Childminder related exemptions were removed from primary legislation and childminder-specific regulations were introduced in September.
- Under Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (2022-2028), 47 of 57 actions for 2024 were either completed or in progress.

#### **A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty and disadvantage**

- Equal Start was launched; a major new model of government-funded supports to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare. Settings benefitting from setting-targeted supports – approximately 800 in the initial implementation phase – have been objectively identified as operating in the context of the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.
- An additional payment of €280 for a newborn or adopted child (the 'New Baby Grant') was announced as part of Budget 2025. It is estimated that in 2025, the grant will be paid in respect of some 54,000 children.