



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



# Supporting Parents:

A National Model  
of Parenting  
Support Services





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## Foreword from An Taoiseach

Ireland is a country that values the importance of families and communities, particularly children. Children represent our greatest hope and the future of our society. We all have a duty to provide them with the supports they need. But while it is right to prioritise the needs of children, we must also support their parents.

Parents' influence on their children's lives cannot be overstated. As we say in Irish, *an rud a chionn an leanbh is é a níonn an leanbh*. What the child sees, the child does. The input of parents can affect the social and emotional development of a child. Yet the experiences of parents can differ significantly, particularly during difficult times.

With the introduction of *Supporting Parents: A National Model for Parenting Support Services*, we reiterate the commitment of the State to support families and children.

Supporting parents effectively, beginning from pregnancy and continuing throughout their child's development, has many positive impacts on children, parents and our society as a whole. A focus on the existing strengths and resilience of children, young people and families with attention paid to accessing their informal networks of support is also advocated.



Parenting supports can improve the well-being of our communities and promote co-operation and solidarity. Support for parents can also help to reduce inequality and build and strengthen relationships, education, the economy and our environment. In Ireland, we are developing a Well-being Framework to measure our progress as a country and to improve our decision making with policies that support the lived experiences of people. *Supporting Parents* aligns with our overall work on the well-being of people across Ireland.

Whether our focus is on children, families, or society as a whole, our goal remains the same. We want to support the happiness and well-being of adults, children, and families in Ireland, and to enable them to reach their full potential. Much of this work is already underway in parenting support services around the country.

*Supporting Parents* acknowledges this excellent work, and commits to provide more information about services, improving and expanding access, so that more families can benefit from this learning.

Over a hundred years ago, the Irish people showed a determination to pursue the happiness and prosperity of all. We still hold those principles dear today. *Supporting Parents* will help parents throughout the country to build on their existing parenting skills, and to build happier and healthier relationships with their children and families.

**An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, T.D.**

# Introduction from the Minister

I am very proud to deliver the publication of *Supporting Parents: A National Model for Parenting Support Services*.

The past few years have not been an easy period for parents in Ireland. The outbreak of COVID-19, which saw the temporary closure of schools, early years services, and other supports, seriously impacted on parents' and children's day-to-day lives. Many people also experienced illness and personal bereavement at this time.



While the well-being of children must always be a priority, it can be difficult for parents to know what to do, especially in a time of high stress or turmoil. The role of parenting support services is invaluable in this respect.

The vision of *Supporting Parents* is for all parents to be confident and capable in their parenting role, helping to achieve the best outcomes for children and families. It also sets out a cross-government, cross-society approach to ensure that all parents can access high quality supports in a timely manner.

*Supporting Parents* has four key goals, to achieve:

- Greater awareness of parenting support services
- Greater access to parenting support services
- More inclusive parenting support services
- Needs-led and evidence-informed parenting support services

The model seeks to strengthen and improve parenting support in Ireland. This is provided by a wide variety of organisations throughout the country. Parents also play a key role in supporting each other, which is recognised and promoted in *Supporting Parents*.

Evidence and experience from around the world shows that for us to create positive change, we need the involvement of the whole community, and the whole of Government, working together. We have certainly seen this in the development of *Supporting Parents*. I would like to thank the many people, organisations and Government Departments who contributed, particularly the members of our collaborative working group, who contributed many hours of their valuable time to the design of the model. Others advised and commented on draft versions, shared useful information and learning, and challenged us where necessary.

I hope that our work on *Supporting Parents* will not only raise awareness of parenting support services, but help us to meet the needs of everyone who plays a parenting role in our society. The development of a new framework for children and young people by my Department, to succeed *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, will facilitate this.

We will continue to work across government and with our partners to expand and diversify services to meet the needs of all parents, no matter where they live or what their circumstances are.

**Roderic O’Gorman, T.D.,  
Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

# Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services

Providing effective parenting supports is important for ensuring the health and wellbeing of children and their parents during their early years and beyond. Resourcing and supporting parents in their parenting role also ensures the best possible start in life for children and can mitigate some of the more negative impacts of intergenerational poverty, challenging family circumstances and inter-parental conflict.

One of the most effective ways of supporting children is by supporting their parents. This is reflected in requirements under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities to support parents in their parenting role. Parents have a profound impact on their child's development and everyday life. The parent-child relationship has been shown to predict outcomes in cognitive, academic and socio-emotional development, as well as physical health and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. The effects of the parent-child relationship last well beyond childhood, impacting on social mobility and later life prospects<sup>2</sup>. It can also have an intergenerational impact with studies showing that how a person is parented can shape how they go on to parent their own children later in life<sup>3</sup>.

Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services defines parenting supports as the provision of information and services aimed at strengthening parents' knowledge, confidence and skills to help achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

There is an inherent complexity in describing parenting support as parenting touches on all parts of family life. A broad range of parenting supports, delivered in a variety of formats, is required to meet the needs of all parents and their children.

Supporting Parents defines a parent as any person with a parenting role, which is any person with primary or major responsibility for the care of a child under the age of 18 years. The term parent is applied in the most inclusive manner as possible, and includes biological parents, adoptive parents, foster carers, step-parents, kinship carers, and guardians.

All parents benefit from support at different stages in their child's life. A parent's support needs will change as their child grows and develops. Families in all circumstances can



experience the intrinsic ups and downs of life. Support needs may arise due to a child's changing developmental needs, a specific issue, or ongoing challenges. Supporting Parents takes a strengths-based approach to support. When parents use a parenting support service, they are doing so as the experts in their own children's lives. They are bringing their knowledge and skills when engaging with services. The aim is to work in partnership with parents to strengthen and build on these skills.

Parenting support services work with parents to enhance their knowledge and skills, and promote protective factors. These supports assist parents to manage and support their children's development and resilience through challenges, to enhance their own personal wellbeing, and to build sustaining support networks. Parenting support is provided along a continuum of need and recognises that needs will range from the provision of information to intensive interventions.

Parenting support emphasises the importance of developing relationships, parental wellbeing, building confidence of parents, and offering a listening ear when needed. Good communication and partnership with parents are key to the delivery of effective parenting support services.

Supporting parents effectively from pre-birth and throughout their child's development has many positive impacts on children, parents and wider society. In communities, parenting supports can improve the well-being of communities and promote co-operation and solidarity. Within society, support for parents can ensure a better use of resources, can serve to reduce inequalities, and can build and strengthen relationships, education, the economy and our environment.

## Whole-of-Government Approach

Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services takes a whole-of-Government approach to improving supports for parenting and helping parents to feel more confident, informed and able. Parenting supports are often one part of a wider range of services such as family, health, education, family law and disability services. The overlap between parenting supports and wider services emphasises the need for a whole-of-Government approach.

## Positive Parenting

Supporting Parents encourages, and is built on, the principles of positive parenting. Positive parenting encourages parenting behaviours that are based on the best interests of the child, and which foster a safe, engaging and nurturing environment for learning and development. The goal of positive parenting is to nurture and empower the child while also providing the boundaries they need to develop in a healthy way<sup>4</sup>. Recent research points to the benefits of positive parenting for long-term developmental outcomes, and healthier inter-parental and parent-child relationships. Positive parenting is recommended by national and international organisations working to support children and families.

## Other Supports for Parents and Children

The purpose of **parenting** support is to strengthen parenting knowledge, confidence and skills. This differs from other forms of support for parents and children.

Parent support encompasses a much wider range of services and financial supports that can affect all aspects of parents' lives and their ability to care and provide for their children. These supports may influence parenting even though parenting practises are not the focus of the support. For example, family leave entitlements give parents the opportunity to take time out from work to be with their child. Other important supports for parents and children that are not included in the model's definition of parenting support services, include: financial supports; family-friendly work practices; educational supports; measure to promote online safety; healthcare and mental health services; early learning and care and school-age childcare; housing; and the development of child-friendly cities and places. The needs of parents, children and families cannot be met by parenting supports alone, they are one part of a whole system of support<sup>5</sup>.

Often other factors in a parent's life can impact on their parenting role. While the model is not intended to address these wider family support needs, it is important that services and practitioners are knowledgeable about the other supports available, e.g. housing, addiction services, mental health services, or income supports.

## Why develop a model?

*First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, contains a key action to develop a national model of parenting support services to improve and guide the development of parenting support services.

*“Develop a national model of parenting services, from universal to targeted provision, covering key stages of child development, taking account of parents and children in a range of contexts and parenting relationships.” - Action A.2.2.1, First 5*

Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services addresses parenting support services from pre-birth up to adulthood. It describes the provision of parenting supports in Ireland and respective roles and responsibilities, and sets out actions to improve parenting supports. Key priorities in these actions are to increase awareness, improve access, and promote inclusive, high-quality and needs-led parenting supports.

While parenting can be a source of life satisfaction and meaning, it can also present challenges. Many new parents report negative emotions, relationship difficulties and financial pressures while adapting to parenting, and often require support and guidance to navigate this new stage of life<sup>6</sup>. This is particularly true for people in adverse circumstances (e.g. living in poverty or with poor mental health), or who may experience additional hardship as a result of becoming a parent (such as parenting alone).

Parenting supports are provided through a complex service delivery structure. Policy and operational responsibility for parenting supports cuts across a range of Government Departments and statutory agencies. Parenting support services are provided by many different organisations and practitioners with community and voluntary sector organisations playing a significant role.

For parents to get the right parenting support, at the right time, we need to provide high-quality, accessible information and high quality services that are visible, inclusive and easily accessible.

Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services seeks to improve services by setting out a shared vision with agreed principles and shared goals. This will help to guide the implementation of current and future parenting support actions and promote a cohesive, joined-up national approach across different sectors.

Supporting Parents takes account of existing policies and commitments in relation to parenting supports. It seeks to strengthen and develop mechanisms for effective coordination, co-operation and collaboration. It recognises the roles and strengths of individual sectors in supporting parents and seeks to identify how we can work together to maximise all efforts and deliver better results for parents and their children.

The model sets out the vision, principles and delivery mechanisms for parenting supports in Ireland. The four goals identified as essential to achieving the vision are:

1. Greater awareness of parenting support services
2. Greater access to parenting support services
3. More inclusive parenting support services
4. Needs-led and evidence-informed parenting support services

The first stage in achieving these goals is described in the action plan. The action plan will be realised through a 5 year implementation plan that will accompany the model.

## Development of Supporting Parents

Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services was developed by a collaborative working group led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, with input from a wide range of stakeholders across Government Departments, agencies and community and voluntary organisations (full details in Appendix 1). The experiences, views and preferences of parents, children and young people were captured through research, online consultation and direct engagement. Supporting Parents has also been informed by Irish and international research on the support needs of parents and on the role of parents in achieving better outcomes for children. Other learnings reflected in the model include the

parenting challenges and stresses faced by parents and children as a result of Covid-19 public health restrictions, and the responses of services in the public and voluntary sectors, to meet both emerging and existing parenting support needs.

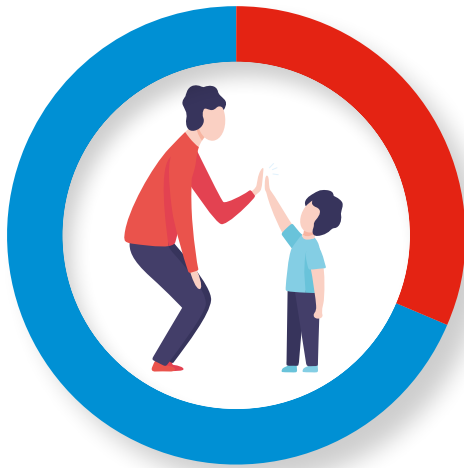
## Parents in Ireland

There are over one million parents in Ireland living with children under 18 years of age. In addition, there are parents who live apart from their children either all or some of the time.

Children and young people in Ireland report having a positive relationship with their parents.<sup>7</sup> A 2018 study saw 84% of 10 to 14 year old children report that they always love their family, 84% find it easy to talk to their mother about things that really bother them and 71.5% find it easy to talk to their father about the same issues<sup>8</sup>. However, 4 out of 10 parents in Ireland felt worried or stressed in relation to parenting “always” or “often”, with younger parents most likely to report feeling stressed<sup>9</sup>.

Parenting is influenced by a broad range of factors, including parents’ own experiences, knowledge, expectations, social context and cultural beliefs. Key challenges facing parents in Ireland today include feelings of uncertainty, balancing work and parenting, navigating family transitions, managing complex needs and coping with children’s educational, developmental and wellbeing needs<sup>10</sup>. Understanding the varied lives of parents in Ireland is crucial in order to effectively take account of the needs of parents and children in a range of contexts and parenting relationships, and to develop and deliver parenting support services that meet their needs.

# Overview of Parents in Ireland



- **1,506.625**  
Parents in Ireland (2016)
- **31.6%**  
of total Irish population



## Age of Parents

- Under 20 = 0.1%
- 20-30 = 7%
- 30-40 = 37.3%
- 40-50 = 40.7%
- Over 50 = 14.8%

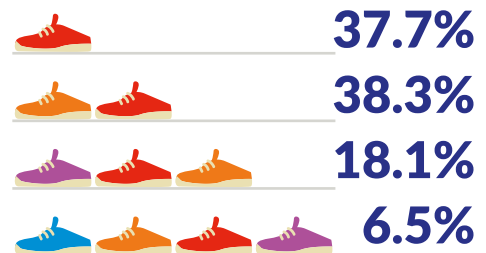


## Marital Status

- Married 76%
- Single 18.4%
- Separated 2.9%
- Other 2.7%



## Number of Children



## Nationality



**82% Irish**



**16% Other**

2% Not Stated

## Mean Age of Women at Childbirth



**30.8**



**32.2**

## Rural & Urban



**38.5%**

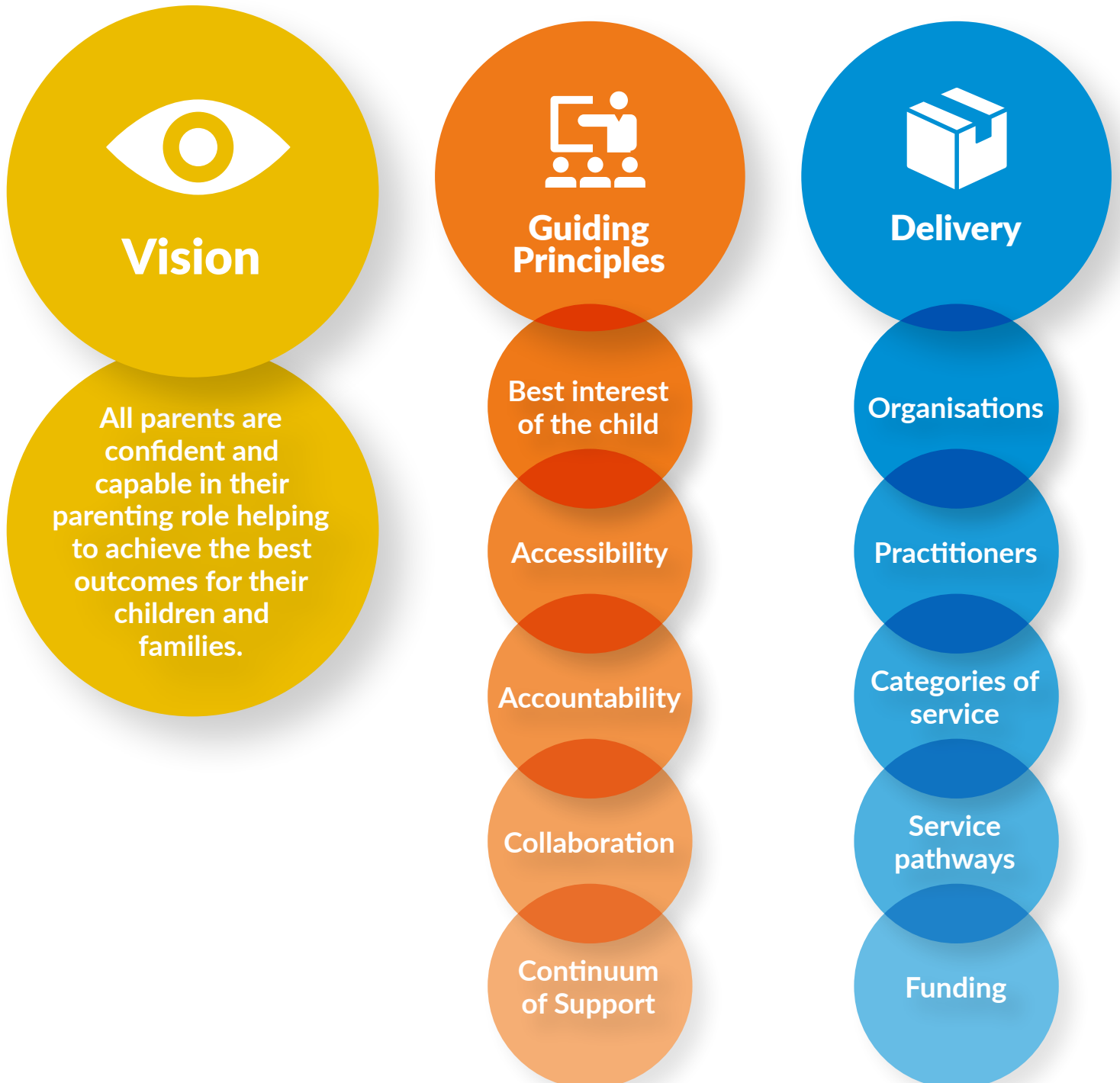


**61.5%**




**17.9%**  
of parents spoke a  
language other than  
English or Irish in their  
home

# National Model of Parenting Support Services







## Goals

1. Greater awareness of parenting support services
2. Greater access to parenting support services
3. More inclusive parenting support services
4. Needs-led and evidence-informed parenting support services



## Action Plan for Change

- A. Governance and policy
- B. Empowering parents
- C. Needs-led supports
- D. Communications
- E. Monitoring reporting and evaluation



## Implementation

- National Parenting Support Steering Group
- National Model Implementation Group
- Cross-Government Parenting Support Network
- DCEDIY Implementation Team

# Vision

All parents are confident and capable in their parenting role helping to achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

## Guiding principles

In addition to a shared vision, parenting support service provision should be guided by four fundamental principles that are underpinned by a central principle that services have the best interests of the child at their core.

**Best Interests of the child:** Acknowledge, promote and protect the rights of all children and improve outcomes by supporting and assisting parents in a consistent and equitable manner.

**Accessibility:** Provide high quality and evidence-informed parenting supports, which are easily accessed, inclusive and respectful of all parents and people with a parenting role in a child's life.

**Accountability:** Services are designed and delivered based on an assessment of needs. Service outcomes are measured and monitored in a transparent manner with a strong commitment to quality, efficient use of public funding, and meeting the needs of parents and their children.

**Continuum of Support:** Provide parents and their children with services throughout the life course, from before pregnancy and throughout childhood that are relationship focused and promote healthy development, prevent problems from arising, provide support at the earliest possible stages when issues arise, and support parents to transition smoothly between services.

**Collaboration:** Work together and in partnership with parents, to respond to their needs and preferences, recognising, fostering and building on a parent's skills, capacities and competencies. Services and funders collaborate and coordinate to ensure that parenting support needs are met and that parents are directed to the most appropriate support.



# Delivery

The delivery of publicly funded parenting supports in Ireland requires a range of different organisations, professionals, and volunteers (often parents themselves). This section describes the roles of different organisations in relation to parenting support. It describes the main forms of parenting support services and how they can be categorised.

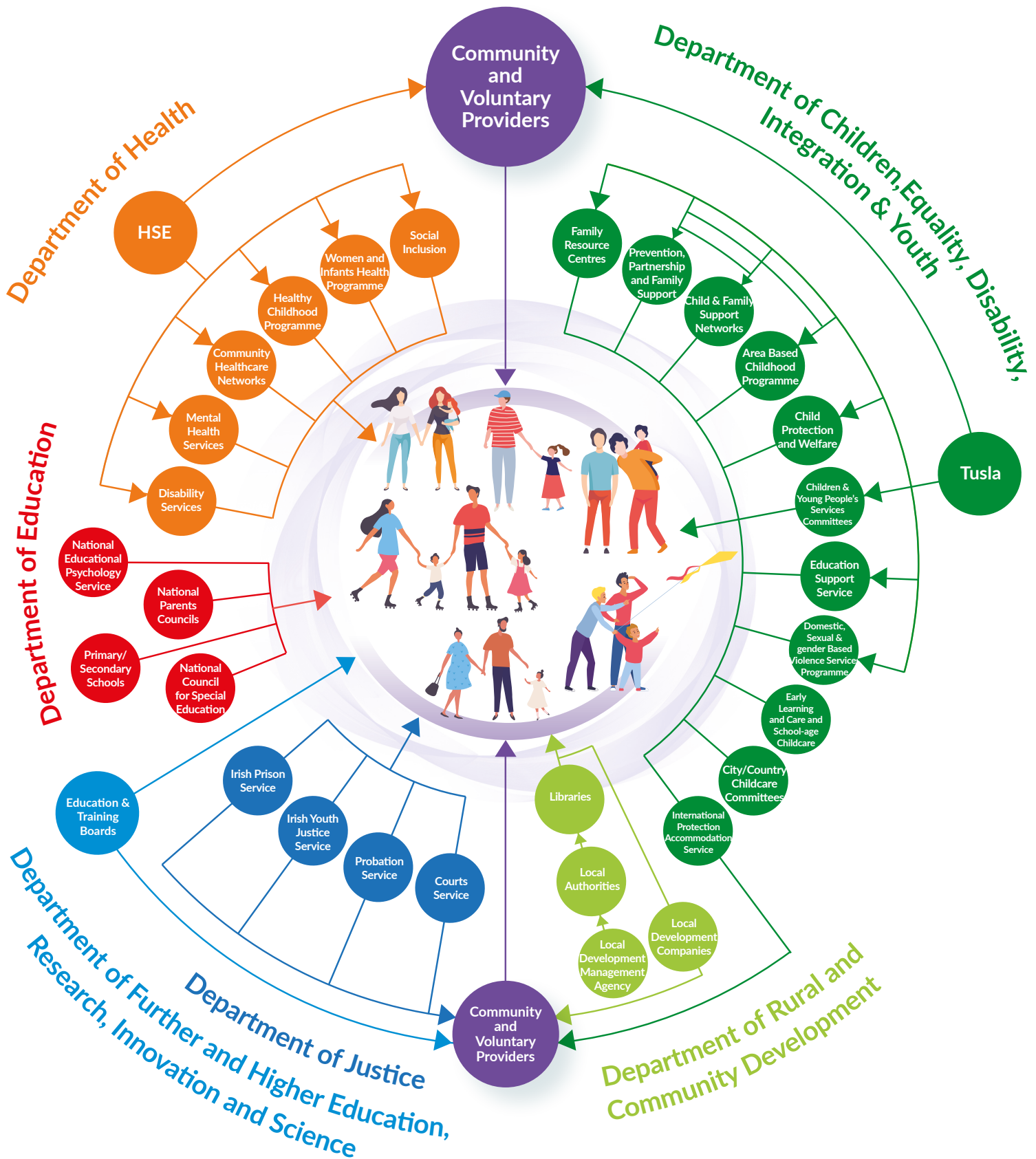
## Organisations and roles

It is important to recognise that while the national model is concerned with publicly funded parenting supports, for most parents, family and friends are the most common source of parenting support and information. Additionally, informal supports are a key source of support for parents. These can take the form of informal networks or parent-led organisations active in local communities.

At the same time, parents need to be able to access high quality, evidence-based information about their child's developmental needs. These services are promoted, funded or directly provided by Government Departments and statutory agencies with policy and operational responsibility for supporting positive outcomes for children and families. In addition, a range of community and voluntary sector organisations play a key role – nationally and locally – in the delivery of supports to parents.

This section provides an overview of the different publicly funded organisations and their role(s) in parenting support services. These roles include setting policy, coordinating the provision of services, commissioning services and providing services.

# Parenting Support Landscape



## Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is responsible for the cross-government coordination of policy direction, activity and performance relating to parenting support. It is the parent department of Tusla, a key provider and funder of parenting support services. Other relevant responsibilities include equality policy, disability policy, policy on Early Learning and Care and School-age Childcare, oversight of the City and County Childcare Committees, and oversight of the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS). Individual policy frameworks, strategies and action plans under the remit of the Department that impact on parenting supports include *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the national policy framework for children and young people and *First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*.

## Tusla

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has statutory responsibilities under the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013 to support the development, welfare and protection of children; to support and encourage the effective functioning of families; and to maintain and develop support services for those functions, including support services in local communities.

Tusla provides **preventative family support services** aimed at promoting the welfare of children and services which relate to the improvement of relationships between parents and children, including effective parenting. Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare Services works closely with **parents of children at risk of care** or **parents of children in care** to build on existing family strengths and support positive parenting. Supports are also provided for foster carers. Tusla's delivery of these responsibilities involves the planning, funding and provision of a wide range of parenting support services at national, regional and local levels. There are 17 Tusla local area offices which commission and provide local parenting support services. Tusla's parenting24seven website contains parenting tips, advice and eLearning courses.

Tusla's **Prevention, Partnership and Family Support** (PPFS) service aims to prevent risks to children and young people arising or escalating by building sustainable

capacity and resources in Tusla and partner organisations to perform early intervention work. One of the main goals of this service is the support of parents to develop their parenting skills. This is shown by the establishment of a Parent Support Champions initiative which supports the development of system-wide approaches and practices to working with parents, the development of online resources for parents, and a toolkit and funding for parental participation in local areas. Many Tusla parenting support services are commissioned from providers in the community and voluntary sector providers, including a range of parenting support and home visiting programmes and the Teen Parents Support Programme.

Tusla has established 121 **Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs)** across the country. These are multi-agency networks established to improve access to support services for children and their families using local, area-based approaches. These partnership-based networks are open to any local services that have an input into families' lives. Members of the networks come from a variety of agencies or local voluntary and community services. Parents can contact their local Child and Family Support Network coordinator directly for information on locally available supports. The **Meitheal Early Intervention Practice Model** is the case co-ordinating process for multiagency delivery of supports within CFSNs. Network members work collaboratively to address the needs of the child and ensure a continuum of support. The model promotes a systemic method of service delivery providing a wide range of services, including universal services, to more targeted and intensive supports.

**Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)** operates under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, a piece of legislation that emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention. **TESS** has three strands: the Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS), and two school support services, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP). The three strands of **TESS** work together collaboratively with schools, families, and other relevant services to achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people.

Tusla also oversees the **Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme** which operates in 12 areas of disadvantage, under the auspices of community and voluntary sector

organisations, and aims to deliver better outcomes for children and families in those areas. A core component of the programme is the provision of parenting support services. ABC programmes coordinate the provision of services by different providers within their local area.

**27 Children and Young People Services Committees (CYPSC)** plan and coordinate services for children and young people. These are organised by counties or similar geographic groupings, e.g. Galway CYPSC, Dublin City North CYPSC, Longford Westmeath CYPSC. Their overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency working. CYPSCs are county-level committees that bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people. Many CYPSCs have subgroups that hold responsibility for the planning and coordination of parenting support services in their county or region. Some CYPSCs also have online service directories that include information about local parenting support services. Local CYPSCs help identify and agree on key priorities for children and young people with the Local Community Development Committee, which can then be presented to relevant Government departments and state agencies.

**Family Resource Centres (FRCs)** provide a range of universal and targeted services and development opportunities that address the needs of families, including many parenting support services. There are 121 centres nationwide, predominantly operating under the auspices of community and voluntary sector organisations.

### **Early learning and care and school-age childcare providers**

There are approximately 4,800 centre-based early learning and care and school-age childcare services in Ireland, as well as up to 15,000 childminders. Their primary role is to offer early learning and childcare, providing a service to both children and families. They aim to work in partnership with parents and can be a source of information on local services and resources for parents. While most early learning and care and school-age childcare services do not provide direct parenting support services, many community services do.

### **County and City Childcare Committees**

There are 30 County and City Childcare Committees located nationwide. In addition



to their role providing information on childcare services, they provide parents with information on parenting courses available locally and distribute funding and provide support for parent and toddler groups.

### **International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS)**

The International Protection Accommodation Service is responsible for the procurement and overall administration of State provided accommodation and ancillary services for applicants for international protection, including family and parenting support.

### **Department of Health**

The Department of Health oversees implementation of health service policy and the governance of the Health Service Executive (HSE). Parenting supports are provided across a range of health policy areas, including Sláintecare, primary care, maternity care, social inclusion, disability services, health protection and health promotion. The goal of the **Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme** is to improve the long-term health and wellbeing of the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland. It includes the provision of evidence-based parenting courses with a particular focus on supporting healthy physical, social and emotional development. **Healthy Ireland** is a campaign that links with existing partnerships, strategies and initiatives to improve the capacity of parents, carers and families to support healthier choices for their children and themselves.

### **Health Service Executive**

The HSE directly provides parenting support services and also funds external community and voluntary organisations to deliver parenting support services. Services provided or funded by the HSE include parenting programmes, child development checks, parenting advice clinics, breastfeeding supports, and home visiting programmes for parents of young children.

The HSE's **National Healthy Childhood Programme** covers every child and is provided through a number of health services such as hospitals and GPs for antenatal and postnatal care, and Public Health Nurse visits. It also includes developmental checks and referrals, immunisation, and childhood screening programmes. Under the programme the mychild.ie website was developed for parents, which provides extensive information and advice on pregnancy and the first three years of a child's life.

Many members of **primary care** teams work with parents, delivering parenting support on particular aspects of their child's health and development. Parenting support services are often provided in Primary Care Centres or local health centres, often in collaboration with community and voluntary organisations, or groups of parents. Examples include breastfeeding support groups, baby massage, well baby clinics, parent and toddler groups, information and guidance on child development, speech and language development, immunisation, nutrition, weaning, behaviour management, toilet training and sleep management.

HSE **early intervention teams** support children, aged 0-6 years, and their parents and families, who have complex developmental needs. Early intervention for young children generally focuses on supporting the child's parents/caregivers to help their child achieve their goals. Parenting supports offered can vary between regions but typically includes the following: individual and group interventions, parenting programmes and parenting talks, and onward referral for specialist intervention where required.

**Children's Disability Network Teams** will provide services for all children with more significant needs and who require a team of professionals working together. They work in partnership with parents in setting agreed goals that support the child's development. Parent Support Groups for parents of children with disabilities are available in some areas to facilitate parents sharing their experiences and learning from each other.

HSE **Social Inclusion** promotes equal access to health services for people from vulnerable groups and provides funding for parenting support services for marginalised groups.

The **National Women and Infants Health Programme** oversees the management, organisation and delivery of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services. These include antenatal and postnatal education, guidance and skills training on care of the newborn, infant and maternal mental health, and breastfeeding supports.

The HSE also provides perinatal mental health services, specialist services for women with a mental health problem. The service is for pregnant women and women with a baby up to one year old who may have an existing or new mental health problem, and also women with severe mental health problems who are planning a pregnancy.

In recent years, a number of **Infant Mental Health Network Groups** have been established as a mechanism to disseminate and consolidate knowledge on infant mental health within the community. Infant Mental Health refers to the optimal development of infants and very young children within the context of secure and stable relationships with caregiving persons, most often their biological parents, but also adoptive parents, foster parents, or grandparents who have primary caregiving roles. They are networks of professionals involved in providing services and support to caregivers, families and children age 0-3. The network groups allow their members to share experiences, transfer knowledge, and develop a cross-disciplinary perspective on infant mental health theory and practice for integration into service delivery across the community.

### Department of Education

The Department of Education oversees schools, the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS), and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). It is responsible for policy in relation to Tusla's Education Support Service and provides funding to the National Parents Councils<sup>11</sup>.

### Schools

There are almost 4,000 primary and secondary schools across the country. Schools often provide information to parents about locally available parenting supports, and some schools have Home School Community Liaison Coordinators. Some parents associations may organise talks on different parenting topics.

### Home School Community Liaison Service

Tusla Education Support Service has operational responsibility for the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL). Under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) this scheme seeks to promote partnership between parents, teachers and community family support services. A HSCL Coordinator is a teacher from a participating DEIS school who is released from teaching duties, for a maximum of five years, in order to work intensively with and support parents or guardians. The overarching goal of the HSCL Coordinator is to improve educational outcomes for children through their work with the key adults in the child's life.

The HSCL coordinator also works in an integrated way with the other two strands of TESS; the School Completion Programme (SCP) and Educational Welfare Service (EWS), in order to provide appropriate initiatives and interventions for families.

### **National Educational Psychology Service**

Psychologists in the National Educational Psychology Service specialise in working with school communities, in partnership with teachers, parents and children, to identify educational needs and additional supports required in areas such as learning, behaviour, and social and emotional development.

### **National Council for Special Education (NCSE)**

The National Council for Special Education seeks to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities. They place a special emphasis on aiding children and their parents. NCSE local services are delivered through their national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) who interact with parents and schools and liaise with the HSE in providing resources to support children with special educational needs.

### **National Parents Councils**

The Education Act recognises both the National Parents Council – Primary (NPC) and the National Parents Council – Post-Primary (NCPPP) as the official parent representative bodies at national level. Both parent organisations represent all parents and guardians of children in schools throughout the country.

### **Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science harnesses resources within the education and research institutions to help define and innovatively address significant public policy and societal challenges. It oversees Solas and the Education and Training Boards which play an important role in supporting family literacy and family learning. Family literacy programmes support and develop the language, literacy and numeracy learning that happens in families. They improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of parents, improve parents' ability to help their children learn, and improve the developmental skills of young children and their acquisition of literacy, language and numeracy. Family learning programmes aim to develop the skills or knowledge of both adult and child participants. They also help

parents to actively support of their children's learning and development, to understand the impact of that support, and to identify opportunities for learning in the home and the community.

## Solas

The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, a 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy published in 2021, seeks to grow family literacy and family learning approaches as part of a targeted programme of support for health, social care and family support interventions. In 2020, Solas published guidelines which aim to strengthen existing good family literacy practice in Education and Training Boards so that it reaches as many families as possible and can contribute to more literacy equality for adults and children in Ireland.

## Education and Training Boards

The 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory education authorities with responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. Family learning, family literacy, and parenting courses are core elements of the services provided by ETBs supporting parents and their children. Each ETB must reflect, discuss and decide what structure and processes will best support family literacy in its catchment area. Examples of innovative approaches include the *My Baby and Me* course, which addresses the gap in learning activity between birth and three years of age and draws on tutors' skills in language, literacy and numeracy development; psychotherapy; child development; and parenting. ETBs often provide parenting supports through other services and in community-based locations such as Family Resource Centres.

## Department of Justice

The Department of Justice oversees the probation service, Irish Youth Justice Service, Courts Service, Irish Prison Service, and Probation Service. Each of these organisations has a role in providing or referring parents to a parenting service. The Youth Justice Strategy sets out a vision of collaborating across all sectors of government and society in the development and delivery of opportunities for children and young people, to harness support in their families and communities in order to strengthen their capacities to live free from crime and harm.

### **Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS)**

The IYJS has responsibility for the funding and development of community programmes aimed at reducing youth crime by focusing on diversion and rehabilitation. A number of funded community and voluntary organisations complement the criminal justice services by providing additional supports to parents and young people via mentoring programmes.

### **Courts Service**

The Courts Service covers a wide variety of functions such as upholding the rights of citizens, resolving civil disputes, and administering criminal law. There are specific Children's Courts and a Drug Treatment Court. As part of sentencing, a judge may recommend particular actions such as participation on a parenting programme. The forthcoming Family Court Bill will create a new dedicated Family Court within the existing court structure and provide for court procedures that support a faster and less adversarial resolution of disputes in specialised centres.

### **Irish Prison Service**

The Irish Prison Service deals with all prisoners over the age of 18. As part of a release programme, prisoners who are parents may partake in parenting programmes. Some prisons have provided programmes aimed at maintaining imprisoned fathers' relationships with their partners and their children.

### **Probation Service**

The Probation Service works with people who have offended, in both the community and detention or prison settings, to help them to effect change and address the harm caused. This incorporates individualised, structured interventions and supports, to address the factors which have contributed to their offending behaviour. As part of its structure, the Probation Service has a dedicated operational Young Persons Probation teams (YPP), established to fulfil the statutory obligation of the Children Act 2001, with a focus on addressing the needs and risks particular to young persons and families. The Service also funds a range of community organisations that complement its work in providing services to support desistance. Many engage directly with young people and their families, providing valuable supports and interventions such as education and training, respite, counselling, mentoring and life skills.

## **Department of Rural and Community Development**

The Department of Rural and Community Development oversees the Local Government Management Agency. The Department provides funding through the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), the Dormant Accounts Fund and the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO), which are important funding resources for organisations providing parenting supports. The Department has also provided funding for supports to Gaeltacht families who are raising children through Irish or who wish to do so.

## **The Local Government Management Agency and Local Authorities**

The Local Government Management Agency provides a range of professional services to the local government sector, supporting all 31 local authorities. Local authorities provide a range of services within their boundaries including public libraries.

## **Libraries**

The 330 public libraries across the country play a role in providing parents with resources and information that meets their needs. Parents can access online courses on different parenting topics through their local library, access books and digital media with information on parenting and child development, and find out about local parenting support services. Some libraries act as venues for parent support groups. The Healthy Ireland at Your Library programme initiative includes a list of digital and hardcopy books on parenting topics and provides funding for talks on different parenting topics.

## **Local Development Companies**

There are 49 Local Development Companies which are not-for-profit, volunteer-led, multi-sectoral partnerships that deliver community and rural development nationwide through locally based services. A number of local development companies provide parenting support initiatives.

### Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs)

LCDCs work to improve community development and give local government a more central role in local and community development. LCDCs manage the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in each local authority. SICAP aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality through supporting initiatives targeting the most disadvantaged and the hardest to reach communities.

### Community and Voluntary Sector Providers

Community and voluntary organisations deliver a wide range of initiatives, supports and services, and new organisations or initiatives are regularly established in response to changing needs and social challenges<sup>12</sup>. There is a strong community-statutory partnership in Ireland, which is clearly demonstrated by the significant role of community and voluntary organisations in the development and delivery of parenting support services.

A large number of local and national Community and Voluntary Sector service providers receive funding from the HSE, Tusla, and a number of other Government Departments and state agencies to develop and provide parenting support services. In 2019, Tusla funded 749 community, voluntary and charitable organisations, many of which delivered parenting support services. The HSE also provides grants to many organisations delivering parenting support services.

There are many examples of community and voluntary organisations working together, and with statutory bodies, at local and national levels to improve and develop parenting support services. The Prevention and Early Intervention Network is an organisation representing individuals and organisations working with children and families in Ireland, with a focus on policies and services with a prevention and early intervention approach. The Parenting Network is an all-island network of organisations, academics and policy managers who are committed to improving family wellbeing through parent support. The Children's Rights Alliance works to change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.



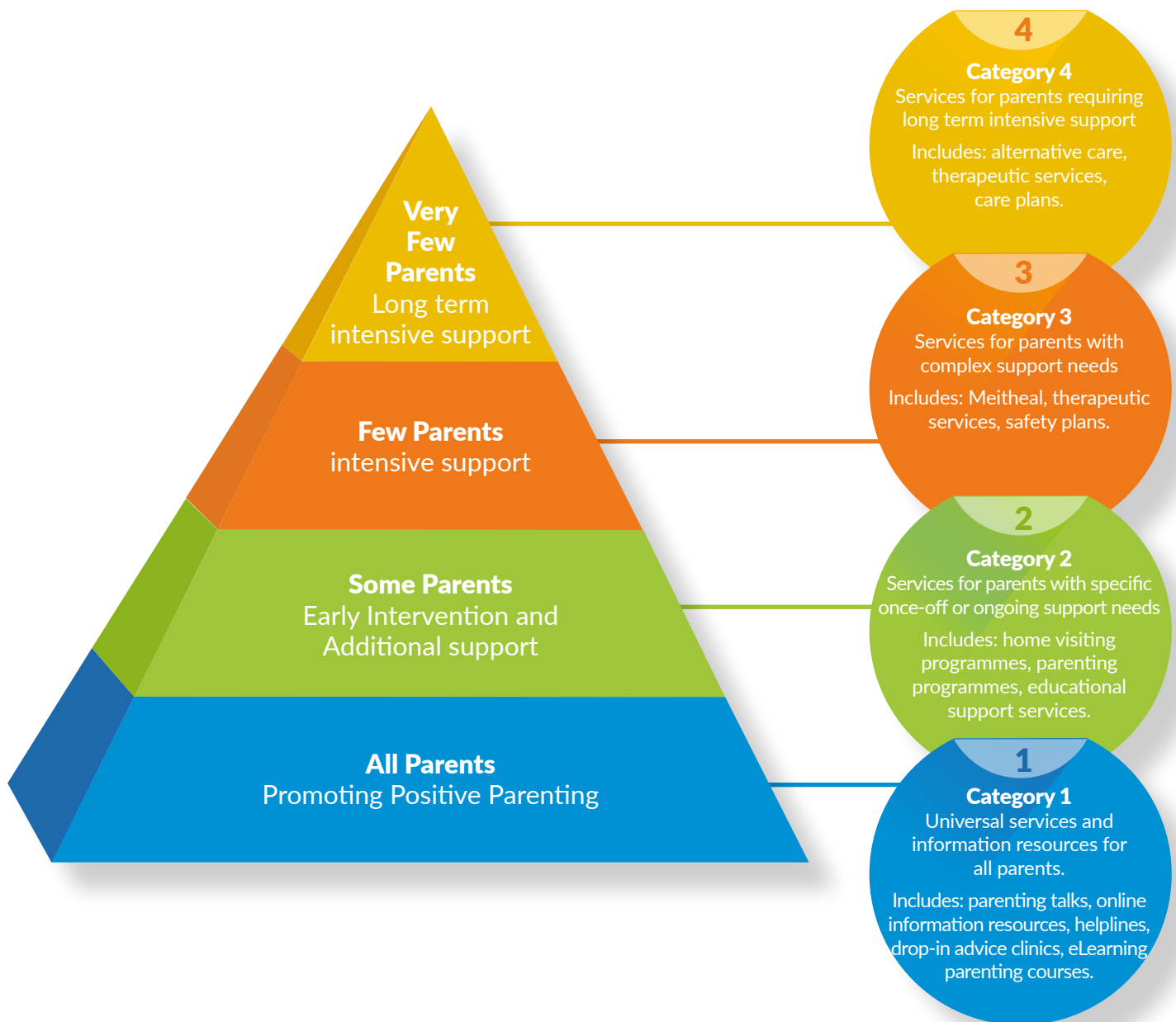
## Practitioners

There is a wide range of practitioners and trained volunteers directly involved in the provision of parenting support services. Additionally, there are practitioners who do not provide a parenting support service but have an important signposting role by helping parents to find a support that meets their needs.

Practitioners providing parenting supports can be found across the education, health, justice, social care, family support and community and voluntary sectors. For some it is a significant part of their role, for others a smaller element of their overall remit. Examples include school principals, teachers, Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, education welfare officers, school completion programme project workers, allied health professionals, GPs, nurses, health promotion officers, baby massage instructors, lactation consultants, early learning and care professionals, family support workers, social care workers, social workers, family learning tutors, home visitors, and juvenile liaison officers.

The *What Works* initiative, developed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund, supports knowledge sharing by providers and practitioners to maximise the impact of prevention and early intervention for children and young people. *What Works* provides information and learning and development support for practitioners working with children, young people and families in relation to evidence-based methods that are focused on early intervention, prevention and strengthening each family's capacity.

# Categories of Parenting Support Services



Parenting supports can be categorised in many different ways. Some approaches categorise different types of services by children's ages and developmental stages, some by the required level of need, and others by delivery mechanism. Under the Supporting Parents model, supports are organised by four categories illustrating how supports are provided across a continuum of need:

- **Supports for all parents** (Category 1) are provided to **all parents**, or are available without restrictions or qualifying criteria. These services seek to promote positive parenting and healthy child development and wellbeing. Universal services must work for all parents, including those with specific needs or higher levels of need and their children, as they can have a preventative role and reduce the need for more intensive supports at a later stage. Universal services also allow for parents to link in with more specific supports if needed. The existence of more targeted supports in categories 2 and 3 does not reduce the need for universal services to be inclusive of and accessible by all. The planning and provision of these services must be on the basis of total parent population, and should take account of the barriers in accessing services for some parents, to ensure equitable access.
- **Additional support/early intervention supports** are needed by **some parents** (Category 2) who face specific parenting challenges. This may be as a result of family circumstances (separation; lone parenting; bereavement; etc.), or child or parent characteristics (additional developmental needs; physical or mental health conditions; young parents; etc.). These services are sometimes described as targeted supports as the target group of parents can usually be defined. The target population for these supports should be identified and quantified.
- More **intensive forms of support** (Category 3) are required by a **small number of parents** who have complex support needs. A few parents and their families will require intensive parenting supports, often in conjunction with supports for other issues faced by the parents and

family. Ensuring parents get the supports that they need may require intensive engagement over time to establish relationships and trust between practitioners and parents. Achieving best outcomes for children in these instances requires good collaboration across different providers.

- **Intensive long term supports** (Category 4) are required by **very few parents** with acute support needs where children are at risk of, or currently in alternative care (including relative foster care, foster care and residential care).

The different categories of supports do not exist independently or serve distinct groups of parents. A service provider may aim to meet the needs of any parent facing a common parenting challenge (category 1 services), but also provide more specialist services for particular groups of parents (categories 2, 3 and 4+). The categories provided are helpful for understanding the target group of parents for different services, comparing the supply of individual services against the potential demand for services, and the development of strategies for informing and engaging different target groups.

It should be noted that these are not categories of parents or children. Parents may use different categories of services for different periods of time, at different stages of their child's life, depending on family circumstances. Parents' supports needs can reduce, and they can transition from higher levels of support to lower level of support and vice versa.

This approach to categorising parenting support services provides clarity to service funders, providers and parents on the desired reach of different forms of support. Categorisation can also inform the development of appropriate actions to raise awareness of service availability, and the development of metrics to measure activity levels and the potential demand for and uptake of supports. It is informed by the Hardiker Model<sup>13</sup>, which is commonly used in social work and related areas for defining different levels of prevention and need.

### *Types of parenting support services*

Parenting support takes many different forms and different modes of delivery (face-to-face or online, individual or group based). The most common forms of parenting support include:

- **One-to-one support** – Many practitioners provide parenting support directly to parents on a one-to-one basis. This may include the provision of general information and guidance about caring for babies and children, as well as help in addressing particular challenges that arise for individual children and their parents.
- **Courses/Programmes** – These are structured courses usually led in-person (face-to-face or online) and take place over a period of time (usually between 4 to 12 weeks). They can be aimed at all parents or address particular challenges faced by some parents or children.
- **Educational Videos** – These can cover specific parenting topics via video format but have no interational element.
- **Websites** – Websites or web-pages can act as a hub of information and resources for parents. They may contain links to other types of support. They can be provided by government departments and agencies, national or local community and voluntary organisations or networks, and private for-profit providers.
- **Apps** – In recent years there has been increased interest in the development of evidence-based apps to support parenting.
- **Leaflets or Guides** – These are typically condensed documents, providing accessible information on specific topics, which can be in paper or online formats.
- **Support Groups** – These are where parents can gather to share experiences, learn from other parents, and mutually support each other. They can be informal or facilitator-led, general or focused on a specific shared topic, and can occur in person or online.
- **Parent, baby and toddler groups** – These are parent-led local groups where parents can meet, socialise, and get support from other parents.

- **Mentoring** – This is a one-to-one support that can be provided by a trained practitioner (professional or volunteer), or a peer to peer resource. It can provide a space to be heard, discuss parenting challenges, and receive advice and encouragement.
- **Helplines** – Helplines are telephone or online services that can offer support or advice to parents, by phone, email, or webchat.
- **Workshops** – These events are shorter than programmes, taking place in a session of a few hours covering a particular issue or child developmental stage. They are typically led by a practitioner and may involve group work/discussion with other parents.
- **Home Visits** – These visits enable a practitioner to call to the household and provide support in the parents' living space.

## Accessing Parenting Support Services

Parents may engage with parenting support services in a variety of ways. As parenting support services cut across a broad range areas, parents require multiple entry points to access services.

Some parenting supports are offered to all parents using a service, e.g. antenatal classes in maternity hospitals, parenting talks organised in schools, etc. In many cases, a parent will identify their own support need and make contact with someone working in their community (Public Health Nurse, GP, teacher, local Child and Family Support Network Coordinator, etc.) who can recommend a suitable service, or contact a parenting support provider directly. In other cases, a parent's need will be met by parenting information that is publicly available, and no further support is required. A practitioner may also initiate the process, identifying a need and making an appropriate referral or recommendation. Some supports can only be accessed through a formal referral.

The relevant agency or service will work with parents to identify and agree areas of need and support. A parenting support service may be part of a wider family support or individual care plan. There may be no further supports required following completion of a service, or further referrals may take place, or the completion of complementary services may take place.

## Funding

Organisations providing parenting support in Ireland can receive funding from a variety of sources, including State or EU bodies, philanthropic organisations, or charitable fundraising. Many parenting support services are provided directly by staff employed or funded by state agencies, or schools in the case of Home School Community Liaison Coordinators.

Parenting support services provided by third party providers within the community and voluntary sector are largely commissioned by a range of statutory bodies, principally the HSE and Tusla. **Commissioning** is defined by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as 'as a strategic planning process linking resource allocation with assessed current and future needs, in order to achieve best outcomes for citizens and service users in line with policy objectives'<sup>14</sup>.

There are a number of **time-limited or once-off schemes** such as the Dormant Accounts Fund, Sláintecare initiatives, and What Works. These schemes provide funding for services to provide useful learnings and trial project-based initiatives to build an evidence base for potential service amendments or developments. These types of funds are an important resource for initiatives to promote learning, innovation and collaboration, although the short-term nature of the funding can create challenges in terms of the sustainability of the work.

As funders rarely have discrete funding lines for parenting support services, it is currently not possible to calculate the total expenditure on parenting support at national, regional, local or service level. Parenting support is often an intrinsic part of other service provision, and often cannot be clearly quantified in terms of financial cost or outputs.

Joint commissioning of services between the key state funders is not considered to be realistically achievable in the short to medium term. Therefore, a focus on the development of greater clarity, cooperation and coherence between the existing ranges of funders is required.

## Goals

Through research, consultation and engagement with key stakeholders including parents, Government Departments, agencies and providers, four goals have been identified as central elements to achieving the model's vision for parenting supports and improving parenting supports for all.

- 1. Greater awareness of parenting support services**
- 2. Greater access to parenting support services**
- 3. More inclusive parenting support services**
- 4. Needs-led and evidence-informed parenting support services**

These goals are interlinked, interdependent and mutually supportive.



## Goal 1 – Greater awareness of parenting support services

### What do parents say?

*“I am very well informed... I work as a doctor ... I would have no idea where to go for parenting supports ... I realised there were all these resources available, if I was working in the healthcare field, and wasn't aware of all these resources, then how are people who aren't working in areas that are so related to them able to manage.” (a)*

*“It's difficult for parents to know where to go. Often we hear things from word of mouth, or if a school shares the information. But this is haphazard and can make it difficult to know where to go when you need something specific. I also feel like there must be more going on to support parents that most of us are completely unaware of.” (b)*

*“I'm unaware of any supports to me as a new parent” (b)*

*“Why didn't somebody tell me about this, like 18 months ago, when I started having a lot of difficulties with my daughter and her speech ... I was really upset because I learned that there was a support that could have been helpful for me.” (b)*

*“The only group I was made aware of was the breastfeeding group which was not taking place due to the pandemic” (b)*

*“Years of being on my own with my children and not knowing where to go. I didn't have a clue” (a)*

*“All my energy is going to go into this. And ... I wanted the knowledge, I wanted to know about children's brain development, and how I was going to help my child reach their milestones” (a)*

(a) Parents participating in interview or focus group, Hickey and Lecky, 2021<sup>15</sup>

(b) Parent response to public consultation, April 2021<sup>16</sup>

Many parents are not aware of the parenting support services available to them. 58% of parents surveyed in 2020 said they were not aware of any parenting supports, universal or targeted, available within their local community<sup>17</sup>.

The variety of services, large number of different providers of parenting support services and variations in the types of services available across the country makes it challenging to map and clearly communicate supports to parents.

High demand for some services and inability to respond to demand can result in limited promotion of the service. Some providers are concerned about creating a demand that they cannot meet, expanding already long waiting lists, and therefore do not want to promote their service widely. For other services, they do not have the funding for promotion and sometimes struggle to reach and engage parents.

Information about available services and how to access different supports is important for both parents and practitioners. For many parents, their first point of contact in relation to a parenting concern is family and friends, followed by a GP, Public Health Nurse, Early Learning and Care professional, or teacher<sup>18</sup>. These practitioners need to be adequately supported to understand the range of parenting support services available in the local area and to support parents to access the service most appropriate to their needs.

A greater awareness of parenting support services is required to normalise the usage of parenting support, improve knowledge of local availability, promote engagement, and facilitate timely access. Improving the visibility of parenting supports, particularly those available for all parents, is important for raising awareness, improving access, and ensuring that supports are viewed as beneficial for all parents.

### Requirements

Achieving greater awareness of parenting support services requires:

- Increased visibility of local services to parents and to the key practitioners they come in contact with,
- Promoting parenting supports to all parents,
- Effective signposting to services and easy to navigate access pathways.

## Goal 2 – Greater access to parenting support services

### What do parents say?

*“Thinking about my situation, I was after having a new baby. I had no idea what I should be doing. If I was doing it right. If I was doing it wrong. [...] you get no guidance, you’re just kind of you... you have baby and you’re kind of ‘off you go!’” (a)*

*“First time mum during the pandemic, felt very isolated and just no support. The only answer I got was “oh x isn’t going ahead due to Covid”. While I understand social distancing and risk assessment need to be considered some of the basic PHN assessments could easily be triaged via zoom or a video call. Interaction is key as is accessibility. I’ve personally had neither over the last few months.” (b)*

*“I looked for a parenting course in my area... and despite having asked in both the crèche, Family Resource Centre, the school and looking on the HSE websites, I have never managed to find one. I availed of support privately, but would really have liked to join a group.” (b)*

*“I definitely find it harder to get the support I need the older the kids are getting [...] [child] has fairly severe anxiety and I find it very hard to get support for parenting through that.” (a)*

*“There’s no family support centres ... community places ... like there’s nothing really around.” (a)*

*“I felt very lonely ‘cause there was nowhere to kind of go or nothing to do. Like I would have loved had there been a parent and toddler group. Somewhere that me and the kids could go and get out of the house.” (a)*

*“A lot of it is who you know and how to get in there. Or being the biggest pest on the planet and ringing every day until they give in and say OK we’ll see you.” (a)*

(a) Parents participating in interview or focus group, Hickey and Lecky, 2021

(b) Parent response to public consultation, April 2021

Parents need to be able to access appropriate parenting support services in a timely manner, regardless of where they live. The provision of parenting supports does not have to look the same in all areas, but all parents should have access to a range of services. Service planning should take account of local contexts which can vary in terms of population density, deprivation levels, access to broadband, available venues for the delivery of supports (schools, libraries, Family Resource Centres etc.), and number and types of providers active in an area.

### **Distribution of Services**

Many parenting support services are provided in a consistent manner across the country in line with national policies and approaches, e.g. Home School Community Liaison in DEIS schools and Public Health Nurse visits. Other services require additional investment to ensure that all parents can access particular supports regardless of where they live, e.g. the HSE's provision of additional lactation consultants to improve access to support for breastfeeding across the country. Some services are distributed or made available in a less consistent manner. Factors influencing the distribution of parenting support services include different local priorities and needs, historical service provision, limited funding for developing new services and the physical infrastructure available for service delivery.

### **Inconsistent Qualifying Criteria**

Some discrepancies also exist with variations in referral or qualifying criteria for certain services, e.g. limited to parents living in a particular catchment area, or a service requiring a formal referral from a particular practitioner or agency in one area but not in another. While restrictions on who can access individual services may be appropriate, they should be applied in a logical and consistent manner across the country. For parents who have identified a parenting support need and looked for support, being unable to access a support may discourage them from seeking support at other times in their child's development.

## Information Gaps

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. There is a general lack of data on the demand for, availability of, outputs and outcomes of parenting support services. This data gap means 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.

## Importance of Collaboration and Coordination

Collaboration in the development of parenting supports benefits parents and their children by bringing all necessary experience and expertise together, and ensuring no unnecessary duplication or gaps in services. Better collaboration between all funders and service providers on the range of services available for parents in a local area is important to maximise the impact of parenting support services, and ensure that parents can access the right service at the right time. Effective interdepartmental and interagency working is also needed to ensure that parents' needs are met by services which work together in an integrated, coherent and complementary way.

Given the wide range of organisations involved in the provision of parenting supports, there can be some overlap in the types of support services offered to parents. Within a particular area, similar parenting supports may be offered in DEIS schools, available in a local Family Resource Centre, provided by community and voluntary organisations funded by Tusla, and directly provided by HSE staff. Effective local, regional and national coordination and collaboration mechanisms are crucial to ensure that parenting support services complement each other, and that duplication and gaps in provision of services can be identified and addressed. Many Children and Young People's Services Committees have facilitated joint planning and co-ordination of parenting support activity to ensure that children, young people and their families receive improved and accessible services.

## Delivery Mechanisms

Access to services is also influenced by delivery mechanisms. Innovative service delivery in response to the Covid-19 public health restrictions has led to improved access to services for some parents, through the use of a range of online approaches. For instance, online delivery has improved access for parents with limited access to child care or transport barriers. Recorded online parenting talks and e-learning modules can be accessed at a time and place that suits parents, and have the potential to reach a larger number of parents than in-person events. However, while the shift to remote delivery and the addition of more online options to access parenting supports is one improvement, it is important to note that parents also want and value face-to-face services in their home and their local communities. Locally-available services provide the additional benefits of allowing relationships to develop between parents and practitioners, and helping parents to establish peer-support networks within their communities. A range of blended delivery mechanisms are required in order to ensure that all parents are able to access the required supports when and where they need them.

## Requirements

Achieving greater access to parenting support services requires:

- Clearly identified and articulated objectives of supporting parents in the provision of health, educational, social and justice services
- A cohesive and partnership approach across Departments, agencies and service providers to the provision of parenting supports, with improved planning and provision of parenting supports at national, regional and local levels
- Identifying and addressing gaps in the provision of parenting support services across the country
- Supports in a variety of different forms, both online and in local venues

## Goal 3 – More inclusive parenting support services

### What do parents say?

*“As a member of the LGBTQI community I find a lot of Irish supports for parents very heteronormative and it can be very isolating as a new parent and can be a huge barrier to access parental services” (b)*

*“I am aware of many mother-centred peer support groups but there doesn’t seem to be as much available for fathers” (b)*

*“if you’re not included at the very start, what does that say to you on how important your role is as a father ... what does that say to you about your role as a parent?” (a)*

*“I think that parents of children with disabilities, we’re thrown to the scrap heap almost, we’re an afterthought.” (a)*

*“There probably is a bit of a stigma attached to doing certain things like no one will bat an eyelid if you are doing baby massage or baby yoga but if you said that you’re doing [a parenting programme] or something, yeah, people, some people, they might say things kind of see that as, you know, a bit of a flaw or something.” (a)*

*“I was actually nervous. I think that’s a massive thing that parents would have ... are we going to be judged? ... I suppose if that kind of element could be taken out, we’re not going to be judged. It would make it easier to attend courses and centres” (a)*

*“I suppose the main thing is to make sure that they feel no shame in going for help because it’s not a failure. I think everyone struggles as a parent and that needs to be reiterated - no shame in it. You’re not failing and it’s not that you’re doing the wrong thing. You need a bit of support” (a)*

*“... when I ask for support, it’s taken as something bad ... oh she can’t cope ... I’m supposed to link in with Tusla ... they say that I have to do, however, I’m reluctant to do that because if I ask them for anything, they put it down as ‘oh she’s struggling to cope’” (a)*

(a) Parents participating in interview or focus group, Hickey and Lecky, 2021

(b) Parent response to public consultation, April 2021

There are many factors that interact with a parent's capacity and motivation to avail of parenting support services. There are large groups of parents who can feel excluded from supports. Parenting supports must reflect the changing nature of Irish society and embrace inclusion and diversity including ethnicity, gender, social circumstance and cultural background. Different groups experience different challenges in their parenting role, and in accessing services<sup>19</sup>. There is not enough understanding or consideration of the factors that create challenges for marginalised groups to engage with both universal and targeted parenting support services. Groups of parents that have unique needs and preferences that if not addressed can prevent or limit their engagement with services, include:

- Homeless parents
- LGBTI+ parents
- Migrant parents
- Parents living in International Protection Accommodation
- Parents experiencing sexual, and gender-based violence
- Parents of children in care
- Parents of children with disabilities
- Parents of children with mental health difficulties
- Parents of children with special educational needs
- Parents with an addiction
- Disabled parents/parents with disabilities
- Parents with literacy challenges
- Parents with mental health difficulties
- Parents working full time
- Traveller and Roma parents
- Young parents



## Gender

Traditionally parenting supports have been designed for and aimed at mothers. While this is changing, it is important to accelerate this change, recognising the importance of supporting men in their parenting role, for the benefit of children, women and men themselves. Fathers have a profound and lasting impact on their children's development. Greater engagement by fathers is associated with improved outcomes for children<sup>20</sup>. As many parenting supports have been designed for, targeted at, and attended by mothers, fathers are unsurprisingly less likely to engage. The State of the World's Fathers 2021 Report found that twice as many fathers say they rely on their partner for knowledge and information on parenting as compared with mothers<sup>21</sup>. Gender equality in the design and provision of parenting support is important to ensure that supports do not impose restrictive gender norms reinforcing care as women's responsibility.

## Practical Barriers

There are many practical barriers that can influence engagement with supports. For some parents, childcare may need to be provided to enable them to participate. Working parents have to balance work time, commuting and caring for their families. Some parents have difficulties accessing online supports. Others may face language or literacy barriers to participating in parenting supports, both online and community based. To ensure inclusive services, practical barriers need to be addressed to welcome and support all parents.

## Perceptions of Parenting

There can be differing cultural expectations and many myths associated with parenting. There is sometimes an expectation that parenting is natural and should therefore come easy to most people. The way in which parents view their role in supporting their children, influences their willingness to engage with supports. The belief that parenting skills should be inherent discourages engagement with supports, due to the perception that a parent must be self-reliant in addressing parenting challenges. It also contributes to guilt and shame where difficulties are experienced, creating further barriers to effective engagement in supports.

The content and delivery of programmes in Ireland is often more aligned to the cultural norms and values of Western parents and can be exclusionary to some cultural groups. The development and delivery of programme must take diversity and cultural differences into consideration<sup>22</sup>.

## Stigma

Some parents may be reluctant to seek support for fear of being judged. Further work is required to address and minimise the stigma that some people associate with parenting supports. Seeking and availing of support should be recognised as parents acting in their child's best interests and not a failure or shortcoming on their part. This requires a strong message that parenting support is for all parents. Overemphasis on supports for "vulnerable" families and children can increase the stigma associated with services. A strengths-based approach recognising that parents are the experts in their own children's lives is crucial.

Some parents fear that they will experience negative consequences if they access services. Many parents have disabilities, experience mental health difficulties, or face adverse circumstances. For some parents experiencing challenges, seeking help is resisted as it is associated with a threat to their child's custody. Similarly, life changes such as separation or assuming kinship care can lead to concern that partaking in parenting support is a sign that they cannot cope.

The perceived or real focus on weaknesses rather than strengths leaves many parents feeling shame that they have failed, embarrassed that others may see them as failing, or fearful that they may be judged. Parents will not engage with services or feel empowered by them if they feel that they are under scrutiny. The stigma associated with accessing parenting supports is particularly difficult to circumvent when there is no existing relationship between the parent and the service or practitioner. The importance of relationship building is critical to breaking down barriers associated with stigma. Providing parenting supports in local venues or close to their homes can reduce the stigma that may be associated with them, making it clear that these services are for all parents in the community.

## Requirements

Achieving more inclusive parenting support services requires:

- Respect for diversity and tackling gender stereotypes.
- Making services easily accessible to all groups of parents.
- Normalising and destigmatising the need to seek parenting support.
- Increased engagement with different groups of parents to understand their parenting support needs and preferences.

## Goal 4 – Needs-led and evidence-informed parenting support services

### What do parents say?

*“... you can’t beat a group environment. And ideally, like everyone gathered together in a room, you know, a few people gather together in a room, because I think you get so much from, you know, that kind of environment, you can see people’s body language.” (a)*

*“Conversation and feedback from other parents would be great.” (a)*

*“We have no voice, we have no input, your ideas are never taken into consideration.” (a)*

*“I think parents should have a voice because sometimes people are putting these courses together, like what might suit one area wouldn’t suit another area. Whereas if you have people involved in the community, they know what the concerns are in that locality.” (a)*

*“.. another parent or another mother, they’re given examples that are relative, or that you can, you know, the language they’re using, you can understand just clearer.” (a)*

*“I don’t want someone out there that read a book. The book is not living my life or my child’s life. It’s actually someone that’s been in my shoes, felt the same way” (a)*

(a) Parents participating in interview or focus group, Hickey and Lecky, 2021

### Access to the right support

In many but not all cases, parents can access some form of parenting support, whether locally or online. However, the services available are not necessarily the services that a parent requires. When a parent seeks support, limited options can mean that the parent is referred to the most available service rather than the most suitable service for their particular needs.

The types and quantity of different parenting supports available in a local area need to be responsive to changes in demographics, trends in relation to child wellbeing, and emerging challenges. They must also reflect parents' preferences for different forms of support.

Parents are not always consulted on decisions that affect them, such as what services are offered to them or how they are delivered. It can be challenging for individual providers to gather the views of parents in their catchment area, particularly those who are unaware of existing services or have not used them. Where services are not developed and delivered in partnership with parents, they are less likely to be responsive to the needs and preferences of parents. This is especially true for understanding the cultural and social needs and preferences of marginalised groups. Consultation with marginalised groups is particularly important as the barriers and facilitators unique to these groups are less well understood.

Some parents struggle to articulate their needs and advocate for the required services. Parents experiencing high levels of stress might not have the capacity to determine their needs. For these parents they are often preoccupied with persevering through the challenges they are experiencing. Equally, many parents are dealing with wider family stressors that affect their capacity to consider their own needs and identify corresponding supports.

## High Quality Supports

In addition to parenting supports funded, provided or supported by public organisations, there are many other sources of parenting advice and information for parents. There is a strong interest in parenting in the media with many websites, advice columns, podcasts, etc., addressing parenting challenges. Some private health insurers have introduced access to “parenting experts” as part of health insurance packages. Employers are increasingly offering supports for parents.

Many of these provide high quality information, but others may not always be evidence-informed. Parents, and those signposting parents to services, need to be assured of the quality of publicly provided, funded, or supported services. Quality assurance can take a variety of forms depending on the parenting support service: delivery by a qualified professional; delivery of a service in accordance with clear requirements; appropriate training of practitioners; and/or monitoring and evaluating the impact of a support.

## Relationships

For many, parenting support service relationships are key. Good communication and partnership with parents are key to the delivery of effective services and to ensuring services are needs-led. Strong relationships between practitioners and parents, and between parents themselves, are difficult to measure, but are often an important part of meeting parents’ support needs.

Peer support is also highly valued by parents, both for common ages and stages and for specific parenting challenges<sup>23</sup>. Informal support networks are an important protective factor which can enhance parental wellbeing and act as a valuable source of information about other parenting support services<sup>24</sup>. Good relationships between practitioners and the development of informal support networks are difficult to capture in activity statistics or quality metrics, but are a key element of successfully supporting parents.

## Requirements

Ensuring parenting supports are needs-led and evidence-informed requires:

- Suitable and proportionate mechanisms to ensure the quality of parenting support services, including quality guidelines for the operators of parenting support services.
- A standardised approach to assessing parenting support needs on a population basis to inform decisions about the types and quantity of services required.
- Development and commissioning of services to take account of existing service provision, relevant trends, child wellbeing indicators and preferences of parents in line with model principles and goals.
- High quality, effective services that address priority needs.
- A skilled workforce with the training and supports necessary to deliver effective supports in an integrated manner, including accredited training for practitioners.
- Parenting supports to be planned, developed and delivered in partnership with parents.
- More consultation with parents about their support needs, co-production of services with parents and partnership with parents in the delivery of services, where possible.

Goals	Requirements
Achieving <b>greater awareness</b> of parenting support services requires:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased visibility of local and national services to parents and to the key practitioners they come in contact with</li> <li>• Promotion of parenting supports to all parents</li> <li>• Effective signposting to services and easy to navigate access pathways</li> </ul>
Achieving <b>greater access</b> to parenting support services requires:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly identified and articulated objectives of supporting parents in the provision of health, educational, social and justice services</li> <li>• A cohesive and partnership approach across Departments, agencies and service providers to the provision of parenting supports with improved planning and delivery of parenting support provision at national, regional and local levels</li> <li>• Identifying and addressing gaps in the provision of parenting support services across the country where parenting support needs are not being met</li> <li>• The provision of supports in a variety of different forms to reduce barriers to access</li> </ul>
Achieving <b>more inclusive</b> parenting support services requires:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect for diversity and tackling gender stereotypes in the provision of parenting supports</li> <li>• Making services easily accessible to all groups of parents</li> <li>• Normalising and destigmatising the need to seek parenting support</li> <li>• Increased engagement with different groups of parents to understand their parenting support needs and preferences</li> </ul>

Goals	Requirements
<p>Ensuring parenting supports are <b>needs-led and evidence-informed</b> requires:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suitable and proportionate mechanisms to ensure the quality of parenting support services, including quality guidelines for the parenting support services</li><li>• A standardised approach to assessing parenting support needs on a population basis to inform decisions about the types and quantity of services required.</li><li>• Development and commissioning of services to take account of existing service provision, relevant trends, child wellbeing indicators and preferences of parents in line with model principles and goals.</li><li>• High quality, effective services that address priority needs</li><li>• A skilled workforce with the training and supports necessary to deliver effective supports in an integrated manner, including accredited training for practitioners.</li><li>• Parenting supports are planned, developed and delivered in partnership with parents</li><li>• More consultation with parents about their support needs, co-production of services with parents and partnership with parents in the delivery of services, where possible.</li></ul>



# Action Plan

The action plan sets out the objectives and actions required to realise the model's vision and goals. These have been organised under five main themes; governance and policy, working in partnership with parents, providing needs-led supports, open and transparent communications about ongoing actions and the availability of services, and monitoring, reporting and evaluation.



## Theme A - Governance and Policy

The overall policy direction for parenting support and the individual policy approaches taken for parenting supports in different sectors must be cohesive and mutually reinforcing. Accountability and oversight mechanisms must support the achievement of visible, accessible, inclusive and high-quality parenting supports that meet the needs of parents and their children.

To manage the complexity in delivering a wide range of parenting supports through multiple funders and providers, national and local planning and coordination mechanisms are required.

### *What's already happening?*

- CYSPCs play an important role in co-ordinating a response to assist with the implementation of Governmental strategies and plans. The National Co-ordinator for CYPSC monitors progress in relation to the implementation of Child and Young People's Plans. All plans are published on the national CYPSC website.
- Parenting support in CYPSCs is working well. CYPSCs support multi-agency collectives on the theme of parenting support, and are currently working towards having active parenting support subgroups in at least 50% of CYSPCs.
- 121 Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) support the integration of all services that play a role in the lives of children and families within each of their geographical areas.
- Tusla and DCEDIY are working together to formalise CFSNs and CYPSCs at a strategic level.
- Within the HSE, initiatives such as social prescribing, making every contact count (MECC), and the development of a dedicated child health workforce can contribute to improved collaborative working and access to services for parents.

## Theme B - Empowering Parents

Effective parenting support involves working with parents, giving them choice, building on their strengths and delivering supports in ways that work for them. Parents need to know what services are available, the supports they provide and how to access them so that they can make informed decisions regarding their support needs.

### *What's already happening?*

- The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth provides annual funding supports for parent, baby and toddler groups.
- The Healthy Ireland at Your Library programme initiative includes a list of digital and hardcopy books on parenting topics, and has provided funding for expert talks on different issues of concern for parents.

## Theme C - Needs-led Supports

The views and preferences of parents must be at the centre of decisions about parenting supports at local and national level. Supports for parents must be evidence-based and meet their needs.

### *What's already happening?*

- Parenting support champions work together to learn and share best practice in parenting support with other practitioners and with parents.
- Tusla engages with children, families and communities on the design and quality of services provided to them. As part of this work, Parents Fora are being established across the country to ensure that parents have a say in the services provided.
- The *What Works* initiative, funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund, provided funding to a number of community and voluntary organisations in 2021 towards learning and development in parenting support.
- Tusla received funding in 2019, 2020 and 2021 under the DCEDIY *What Works* initiative for several projects. This includes facilitation of the further professional development of family support staff through a Level 8 Certificate in Prevention, Partnership & Family Support, and development

and implementation of a Traveller Parenting Support programme with local Traveller community organisations and representatives of the community, to support Traveller parents to access quality parenting programmes.

- In general, there is an increasing wealth of innovative needs-based and evidence-informed work and research happening throughout the sector with many organisations maximising the focus on needs and outcomes.
- The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has committed to develop and agree a national approach to home visiting services across the continuum of need for parents of babies and young children, taking account of existing services currently funded or provided by Tusla and the HSE.
- Sláintecare and First 5 contain recommendations on the development of a dedicated child health workforce.

## Theme D - Communications

Parenting support services are only effective if parents are aware of, and engage with them. Communicating high-quality, evidenced-based information on parenting, and promoting awareness of available parenting support services to all parents is essential to normalising parenting supports and supporting parents' engagement.

### *What's already happening?*

- The online information platform Supporting Children and Parents brings together new and existing resources for children and parents. It provides a starting point to access high-quality, trusted information and support in an easy to navigate format.
- Many CYPSCs and other local collaborations have developed local service directories for their areas which provide information on local parenting support services.

## Theme E - Monitoring, reporting and evaluation

The impact of adopting Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services will be monitored and evaluated. Actions will be updated as required to reflect developments across different sectors.

### *What's already happening?*

- The development of a policy successor to *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* has commenced and will align with the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee and development of Ireland's reporting to the United Nations Children's Rights Convention.
- Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services will be a key constituent policy of the successor to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.
- Tusla has commissioned the development of an outcomes framework for its PPFs programme. This will include the identification of existing resources and expertise and clarity on areas to be addressed.

## Actions

### Theme A - Governance and policy

#### Objectives

- Ensure a cohesive national approach across departments, agencies and providers for the provision of parenting supports
- Improve the planning, review, and quality assurance processes for the provision of parenting support provision
- Ensure parenting support policies and practices are in line with the national model to deliver best outcomes for children and families
- Work in partnership across departments, agencies and the wider sector to maximise the positive impact of parenting support services

No.	Action	Lead and Partners
1	Establish a <b>National Parenting Support Steering Group</b> to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• guide the delivery of parenting supports nationally and locally</li> <li>• promote collaboration in policy, programme and service development</li> <li>• share information and learning on the provision of parenting support services, parental engagement, new developments, innovations and funding strategies</li> <li>• agree priorities for research on parenting supports and guidance on the scaling up of services</li> <li>• provide input and guidance on the evaluation of the operation of the National Model of Parenting Support Services</li> </ul>	DCEDIY, HSE and Tusla

Theme A - Governance and policy		
No.	Action	Lead and Partners
2	Establish a National Model Implementation Group, chaired by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to advise, support and guide the implementation of the National Model. It will meet a minimum of twice a year.	Relevant departments, agencies and non-statutory providers
3	Establish a cross-government Parenting Support Network to share learning and showcase best practice	DCEDIY
4	Facilitate collaborative working for the designated national parenting support leads in Tusla and the HSE, and individuals within their separate organisations, to promote the cohesive planning and delivery of parenting support services across areas and agencies.	Tusla, HSE
5	Each CYPSC 3-year Child and Young People's Plan to consider priorities for the development of parenting support services within each CYPSC area in line with the goals of the National Model of Parenting Support Services.	CYPSCs, Tusla, HSE

## Theme B - Empowering parents

### Objectives

- Increase awareness of parenting support services to ensure parents know what support is available
- Provide clear and effective signposting to services for parents
- Ensure the availability of high quality, accessible information for all parents
- Adopt a collaborative approach in the provision of services, seeking to build on parents' existing knowledge and expertise

No.	Action	Lead and Partners
6	<b>Enhance signposting and increased access to parenting support services</b> through universal services (education, health, family support, justice, etc.) by developing guidelines, online resources and training for relevant practitioners.	DCEDIY National Parenting Support Steering Group
7	<b>Establish an annual Parent Peer Support Fund</b> to provide funding to organisations working with parents and/or children and young people to facilitate the development and support of parent peer support groups.	DCEDIY



## Theme B - Empowering parents

No.	Action	Lead and Partners
8	<p><b>Enhance the role of Child and Family Support Network co-ordinators in:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improving the coordination of parenting support services within geographic areas</li><li>• Increasing the visibility of available services and raise awareness with parents</li><li>• Identifying and responding to barriers to participation in parenting support services</li><li>• Providing a mechanism for parents to contribute to the development of responsive services</li><li>• Working in partnership with local Child and Family Support Networks and Parenting Support Champions.</li><li>• Promoting and generating awareness of effective parenting programmes and services.</li></ul>	Tusla

<b>Theme C – Needs-led supports</b>		
<b>Objectives</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address parenting support needs on a national or local basis as appropriate, taking account of parents' views and preferences</li> <li>• Provide high quality services delivered by practitioners with appropriate training and skills</li> <li>• Establish a greater understanding of the support, needs and preferences of specific groups</li> </ul>		
<b>No.</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Lead</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Review different types of parenting support services that are currently available</b> and seek to identify gaps in national and local provision of services for particular needs. Following the completion of the review/s, an agreed approach should be developed to facilitate more consistent provision of these services.	DCEDIY, Tusla, HSE
<b>10</b>	<b>Publish best practice guidelines for consulting with parents</b> in service design, delivery and evaluation, including guidance on existing consultation mechanisms for engaging with parents.	DCEDIY
<b>11</b>	<b>Publish and implement quality guidelines for parenting supports</b> to evidence the delivery of high-quality, inclusive parenting support services.	DCEDIY
<b>12</b>	Develop <b>proposals for the provision of parenting support</b> and/or information about local parenting support services in schools and Early Learning and Care Centres.	DCEDIY, DOE
<b>13</b>	<b>Establish a cross-sectoral programme of research and evaluation</b> addressing the parenting support needs and preferences of all parents and, in particular, groups that face additional barriers to accessing supports.	DCEDIY National Parenting Support Steering Group

## Theme D - Communications

### Objectives

- Increase the visibility of local and national services for parents and key practitioners
- Promote parenting supports to all parents to normalise and destigmatise parenting supports

No.	Action	Lead
14	<p><b>Develop and deliver a three year communications plan</b> in line with the National Model of Parenting Support Services to include national and local components with the aim of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a high-quality, recognisable parenting support brand</li> <li>• Ensuring all parents, and the practitioners who work with them, are aware of the online advice and resources available to them and of the full range of support services in their area</li> <li>• Developing strategies to reach parents who face additional barriers to accessing parenting supports</li> <li>• Conducting regular national and local public health campaigns on key parenting themes</li> <li>• Sharing key public health messages on parenting</li> </ul>	DCEDIY
15	<p><b>Create, maintain and publish an approved list of effective parenting programmes</b> in Ireland.</p>	DCEDIY National Parenting Support Steering Group

Theme D - Communications		
No.	Action	Lead
16	<p><b>Establish a dedicated Parenting Support Advisor for all Tusla areas:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act as the main contact for all parenting support queries within their area.</li> <li>• Provide updates and participate in the respective CYPSC parenting support sub-group.</li> <li>• Signpost parents to information and services.</li> <li>• Increase visibility of services and raise awareness for parents.</li> <li>• Maintain and promote a calendar of parenting support events.</li> <li>• Support the management of the parenting support awareness fund.</li> </ul>	Tusla
17	<p><b>Establish an annual area-based parenting support awareness fund</b> to be planned and delivered through the CYPSC Parenting Support Sub-groups.</p>	CYSPCs, Tusla, DCEDIY
18	<p><b>Prioritise the use of maternity services, antenatal education, and PHN child development visits as opportunities to provide information to parents on accessing services.</b></p>	HSE

## Theme E – Monitoring, reporting and evaluation

### Objectives

- Demonstrate progress towards achieving visible, accessible, inclusive and high quality parenting supports.
- Monitor and evaluate the provision of parenting services in line with the principles of the National Model, and the effectiveness of the Model in enabling service delivery.

No.	Action	Lead
19	<b>Report annually on progress made, using the oversight infrastructure for the new National Policy Framework for Children and Young People</b> (successor to Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures), to be developed in 2022.	DCEDIY
20	<b>Promote a standardised approach across sectors to the collection of parenting support activity and outcomes data</b> and publish an annual cross-government report on activity levels and future development plans.	DCEDIY National Parenting Support Steering Group
21	<b>Undertake a nationally representative biannual survey of parents</b> to monitor awareness and experiences of parenting support services, identify emerging or unmet needs, and to measure progress towards the goals of the national model.	DCEDIY National Parenting Support Steering Group
22	<b>Develop and maintain a set of outcome indicators to monitor progress</b> in achieving the goals of the model, including options for tracking the wellbeing of parents to complement existing indicators on child wellbeing.	DCEDIY
23	<b>Undertake a review of the national model and its implementation progress</b> after 5 years, and engage with all relevant partners as appropriate.	DCEDIY National Parenting Support Steering Group

## Implementation Structures

As part of the initial introduction of Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services, an implementation plan for the model's constituent actions will be finalised and informed by inputs from action holders and stakeholders across government.

The structures that will oversee the implementation are detailed below:

- The **Parenting Support Policy Unit** in DCEDIY will be responsible for leading on the delivery of key actions and supporting the effective functioning of the other implementation structures. It will act as a programme delivery office for the national model.
- The **National Parenting Support Steering Group** will consist of the PO of the Parenting Support Policy Unit, the Tusla National Lead for Parenting Support and the HSE Programme Manager of the National Healthy Childhood Programme. It will meet bimonthly.
- The **National Model Implementation Group**, chaired by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will advise, support and guide the implementation of the National Model. It will meet a minimum of twice a year.
- The **Cross-Government Parenting Support Network** will be open to all public and civil servants with a role in the development of policy and delivery of parenting support services. It will meet at least three times per year to share learning and showcase best practice in the planning, development and delivery of parenting support services.

# Appendix 1 Model Development

A collaborative working group, led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, developed the model between October 2020 and August 2021. The group's work was informed by:

- Consultation with children and young people
- Qualitative and quantitative research with Irish parents
- Literature review
- Challenge panel feedback at key stages

## *Collaborative Working Group Members*

- Anne Parry, Programme Lead – Nurture Programme, HSE
- Bernie Laverty, National Project Manager, Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, Tusla
- Catherine O'Donohoe, Regional Implementation Manager (South) and National Parenting Lead, Tusla
- Catherine Whitty, Project Specialist, Centre for Effective Services
- Ciara Pidgeon, Parenting Support Policy Unit, DCEDIY
- David Studer, Limerick CYPSC Coordinator, Tusla
- Emer Musonda, Early Years Policy and Strategy, DCEDIY
- Eoin Roche, Early Years Policy and Strategy, DCEDIY
- Francis Chance, Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN)
- Kathryn O'Riordan, Early Years Quality Unit, DCEDIY
- Maria Tobin, TESS National Manager, Tusla
- Niamh Carey, Child Care Performance and Social Work Unit, DCEDIY
- Tracey Monson, Parenting Network
- Virginia Pye, National Lead for PHN Services, HSE
- Zara Lafferty, Parenting Support Policy Unit, DCEDIY

## Appendix 2 Existing Parenting Support Actions and Commitments

### **Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (2020)**

- Enable increased remote, flexible and hub-working arrangements to support families in their parenting and childcare choices, while also supporting enterprise.
- Expand access to parenting support programmes that have been proven to be effective.
- Set up a special expert forum on antisocial behaviour, to consider the effectiveness of existing legislation and propose new ways forward, including new powers for An Garda Síochána and additional interventions to support parenting of offenders.

### **First 5 | A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028**

- Consolidate, streamline and strengthen parenting information resources into a single, coherent platform, to ensure consistent, high-quality and accessible information and develop user friendly, attractive, high-quality information resources across multiple platforms, building on the suite of existing resources.
- Pilot the development and implementation of Baby Boxes and Book Bags initiatives to support parenting with a focus on parent–baby bonding, information on baby development and early learning and promotion of baby safety.
- Develop a national model of parenting services - based on a thorough audit and review of existing provision, and informed by research on parenting support needs.
- Sustain the Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support programme through continued investment.
- Continue progress towards the breastfeeding target rate set out in the National Breastfeeding Action Plan. To meet this target, continue to support mothers to breastfeed through the PHN service, implement standardised breastfeeding policies and provide clinical specialist posts in both primary care and maternity hospitals as per the key actions of the National Breastfeeding Action Plan.
- Enhance weaning support to parents through the National Healthy Childhood Programme.
- Develop, publish and disseminate guidelines on health behaviours for babies and young children



### **First 5 | A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028 (parenting support actions continued)**

- Extend the Community Based Nutrition and Cooking Programmes.
- Develop and maintain comprehensive, accessible information for parents on all aspects of their child's health and wellbeing through a new parenting and child health and wellbeing website supported by social media.
- Review the content and scope of Maternity and Infant Care Scheme, standardise the six-week post-natal check-up for the mother and the six-week check of the baby (as part of the Newborn Clinical Examination) and consider extending coverage of this Scheme to include to a pre-conception consultation and beyond six-week post-natal check-up of the mother.
- As resources allow, make the antenatal visit by the Public Health Nurse more widely available to expectant mothers in line with need.
- Increase the use of antenatal care in the first trimester, particularly among vulnerable groups.
- Improve diagnosis and services for women with pregnancy related mental health problems.
- Extend post-natal depression screening by PHNs for all mothers, using a standardised evidence-based approach.
- Implement the national Model of Care for Specialist Perinatal Mental Health with continued resourcing.
- Improve access to parental mental health services (including counselling and psychological services) that treat maternal depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse and identify and address any gaps in mental health services for very young children.
- Provide additional support for parents of babies who receive a diagnosis of disability in the perinatal period and those who experience a traumatic birth or bereavement.
- Carry out a national information campaign to build awareness of the important role that parents and families can play in supporting children's early learning with advice and information to empower parents and families in creating playful learning environments.

**First 5 | A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028 (parenting support actions continued)**

- Develop guidance and information for parents and families on ELC (and school-age childcare), including information on ELC (and school-age childcare) options and entitlements and guidance on key indicators of high-quality provision. Over time, explore the potential to develop a real-time finder of regulated ELC (and school-age childcare) places with links to inspection reports and other relevant information.
- Support greater parental involvement and engagement in children's early learning in ELC settings and primary schools.
- Provide information and guidance to parents, families, childminders and communities on the role they can play in supporting transitions (with tailored advice and information for vulnerable groups), including guidance for parents making decisions on school starting age.
- Develop a standardised curriculum framework for antenatal education for parents.

**DEIS Plan 2017**

- Adult and family literacy service providers to formally engage with related support services (Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), SCP, LCDCs and CYPSCs) to ensure that family literacy is fully supported and engagement with education is improved.
- Planning for engagement with parents in the context of family literacy services to be included in the School Plan and Tusla HSCL service planning.
- School planning to identify formal and informal links between early years' settings, schools, parents, families and communities in order to support children in the transitions across the educational continuum.
- A School Completion Strategy to deal with: Evidence of proven models of good practice in family support service delivery to support Tusla's integrated educational welfare service – e.g. Meitheal practice model

### **Healthy Ireland: A Framework For Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013 – 2025**

- Implement evidence-based prevention and early intervention initiatives aimed at children and families, initially focusing on areas of disadvantage, drawing evidence emerging from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme.
- Support, link with and further improve existing partnerships, strategies and initiatives that aim to improve the capacity of parents, carers and families to support healthier choices for their children and themselves.

### **Creating A Better Future Together: National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026**

- Ensure antenatal care encompasses a holistic approach to the woman's healthcare needs including her physical, social, lifestyle and mental health needs.
- Ensure that additional supports are provided to pregnant women from vulnerable, disadvantaged groups or ethnic minorities, and take account of the family's determinants of health, e.g. socio-economic circumstances.
- Ensure that an on-line resource for maternity services is developed, to act as a one-stop shop for all maternity related information; any information provided will be understandable and culturally sensitive.
- Ensure that breastfeeding promotion campaigns are tailored and targeted to help the wider community to play their role in improving Ireland's breastfeeding initiation and duration rates.
- Ensure that maternity hospitals/units strengthen their methods of detecting alcohol abuse and supporting women to reduce their intake.
- Ensure that a consistent approach to informing women about the risks of alcohol consumption during pregnancy is developed.
- Ensure that the need to provide Drug Liaison Midwives and specialist medical social workers in all maternity networks is examined.
- Ensure that access to mental health supports are improved to ensure appropriate care can be provided in a timely fashion.
- Ensure that all health care professionals involved in antenatal and postnatal care are trained to identify women at risk of developing or experiencing emotional or mental health difficulties, including an exacerbation of previous mental health issues, in the perinatal period.

**Creating A Better Future Together: National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026  
(Continued)**

- Ensure that a multidisciplinary approach to assessment and support is adopted for women at risk of developing or experiencing emotional or mental health difficulties in the perinatal period.
- Ensure that women with a history of a mental health condition are identified early and midwives will work collaboratively with mental health and other services to ensure that the appropriate support is provided.
- Ensure that mother-baby bonding is facilitated and supported at all times, and every effort will be made to keep the mother and baby together, if clinically appropriate.
- Ensure that access to perinatal psychiatry and psychology services is standardised, and as a minimum provided on a maternity network basis.
- Ensure that a hospital outreach, community midwifery service is developed; this service will be provided by a team of midwives, within a broader multidisciplinary team, and will rotate between the community and hospital, offering continuity of care(r) that supports the woman through all stages of pregnancy, childbirth and postnatal care.
- Ensure that a co-ordinated approach between the community midwifery team and the public health nursing and general practice services is in place, to support postnatal women and new babies in the community.
- Ensure that comprehensive and standardised antenatal education is provided to prepare women for any complications that might arise and for the transition to motherhood.
- Ensure that maternity services are integrated across both community and hospital for antenatal booking visits, antenatal care including health and social care professional input and antenatal diagnostics, so that antenatal care is provided as close to home as possible.
- Ensure that women continue to have the option to receive their antenatal care as part of a shared model of care with the GP under the Maternity and Infant Care Scheme and will be encouraged to avail of this scheme.

### **Youth Justice Strategy 2021 – 2027**

- We will identify and support at an early stage those young people, at risk of becoming serious offenders, (currently estimated as in the region of 1,000 children), including provision of appropriate family supports, where necessary, to address the needs of these children.
- The Garda Youth Diversion Projects will be strengthened and rebranded (as youth support projects for those most at risk) and will be the first line of targeted support for children in this category and their families; this will include early intervention, family and parenting support, working with harder-to-engage young people, mentoring for young people and promotion of restorative practices.

### **Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025**

- Developing and broadening the range of peer-led, mutual aid and family support programmes in accordance with best practice
- Strengthening links between maternity services and addiction services
- Quantifying the need for additional residential placements for pregnant and postnatal women who need in-patient treatment for addiction to drugs and/or alcohol across the country
- Developing services to meet that need ensuring that such facilities support the development of the mother-baby relationship
- Providing dedicated support for pregnant women with alcohol dependency, including examining the need to expand the role of the Drug Liaison Midwife (DLM) in this regard. Any such expansion will likely generate a need to further increase the number of such midwives
- Resourcing the National Women and Infants Health Programme (NWIHP) to provide drug liaison midwives and specialist medical social workers in all maternity networks
- Supporting maternity hospitals/units to strengthen their methods of detecting alcohol abuse and supporting women to reduce their intake
- Engaging the NWIHP to develop a consistent approach to informing women about the risks of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.
- Increasing the range of wrap-around community and residential services equipped to meet the needs of women who are using drugs and/or alcohol in a harmful manner, including those with children and those who are pregnant

### **A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service (2021)**

- Women passing through the International Protection process will be entitled to avail of the same healthcare supports as Irish nationals, including reproductive care, antenatal, birth and postnatal care, cervical checks.(..) It is crucial that information relating to these services is conveyed in an accessible and culturally sensitive manner. Information on the range of healthcare supports will be provided at the earliest point of contact on arrival in a Reception and Integration Centre.
- The Tusla Education Support Service will also work to advise and assist parents and guardians in relation to school enrolment procedures and applications, as well as with appeals against refusal to enrol a student.
- Community initiatives, such as the Healthy Ireland Fund, social prescribing, parenting programmes and the new Healthy Communities Programme aim to improve health and reduce morbidity in communities at risk, including applicants for International Protection
- Parenting supports and child development services will be made available to applicant families to support child development during the application for International Protection. It is recognised, in this regard, that applicant families who have experienced conflict or trauma may need additional supports. Caseworkers' work with applicant families will include specific supports for people who have been trafficked and suffered gender based violence. It is also recognised that moving from a third country to Ireland may in itself impose additional pressures on the applicant family which, if ignored, may lead to poorer outcomes for applicant children. Childcare will be provided to enable parents to attend English language classes.
- A lone parent will be linked with lone parent organisations. A family with young children will be linked with family resource centres in the area while those with teenage children will be linked with youth organisations.

### **Actions from Previous Strategies and Plans**

- Engage with migrant parents through personal contact, to enhance mutual understanding and assist integration. (Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015)
- Engage volunteers from host and migrant communities to assist with matters such as liaising with parents to increase awareness of the education system and promote participation in it. (Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015)
- Engage with all parents in both host and migrant communities to promote active participation in the sector. This entails parents furthering their own education where possible, in particular with regard to language competency, and being actively involved in their child's education. (Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015)
- The Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and TUSLA will implement good practice initiatives to support parental engagement in education and increase children's school readiness. (Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021)
- Provide parents/guardians, students and teachers with information, advice and tools to promote safer, more responsible and more effective use of the internet. (Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020)
- Provide and commission both universal and targeted evidence-informed parenting supports and ensure early identification of 'at risk' children and families to strengthen families and reduce the incidences of children coming into, and remaining in, care. (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework For Children and Young People, 2014-2020)
- Achieve effective child and family support services through the establishment of Tusla, The Child and Family Agency and implementation of the National Service Delivery Framework for child welfare and protection services, with agreed thresholds and outcome measures. (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework For Children and Young People, 2014-2020)

**Actions from Previous Strategies and Plans (Continued)**

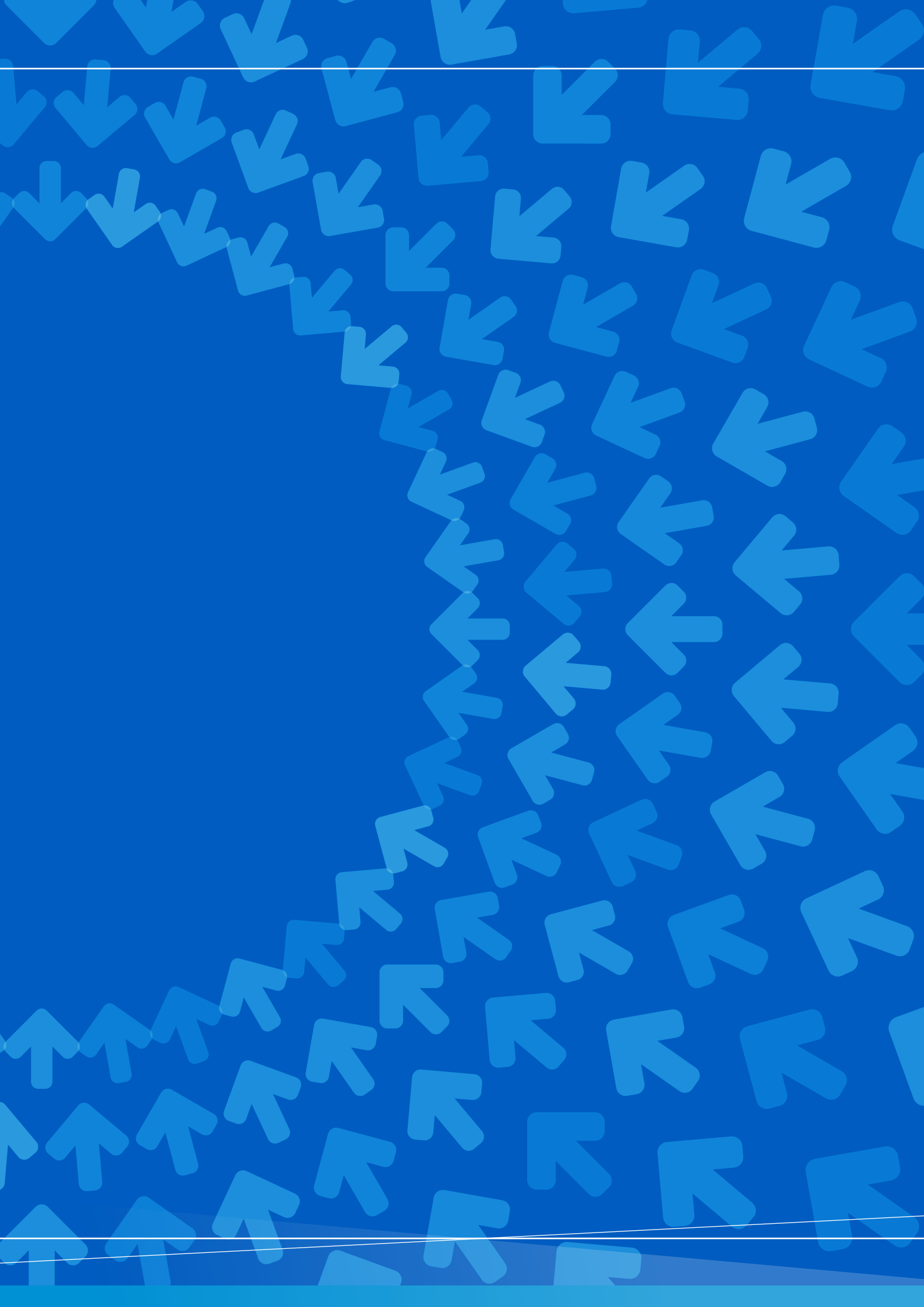
- Families, guardians and carers should be supported in parenting children and young people through the provision of universal, quality-assured and evidencebased parenting information and support programmes (National Youth Mental Health Taskforce Report 2017)
- Within the context of the National Healthy Childhood Programme (based on a model of progressive universalism), continue to provide the totality of the universally delivered programme of support to mothers. (National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020: creating a better society for all)



## Appendix 3: Endnotes

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