UPDATE ON FIRST 5 – IRELAND'S STRATEGY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

'First 5' is Ireland's first ever strategy for early childhood. This ten-year, whole-of-Government Strategy will deliver:

- a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring
- a new model of parenting support
- new developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce
- reform of the Early Learning and Care system, including a new funding model
- a package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty

The Implementation Plan, published in May 2019, describes the ambitious steps that will be taken in the initial implementation phase – from 2019 to 2021.

DCYA Progress to Date

Considerable progress has already been made to deliver on the commitments in First 5 since it was published in November 2018.

Within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, some of the essential building blocks for successful implementation have been put in place. This includes the establishment of a Parenting Support Policy Unit and publication of a call for tenders to undertake a national study on parents' support needs. A First 5 Implementation Office has also been established.

Significant progress has also been made to drive the reforms in the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Sector, including:

- The establishment of the Steering Group on the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Sector
- The establishment of an Expert Group to develop a new funding model for the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare.

- The publication of the draft Childminding Action plan (for consultation)
- The introduction of initial regulations for school-age childcare, and public consultation on comprehensive regulations.
- The publication of agreed criteria and guidelines for further and higher education for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare qualifications including access and entry requirements; knowledge and content of programmes and the incorporation of supervised professional practice

Adding to this, intensive preparations for the launch of the landmark National Childcare Scheme later this year continue.

Wider Progress to Date

First 5 is a collaborative effort across Government. Key achievements across other Departments to date includes:

- The recent publication of the Parents Leave and Benefits Bill, which will provide for an individual entitlement to two weeks of paid parental leave per parent (up to a potential four weeks in total per child) from November 2019 (with a commitment to extend the individual entitlement to seven weeks of paid parental leave per parent by 2021).
- The extension of unpaid parental leave from 18 to 22 weeks since September 2019 (with a further 4-week extension from September 2020)
- The development of measures to extend library structured support to babies and young children
- The establishment a Joint Working Group on Food Poverty.

2020 Priorities

Implementation efforts will intensify in 2020. All work to be progress in 2020 is set out in the First 5 Implementation Plan.

With €700k in additional funding secured in Budget 2020, DCYA will:

Progress a range of research/data activities to fulfil commitments agreed in First 5 including the evaluation of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme; Research on the ELC Needs of Parents Working Atypical Hours, Research on the Potential for Joined up Service Development in ELC, and the establishment of a First 5 Research Observatory.

Progress the Development of a New Funding Model for ELC and SAC, which is a major strategic project committed to under First 5. The project will be overseen by an independent Expert Group including national and international experts which will be supported by a research partner (the procurement process for which is currently underway) who will contribute a series of research paper to the Expert Group and manage the significant stakeholder engagement and consultation process which will be required for the process.

Progress a pilot meals programme in ELC, in 45 not-for-profit ELC settings in 2020. The focus of pilot meals programme will be children enrolled on the ECCE Programme. The pilot will operate for the full duration of the 2020/21 ECCE Programme year (i.e. 38 weeks from September to June) and will be subject to a full evaluation.

Support the development of a model of supports for learning transitions and parental engagement in ELC and specifically a first output from this work 'guidance and information for parents and families on ELC and SAC, including information on ELC and SAC options and entitlements and guidance on key indicators of high-quality provision'.

Across other Government Departments there will be

- Piloting of the milk programmes with early learning and care settings
- new Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1–5 Year Olds
- new Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care settings for 1–5 Year Olds, including a toolkit for implementation
- new preventive oral healthcare packages introduced for children under 6
- an extension to the Home Carer Tax credit
- new guidance and tools to facilitate employers to offer more family-friendly working options, so that over the course of the Strategy employment legislation, culture and practice enables parents to balance working with caring, while also promoting gender equality

There will also be progress made in the development of a dedicated child health workforce, focussed initially in areas of high population density and disadvantage, with the foundational work needed for this transformative action progressed in 2020.