

Ireland is developing a national model of parenting support services

ESPN Flash Report 2022/63

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SEPTEMBER 2022

Ireland is set to develop a national model of parenting support services. Announced on 27 April 2022 and due to commence later this year, Supporting Parents sets out 23 actions to enable greater access, information and inclusion with regard to parenting support services. Addressing services from pre-birth to adulthood, the new model foresees actions both to improve existing support and assign roles and responsibilities for planning and delivery. Instituting the national model is viewed as another critical element of Ireland's family policy infrastructure which, over the last decade, has seen the establishment of policy programmes for specific groups of children and their families.

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Description

Parenting support is the provision of information and services aimed at strengthening parents' knowledge, confidence and skills in child-rearing. It covers a range of services and facilities, including education programmes and videos on parenting, home visiting programmes, one-to-one advice and support, parent support groups, support helplines and apps for parents.

With over one and a half million parents of children under 18 years (comprising nearly a third of the population), Ireland's aim in having a national model is to develop and put in place a coherent and strategic approach to supporting parents so that all parents can access the support they need when they need it.

Supporting Parents, which was developed through a collaborative working group led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, with input from a wide range of stakeholders and parents, children and young people, has four goals: increasing awareness of parenting support services, improving access to the services, making the services more inclusive, and developing a set of needs-led and evidence-informed parenting support services. Among the planned actions are the establishment of a set of governance and delivery structures, the setting up of an annual parent peer support fund, enhancement of the role of the existing "Child and Family Support Network Coordinators" (whose function is to ensure a coordinated service delivery to families), as well as the undertaking of a cross-sectoral programme of research and

evaluation, the publication of quality guidelines for provision and the development of a three-year communication plan.

Oriented especially to setting out service principles, the new model emphasises inclusiveness, empowering parents, the best interests of the child, consultation and a whole of government approach. The development of the model is a key action under the "First 5" 10-year plan to support babies, young children and their families (Government of Ireland 2018) and it is one of the six transformational goals in The National Policy Framework for Children and Young people, 2014-2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014).



Outlook and commentary

The problems that the new model aims to overcome are of services that have grown in an ad hoc rather than planned manner, variation and inconsistency in availability and access, and dispersed policy and operational responsibility. The background in Ireland is of a long-term history of limited family services on the one hand (although this is being corrected for) and a complex and poorly-coordinated delivery infrastructure (including state, voluntary/community bodies and for-profit services). The new model also aims to combat lack of information on the part of parents of the existing support services – some 58% of parents surveyed in 2020 said they were not aware of any parenting supports, universal or targeted, available within their local community (Department

of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2022: 40).

Among the strengths of the new model is its focus on putting in place both structures and a set of principles.

In terms of structures, Supporting Parents will establish a Programme Delivery Office, based in Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to lead on the delivery of key actions; a Supporting Parents Steering Group, consisting of representatives of different relevant statutory units and services, to guide the delivery of parenting supports nationally and locally; an Implementation Group chaired by the Minister and including stakeholders from a range of sectors, including parents, meeting at minimum twice a year to progress implementation; a Cross-Government Parenting Support Network for public and civil servants to share learning and showcase best practice. These measures suggest that parenting support will be institutionalised not just as a form of service provision but as part of the planning and development of family and parenting policy in Ireland.

The institutionalisation of parenting support is in line with thinking in other Member States, although there is great variation both in the degree of centralisation/decentralisation and the universal versus targeted nature of parent support provision across the EU (Devaney et al 2021).

The underlying principles also have merit. These include the planned empowerment of parents which was one of the recommendations

of an EU Peer Review in Social Protection and Inclusion on Building a Coordinated Strategy for Parenting Support conducted in 2011 (Daly 2011). Another recommendation from the Peer Review, which the Irish developments also take forward, was for research and evaluation of the services and especially the parenting programmes. Ongoing research is essential given that some of these programmes involve intrusive interventions in families which should be avoided unless demonstrated to be necessary to improve the effectiveness of the programmes. Another recommendation from the Peer Review was for children's and parents' rights to be endorsed as operating principles. Ireland's new model is not explicitly underpinned by a rights approach and so will need to proceed carefully, especially in balancing the needs of parents and children (mindful especially of the child's right to autonomy).

Another critical dimension that will need to be carefully managed pertains to the degree of compulsion and especially the imposition of programmes on parents from low-income sectors of the population. Some scholars and analysts have been critical of parenting support in general and parenting programmes in particular for being controlling of low-income groups and for imposing particular, often middle or upper class, values on child rearing that may not reflect values held by lower income sectors and people from minority ethnic backgrounds (Jones et al 2020).

Further reading

Daly, M. (2011), [*Building a Coordinated Strategy for Parenting Support Synthesis Report.*](#)

Devaney, C., Christiansen, Ø., Holzer, J., MacDonald, M., Matias, M., Piessens, A. and Salamon, E. (2021), [*The Conceptualisation and Delivery of Family Support in Europe: A Review of Academic Literature.*](#)

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022), [*Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services.*](#)

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014), [*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures - The national policy framework for children & young people \(2014-2020\).*](#)

Government of Ireland (2018), [*First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028.*](#)

Janta, B. (2013), [*Parenting Support. Policy Brief.*](#)

Jones, D., Lowe, P. and West, K. (2020), [*Austerity in a disadvantaged West Midlands neighbourhood: Everyday experiences of families and family support professionals.*](#)

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Quoting this report: Daly, M. (2022), *Ireland is developing a national model of parenting support services*, ESPN Flash Report 2022/63, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.