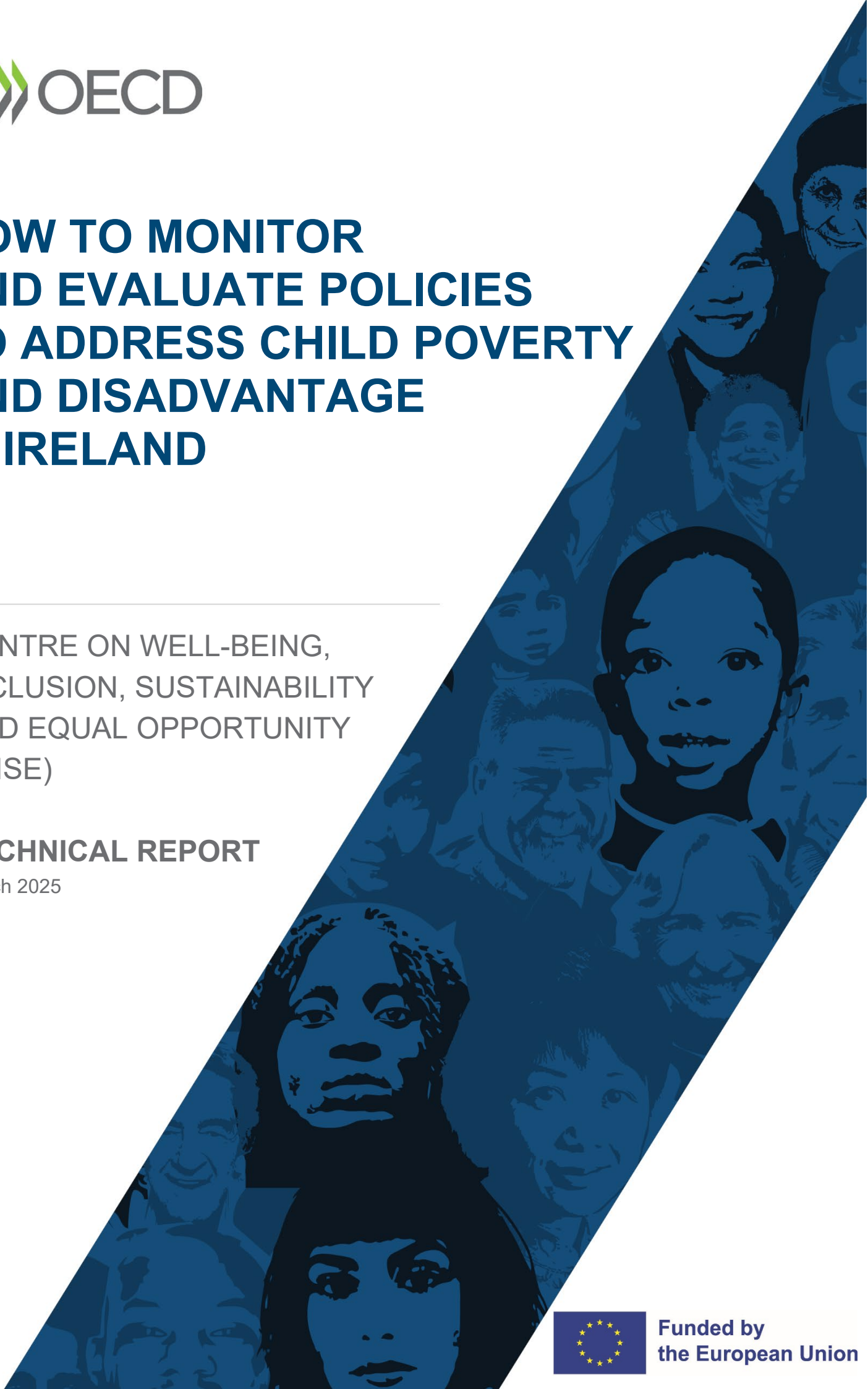
HOW TO MONITOR AND EVALUATE POLICIES TO ADDRESS CHILD POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE IN IRELAND

CENTRE ON WELL-BEING, INCLUSION, SUSTAINABILITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY (WISE)

TECHNICAL REPORT

March 2025



Funded by the European Union

How to monitor and evaluate policies to address child poverty and disadvantage in Ireland

Foreword

Ireland has many important initiatives underway to promote child and youth well-being and to improve outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage. In 2023, the country launched Young Ireland, its third whole-of-government policy framework for children and young people. This technical report aims to provide Ireland with practical guidance to support the development of a data monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for Young Ireland.

This report was prepared by the Child Well-being Unit in the OECD's Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunities (WISE). It was developed under the leadership of Romina Boarini (Director, OECD WISE Centre) and drafted by Gráinne Dirwan and Olivier Thévenon. Appreciation is given to Martina Garcia Asia (Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs) and Nicole Drew (Directorate for Public Governance) for their comments. Anne-Lise Faron (OECD WISE Centre) prepared the manuscript for publication, and Martine Zaïda (OECD WISE Centre) provided valuable support and advice on communication and publication.

The OECD Secretariat wishes to express its gratitude to SG-REFORM and Ireland's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), in particular Clare Farrell, whose support has been instrumental to the preparation of this report.

The action was funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument, and implemented by the OECD, in co-operation with the Reform and Investment Task force (SG-REFORM) of the European Commission.

Table of contents

FIGURES

1. Introduction

Ireland has many important initiatives underway to promote child and youth well-being and to improve outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage. Among them is the Ireland's new whole-of-government policy framework for children and young people, Young Ireland, which includes a programme of work to create an enabling environment to ensure that children and young people's needs and rights are a central part of government action. Crucially, Young Ireland aims to promote cross-government work through its governance structures, system-level actions, and three spotlight areas fostering cross-government action in areas of significant need (DCEDIY, 2023[1]; OECD, 2024[2]).

Young Ireland has taken important steps towards developing Irelands' capacity to monitor and evaluate the actions and programmes that will be implemented within the framework. This increase in monitoring and evaluation capacities builds on three elements: (i) the identification of spotlight areas requiring enhanced cross-governmental actions; (ii) the development of indicators to measure progress towards the five national outcomes targeted by Young Ireland (i.e., that children are active and healthy, achieving full potential in learning and development, safe and protected from harm, have economic security and opportunity, and are connected, respected, and contributing to their community)*;* and (iii) the development of the data and research agenda to provide the evidence base required to guide policies. These three elements combined shape objectives for developing the capacity to track the implementation of policy actions and their impact on children and youth outcomes (OECD, 2024[3]). At a higher strategic level, they also pave the way towards assessing whether the entire set of implemented measures result in the desired improvement of children's outcomes, including the most vulnerable groups.

This Guidance Note initiates a discussion on the practical steps necessary to enhance monitoring and evaluation capacities. The first part focuses on the potential of data and indicator development to track the implementation of policy actions and to strengthen impact evaluations. It provides a series of examples from data development initiatives in OECD countries that can offer inspiration when developing data linkages to assess children's vulnerabilities, local population needs, and the effectiveness and impact of policy measures, including integrated services. The second part outlines recommendations for developing a broader set of indicators that can inform the longer-term steering of Young Ireland. The section also discusses the necessity of documenting specific information challenges to inform policies and facilitate timely and appropriate responses to the needs of children and their families.

Strengthening Ireland's capacity to monitor and evaluate its National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028

Ireland has embarked on crucial initial actions to set up a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system for its new policy framework "*Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*", in particular the identification of spotlight areas requiring enhanced cross-governmental actions and the adoption of an indicator set to inform policies. However, substantial endeavours are still needed to develop a system capable of effectively informing whether the measures adopted during the implementation of the policy framework will have the desired impact, and if not an understanding of why. The following steps will be important:

1. Collecting information on policy implementation and make it possible to link this information with the outcomes of the population covered by policies through data matching and by incorporating more information on the uptake of benefits and services in household and child surveys;
2. Complementing the existing indicator set with information on challenges linked to poverty and other forms of childhood disadvantage in order to guide policies at a higher strategic level.

To strengthen the assessment framework, data and indicators can be developed to document the Theory of Change, linking policy implementation to its impact on child outcomes. In the case of services to assist parents and children, developing appropriate indicators for this Theory of Change could involve identifying facilitators and obstacles to effectively scaling up, such as funding models and policy support, workforce competencies, and programme reach. Collecting information on service uptake, quality and the outcomes or service uptake on parents and child outcomes is also needed.

Since **conducting impact evaluations** are costly, **priority** could be given to programmes and policy measures with broader scope or higher costs, greater anticipated impact on child outcomes (including potential cascading effects on multiple outcome areas), and with higher uncertainty regarding their benefits. Among the methodological issues to be considered are constraints and costs associated with the protocol and the complexity of the data matching required to identify causal relationships.

Harnessing the full potential of data development and data linking across datasets is essential for informing policy monitoring at all stages. This involves maximising data utility from various sources, including official statistics, administrative records, school or household surveys, and data from services aiding children and families. Ireland has made significant strides in developing publicly available data on children's situations and related policies, aligned with the Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023.

Improving further matching between data sources, including administrative and survey data can contribute to*:*

1. Enhancing the identification of risks, vulnerabilities, and needs of children and their families;
2. Improving the profiling of populations needs living in a given local area:
3. Developing the capacity to undertake and report on coordinated and interdepartmental action;
4. Increasing the capacity to measure the effectiveness and impact of child policies;
5. Strengthening capacity to conduct ex-ante and ex-post impact evaluations to inform the policy cycle.

The specific methods for connecting data sources with each other will vary significantly depending on policy domains, the concrete measures being adopted, and the available data sources in each area. However, it is crucial that consideration of the need for data, including data that needs to be linked

together, should take place at the same time as decisions are made on the policy measures adopted. This ensures that the effects of the measures on children's environment and outcomes can be assessed as effectively as possible. Any data matching would have to be done in the relevant legal and ethical frameworks, including the Statistics Act and General Data Protection Regulation.

Options for making the Children and Young People's Indicator Set for steering Young Ireland more impactful include:

1. Enriching the set of monitoring indicators and potentially poverty targets with consideration of poverty persistence and intensity, influence of housing costs, and with indicators to be developed for highly vulnerable groups of children (e.g. younger children, children with a disability, etc.);
2. Measuring families' economic and financial vulnerability to the fast-changing context;
3. Uncovering the determinants of the cost of raising children;
4. Streamlining the collection of indicators by clearly defining their role in monitoring and explaining the rationale behind their inclusion.

A multi-tiered set of indicators can facilitate distinguishing between policy targets (indicators directly impacted by policies), indicators measuring broader policy consequences, and indicators providing contextual information on children's well-being. Ireland has initiated the work to the Children and Young People's Indicator Set to make progress in this area. Equally important is disaggregating indicators by socio-demographic characteristics, such as socio-economic status and gender, to identify outcome gaps and groups of children who are left behind. The OECD Child Well-Being Measurement Framework is proposed as a potential source of inspiration for crafting valuable indicators aimed at pinpointing challenges for child well-being.

2. Improving Ireland's capacity for learning from policy implementation and evaluation

Ireland has made significant progress in enhancing its ability to monitor and evaluate the initiatives and programmes implemented under the "*Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*" through the following three key elements (DCEDIY, 2023[1]):

- The identification of spotlight areas requiring enhanced cross-governmental actions. These spotlight areas aim to facilitate the coordination of cross-sectoral initiatives by different departments responsible for programmes that impact various aspects of children's lives. For example, the Programme Office on Child Poverty and Well-Being is tasked with enhancing actions to address the specific obstacles faced by children experiencing poverty (Department of Taoiseach, 2023[4]). It identifies six priority areas that form a coherent set of actions addressing the determinants of child and family poverty and their impact on child outcomes. These six priority areas are also linked to six desired long-term outcomes: (i) Every child lives in a household with adequate income; (ii) Every child has access to good quality early learning and childcare; (iii) No family struggles to meet the cost of education; (iv) No childhood is undermined by the experience of family homelessness; (v) Every family knows how to access and are supported to access the services they need; and (vi) Every child has the opportunity to participate in culture, arts and sport.
- The development of indicators to measure progress towards the five national outcomes targeted by Young Ireland, building on the indicator set established for its predecessor policy framework, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. Young Ireland comprises of measures designed to assess the progress and effectiveness of policies and initiatives aimed at improving the well-being and development of children and young people across key outcome areas such as health, education, safety, economic security, and participation in society.
- The development of data and research. A key component of the Young Ireland programme is the development of a Cross Government Children and Young People's Research Programme. Work has already commenced on a research landscape and gap analysis, which will inform the breadth and scope of a new research programme and the prioritisation of actions within this programme.

In addition to the indicators developed under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, there have been a number of other relevant data and research initiatives. Linked to the indicator development, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, created the Outcomes for Children Data Hub, as part of the What Works initiative. The Hub is a centralised platform with an agreed set of indicators from relevant reports. The Hub has an interactive area-based geo-mapping system to aid policymakers, service providers, and Tusla management in making informed decisions about service design and delivery.

DCEDIY, Tusla and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) have also worked together on an innovative project that links children-in-care data with school attendance and attainment data. This project generated valuable findings and demonstrated the potential of improved data linkage for understanding children's lives (CSO, 2023[5]). DCEDIY and Tusla are also working collaboratively, in line with ethics and data protection obligations to maximise the value of Tusla case management data to understand children and young people's pathways through care, under the Care Experiences research and data programme.

The National Equality Data Strategy 2023-2027 will also advance the collection, standardisation, use and monitoring of all equality data, including data relating to children and young people, to highlight inequalities that may otherwise remain hidden.

These advances align with the broader Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023, which aims to enhance data usage for a more cohesive, efficient, and effective government.

By leveraging these three pillars, Ireland is significantly enhancing its capacity to conduct impact assessments, inform all stages of policy cycles through monitoring the implementation of actions and programmes, and improve its ability to identify vulnerable populations in need of additional support. This section explains how an assessment framework for childhood disadvantage could be strengthened building on these developments. It presents a checklist of questions that the framework could address to facilitate learning at all stages of policy conception and implementation. Additionally, it discusses key directions for developing data potential to determine where and for which children enhanced actions are needed. Taking action in these directions is essential for fostering collective learning at all stages of policy conception and implementation, both nationally and locally (Heikkila and Gerlak, 2013[6]).

Strengthening learning from policy implementation

The capacity to learn from the implementation of actions and their impact on children relies heavily on the framework set up to monitor policy implementation, which should determine who benefits and evaluate the outcomes (DCEDIY, 2021[7]). This involves clearly defining the expected effects and understanding the mechanisms driving these effects, as well as identifying potential obstacles that could hinder progress[1]. Having this clarity aids in mitigating the inherent uncertainty often encountered in evaluating intricate policy domains, particularly in areas like "human services". Box 1 provides a definition of the main concepts and terms used in this note.

Box 1. A short glossary on the main terms used in this note

A **Monitoring and Evaluation** (M&E) **Framework** is a structured and systematic tool used in project management and programme implementation to assess performance, measure outcomes, and ensure the achievement of objectives. It consists of several core components, including clear project objectives, key performance indicators, data collection methods, data sources, and responsibilities.

The M&E Framework defines how data will be collected, analysed, and reported, ensuring that the project or programme remains on track. It incorporates ethical considerations and emphasises a culture of continuous improvement. Overall, an M&E Framework serves as a roadmap for organisations, enabling them to make informed decisions, enhance transparency, and align initiatives with their intended goals.

Monitoring is a continuing process that involves the systematic collection or collation of data (on specified indicators or other types of information). It provides the management and other stakeholders of an intervention with indications of the extent of implementation progress, achievement of intended

results, occurrence of unintended results, use of allocated funds and other important intervention and context-related information.

Monitoring relies on **developing indicators** which are specific measures used to assess and track progress towards achieving objectives or goals within a policy, programme, project, or initiative. The indicators provide quantifiable evidence of performance or change over time and help stakeholders understand whether desired outcomes are being achieved. Indicators can be qualitative or quantitative and are often selected based on their relevance, feasibility, reliability, and sensitivity to change. They play a crucial role in monitoring and evaluation processes, allowing for the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data to inform decision-making and improve performance.

The **results chain** is the casual sequence of a policy programme that stipulates the different stages that need to take place. It describes how inputs and activities will produce outputs, which will then lead to specific outcomes and eventually to policy impact. The **Theory of Change** is an analytical framework aimed to model the change process, that is, a description and explanation of how and why a particular intervention is expected to contribute to the desired change in a particular context.

Evaluation involves **assessing**, as objectively as possible, a **completed project or programme** (or a phase of an ongoing project or programme that has been completed) in order to determine whether a policy measure or intervention has achieved a given set of objectives. Therefore, evaluation aims to render a judgment about the programme's quality. It relies on scientific methods to determine how successful the implementation of a programme and its outcomes have been. 'Formative' evaluations help inform: 1) the planning/design process, by assessing the need for a programme, and/or a range of programme options based on defined value for money criteria, and 2) the implementation process and continuous development (DCYA, 2019[8]). 'Summative' evaluations may be conducted across the implementation and post-implementation review stages.

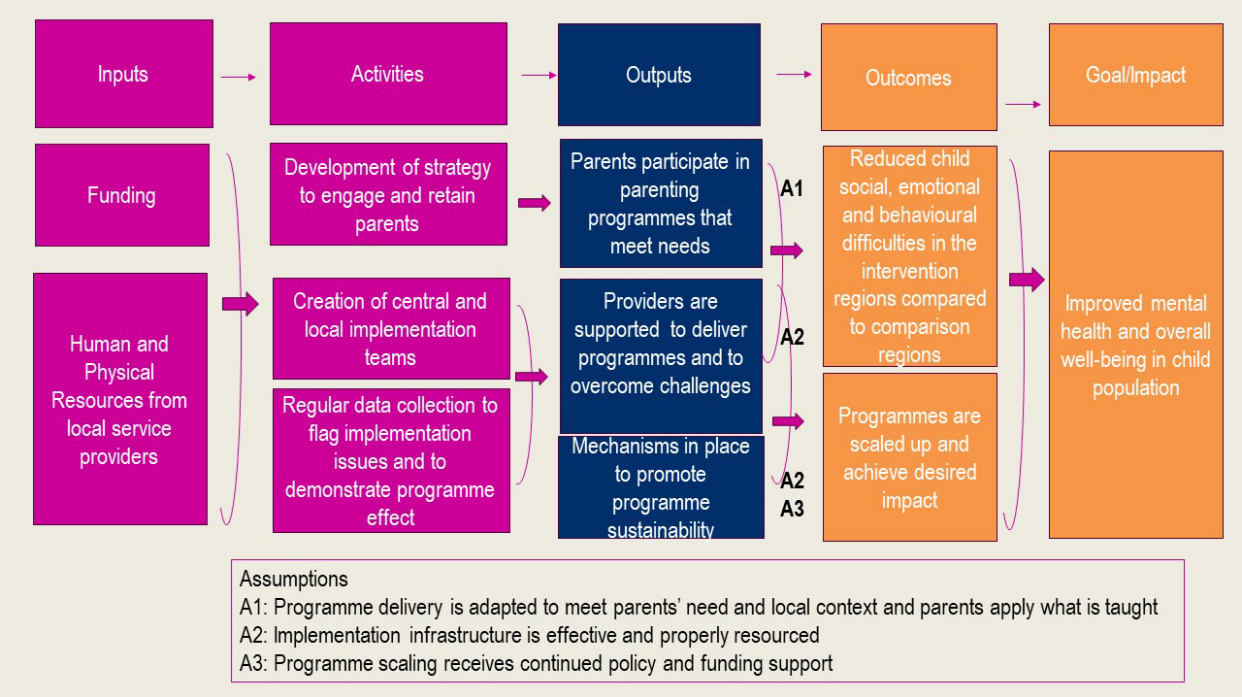
"**Ex ante impact evaluation**" refers to the assessment of the potential effects or outcomes of a policy, programme, or project before it is implemented or carried out. This evaluation typically involves forecasting or predicting the likely impacts based on the design, objectives, and expected inputs of the intervention. It aims to provide insights into the expected consequences, both positive and negative, and helps decision-makers make informed choices about whether to proceed with the proposed action and how to optimize its design for maximum effectiveness.

"**Ex post impact evaluation**" refers to the assessment of the actual effects or outcomes of a policy, programme, or project after it has been implemented or completed. It aims to determine whether the intervention has caused the intended changes or impacts, such as improvements in social, economic, or environmental conditions. Impact evaluations often employ rigorous research methods, including experimental or quasi-experimental designs, to isolate the effects of the intervention from other factors and establish causal relationships between the intervention and its outcomes. These evaluations provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and efficiency of policies and programmes, helping policymakers and practitioners make informed decisions about resource allocation and programme improvement.

Formulating the results chain to connects the allocation of resources and the implementation of actions and programmes to the potential short- and long-term effects on child outcomes is essential for getting a clear understanding of policy impact. The most common method to structure a results chain is the Theory of Change (ToC) approach. A documented ToC makes it explicit what a policy does (inputs, activities and outputs) and what it aims to achieve (outcomes and impacts).The ToC approach allows testing and reviewing the hypothetical causal linkages and underlying assumptions between activities, outputs, and outcomes during implementation (OECD, 2024[3]; Innovation Network, 2005[9]). Since the ToC is indeed a model, its portrayal of policy implementation and effect is by default much simpler than what occurs in the real world.

As an exemplar, Figure 1 presents a ToC for scaling evidence-based parenting programmes. The ToC offers a simplified representation of the implementation steps behind scaling an evidence-based parenting programmes, such as Triple P Parenting, which has the goal of reducing the prevalence of child social and emotional difficulties in children aged 0-16 years at the population level. It illustrates how information on policy implementation and its results can be organised around a result chain linking the financial and human resources committed to the various activities and services, and then the 'outputs', which are the concrete measures benefiting the target population. Developing appropriate indicators for this logical framework involves identifying facilitators and obstacles to effectively scaling up, such as funding models and policy support, workforce competencies and programme reach (Fagan et al., 2019[10]; Gottfredson et al., 2015[11]). The second part of the ToC reflects the effect that the policy "output" is expected to have on individuals' outcomes, while the "impact" characterises a longer-term and 'higher-order objective to which a policy measure or programme is intended to contribute (OECD, 2002[12]). This part involves collecting information on service uptake, quality, and the outcomes or service uptake on parents and child outcomes. In all, this ToC underlines how central access to reliable and accurate data is to supporting scaling up (Gupta, 2021[13]).

Figure 1. A simplified Theory of Change for scaling evidence-based parenting programmes



Source: OECD Secretariat's figure.
Note: Figure illustrates components of a results chain for scaling an evidence-based parenting programme.

Referencing a ToC allows for the identification of key questions that are essential for documenting the monitoring and evaluation of actions and initiatives within the scope of Young Ireland. Key questions include:

- Are the policy goals clear? – Do the "if-then" links between policy implementation and outcomes follow a logical sequence, and are there gaps in this sequence?
- For example, following the logical framework illustrated in Figure 1, this means documenting whether resources for the implementation of programme activities. "If" these activities are implemented successfully, 'then' certain outputs and outcomes can be expected.
- Are we asking questions about inputs, activities, outputs or outcomes/impacts?
- What will we measure? What links/components in the logical framework is it useful for us to know about?
- What indicators will help us to answer these questions? Do we need to assess process, output or outcome/impact indicators?
- Do indicator data already exist, or will we need to collect new data?

Designing the monitoring and evaluation plan for the adopted actions requires selecting indicators to track policy inputs, activities, outputs, that are related to the desired outcomes. This necessitates implementing plans to collect relevant data alongside the rollout of policy measures. This also means selecting outcomes that can be measured prior to reform implementation and tracking their evolution consistently afterwards (OECD, 2024[3]).

Key questions for designing effective impact evaluation

To ensure impact evaluations are designed for optimal collective learning, the impact evaluation itself must address the following questions:

- **What type of impact is expected?** As stated earlier, this impact of an intervention can be either **direct** or **indirect**. For example, an income support policy can have a direct impact on households by directly increasing income or reducing the cost of living. Policies to improve housing quality could have an indirect impact on child poverty and disadvantage, for example, by improving living conditions which could in turn reduce heating costs, medical treatment costs and loss of employment income due to illness. Indirect impacts are trickier to quantify.

  An impact can also be further identified as relating to either the **determinants of child poverty**, for example, the labour market situation of parents (which also may depend on their health status), or to the **consequence of poverty** on child outcomes, for example, educational or health disadvantage (Government of Scotland, 2023[14]).

- **What is the timeframe to be set to assess policy impact?** Understanding the potential effects of an intervention on the short-term activities, behaviours, or outcomes of children or families is crucial, as is considering the long-term impacts. For instance, providing school meals could alleviate food deprivation for specific children and mitigate nutritional issues in the short term, and support active learning. In the long run, access to nutritious food at school might help address broader societal concerns such as overweight and obesity within the population. The time reference period considered for measuring progress in programme implementation and impact may vary across areas and depend on the entities responsible for implementation. For instance, the impact of income support on child poverty exposure may be observable right after benefit payments, while it will take longer for any impact on educational or health outcomes to materialise. It may also take a longer time for the provision of services to families and children to be implemented, as well as for their impact on child outcomes to be realised. In other words,

depending on the pace of policy implementation and the nature of the policy itself, some policy measures take effect quickly while others are more gradual.

The timeframe to assess policy impact also depends crucially on the time lag that often exist between the implementation of measures and the collection and diffusion of data that follows their own agenda. For example, a household will benefit immediately from a rise in income support, however this rise in household income will not be captured in child poverty indicators for some time because these indicators are based on annual household income and subject to data time lags.

- **Which subgroups of children will benefit?** The more responsive a policy is to the multiple needs of children living in poverty, the greater the potential impact on child poverty reduction or mitigation (Thévenon et al., 2018[15])**.** Ireland has a higher child poverty prevalence in lone-parent and jobless households while material deprivation is an issue for a share of children in households whose incomes are well above the relative poverty line (OECD, 2024[16]). Personal circumstances or characteristics of children might overlap with poverty risk. For example, in the Irish and international context households with a child with a chronic illness or disability experience significant disadvantage and economic hardship due to reduced household income and a lower standard of living associated with the extra cost of caring for their child (Roddy, 2021[17]; Shahat and Greco, 2021[18]). There is the need to **consider the vulnerable groups of children identified in Young Ireland** and if a policy could offer an impact that is relevant to addressing their disadvantage.
- **How certain is the impact on childhood disadvantage?** This means attributing a level of confidence to whether the policy, on its own, will have an impact on one or more of the target outcomes.
  - At a conceptual level, this involves questioning the likelihood that a measure (or set of measures) will have the desired impact, considering it operates within a system of complex determinants that vary among individuals (in this case, among children and families) (Lowe, 2023[19]).
  - At a measurement level, this involves identifying the metric through which the impact of the policy measure on the outcome can be reliably measured. This reliability stems from the availability or potential production of relevant data, as well as the feasibility of isolating this impact from other influencing factors.
- **What effect will interdepartmental action have on the policy impact?** Many of the issues connected to child poverty and childhood disadvantage are cross-cutting. Administrations and service providers deliver joint action in order to address the multiple needs and complex issues faced by the most disadvantaged children. One way to assess the success of interdepartmental collaboration and coordinated action is to measure whether children demonstrate improved outcomes in specific areas due to “joined-up” service delivery, and to determine how much progress in these areas depends on advancements in other areas supported by coordinated services. Measuring the quality of integration between services is also crucial, as it can inform on how well service integration is progressing and locate the weak links in the integration chain.

Harnessing the potential of data linkages

Harnessing the full potential of data development and cross-linking is crucial for informing the various stages of policy monitoring. This involves maximizing the utility of data from various sources, including official statistics, administrative records, data collected from schools or household surveys, other relevant research data such as data from Growing Up in Ireland, or data gathered by services providing assistance to children and their families. Ireland has made significant progress in recent years in developing publicly available data on the situation of children and policies affecting them. Moreover, the Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023 sets out detailed goals and actions to deliver a more joined-up whole-of-Government

approach to how data is used and managed within the public service (Department of Public Expenditure, 2019[20]). It aims to provide more joined-up and integrated data, end-to-end digital services, improve protection and transparency of personal data processing, for the sake of putting in place better processes for policy formulation and evaluation.

In the area of child data, the development the Tusla data hub provides a platform to visualise trends regarding activities in the area of child protection, alternative care and family support. For instance, information is available by county on the number of cases opened to social work departments and the number of cases awaiting support with high priority. The Outcomes for Children Data Hub developed by Tusla and DCEDIY provides a mapping of existing disparities between counties based on the categorisation of data in Five National Outcomes included in the Young Ireland Framework.

Ireland has made important efforts to exploit the potential of administrative and register-based data for measuring child well-being. There has been a focus on linking administrative data with other sources (e.g., survey data in particular) to create new insights into the state of child well-being for policymakers and services to use. For instance, the Individual Health Identifier (IHI) has the potential to strengthen data linkage (in line with legal and ethical obligations). The Health Identifiers Act in 2014 made it possible to uniquely identify each person engaging with the Health Service Executive and relevant social care agencies and to associate their care records. The Individual Health Identifier (IHI) will allow the health and social providers supported by a mechanism to accurately associate service users with their records and communications, and to transfer securely service user records electronically.

Administrative data are a potentially important source of information on child outcomes and the contextual factors affecting children's well-being. It is important that, in line with ethical and data protection obligations and legal requirements, Ireland continues its efforts to match different sources of data by combining administrative sources and allowing them to be linked to survey or other data. Such efforts can particularly increase the ability to monitor Young Ireland's policies aimed at improving the evidence base in several directions:

- **Enhancing the identification of risks, vulnerabilities, and needs of children and their families**. This is particularly valuable for prevention policies and designing policies that align with the profile of the populations covered.
- **Improving the local area profiling of populations needs**. This is necessary in order to deploy the measures and programmes adopted at the local level, taking into account the characteristics of the local population and the nature of their needs, which may vary according to their socio-demographic characteristics and the existing infrastructure and services. Ireland has an area deprivation index based on ten measures of area-level disadvantage, which draws on census data. Expanding area profiling to include key administrative datasets would better inform on local support needs of children.
- **Develop the capacity to report on coordinated and interdepartmental action**. This is particularly necessary in the context of spotlight action areas, where the goal is to specifically enhance coordinated/joint action to more effectively address the complex challenges experienced by the most disadvantaged children.
- **Increase the capacity to measure the effectiveness and impact of child policies**. The challenge lies in connecting the information regarding whether policy measures reach the targeted population with the available information on their outcomes.
- **Strengthening capacity of impact evaluations to inform the policy cycle.** The challenge here is to conduct more detailed impact evaluations to ascertain the existence of causal relationships between the implemented policy measures and the outcomes for children and their families.

There are few data systems in OECD countries that can inform the various aspects mentioned above. New Zealand is one of the countries with the most advanced integrated data systems, in the sense that data

from different sources are linked across a wide range of areas: health, education and training, benefits and social services, justice, people and communities, income and work, and housing. These data are used to inform child policies at different stages of development, including:

- policy conceptualisation, by making it possible to describe the characteristics of the populations covered by support services and to identify the "unmet" needs of populations not covered by the existing support;
- policy impact measurement, with measures of short-term impact (do support programmes make a difference) and longer-term achievements (is the desired outcome achieved);
- policy predicted impact, using simulation models to simulate the impact of policy measures that could be adopted and adjusted according to different parameters.

Developing and maintaining such a data system is costly and in Ireland would require significant investment in data infrastructure development. However, the manner in which this integrated data system is used in New Zealand to shed light on the situation of children demonstrates the informational potential of improved data integration (Box 2). The remainder of this section looks at other examples from OECD countries showing how data can be used and combined to document the issues mentioned in the bullet points above.

Box 2. New Zealand's Use of Integrated Data to Document Policies for Improving the Well-being of Children and Youth

The Social Wellbeing Agency used the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) to provide data and insights that enable a better understanding of the needs and life experiences of children and young people who have high needs and those who offend. The IDI is a secure research database that brings together data collected by government agencies, including records from the criminal justice, education, health, and care and protection systems (For e.g., systems and services that provide protection to vulnerable children and young people). The data on adult outcomes can be matched with administrative data on their living circumstances in childhood; a number of child cohort studies make it possible to examine the consequences of disadvantages experienced in childhood on adult outcomes. These data include:

- "Growing Up in New Zealand" is the largest longitudinal study in New Zealand, tracking the development of around 7 000 children born in 2009 and 2010. The study collects comprehensive data on various aspects of children's lives, including health, education, family environment, socioeconomic status, and cultural identity. It includes information gathered from parents during pregnancy and continues to collect data from both children and their families as they grow.
- Pacific Islands Families (PIF) Study: This study focuses on children of Pacific Island descent born in Auckland in the year 2000. It collects data on child health, development, and well-being, as well as family dynamics, cultural practices, and socioeconomic factors. The study aims to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by Pacific families in New Zealand.
- Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (Dunedin Study): Started in 1972-1973, this study follows 1 037 individuals born in Dunedin, New Zealand. It includes detailed data on physical and mental health, education, behaviour, and family background. The study provides insights into how early life experiences influence outcomes across the lifespan.
- Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS): This longitudinal study tracks 1 265 children born in Christchurch in 1977. The study gathers information on health, education, behaviour, and social development from birth through adulthood. It focuses on understanding the factors that contribute to various life outcomes.

The data and insights provide decision-makers with evidence on the "*who"* – identifying those with the highest need, "*what"* – what are their characteristics and experiences, "*where"* – which regions have the highest need, and "*what works*" – what works to effectively improve their outcomes.

Specifically, the data from the IDI has been used to inform policies on:

Children with additional learning needs: The Social Wellbeing Agency analysed how children with the highest needs (children and young people who need extra support for their learning which includes those with learning difficulties, physical disability, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and communication and sensory issues) are identified and can be better supported in the education system. Insights were based on data from the education and health systems (in the IDI) to see how those systems identified need in different ways, and how many children might have high additional learning needs that are not currently supported in education. Findings from this research informed the Ministry of Education's work on the Highest Support Needs Review.

The experiences and outcomes of Alternative Education participants: The Social Wellbeing Agency also used the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) to look at the characteristics, life experience and family and community context for Alternative Education young people and compared their outcomes with a matched group of young people with similar life experiences and contexts. This analysis shows young people in Alternative Education have significant needs and have had disrupted and traumatic histories. Their outcomes are substantially worse than the total population but also meaningfully worse than the matched group. The Agency also tested a new evaluation method for evaluating Alternative Education Services and Teen Parent Units using the IDI. The evaluation used propensity score matching to compare the well-being outcomes of children and young people with similar characteristics but who had not received these services.

The long-term impact of Teen Parent Units: Teen Parent Units (TPUs) provide wrap-around support to pregnant- or parent-school students. They are established in collaboration between a secondary school and a local early childhood education provider. The aim of TPUs is to improve educational engagement and achievement, and promote future participation in education, training, and employment. The Social Wellbeing Agency used data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) to look at birth outcomes and early childhood outcomes and outcomes up to the age of 8 for children of TPU participants. The IDI allowed the Agency to include both later employment outcomes for mothers who participated in TPUs, as well as early life outcomes for their children. The analysis found a substantial improvement to school attainment rates of mothers but no significant impact on their long-term employment outcomes. The children were more likely to participate in early childhood education and less likely to be placed in state care.

The wellbeing of children and young people who offend: The Agency used the Integrated Data Infrastructure to create a measure of need based on well-being factors that are highly correlated to offending behaviour. Using this measure, the cohort of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand who turned 18 in 2020 were placed into four groups based on their exposure to hardship and disadvantage. The research examined the lives of the young people in each of these groups to understand their involvement with youth crime. It found that a small group with most exposure to hardship and disadvantage do the majority of youth crime.

The IDI data can also be used to support decision makers to understand and track the situation of children in local areas across various dimensions, including the proportion of children covered by services for which data are collated. To this aim, a Community Insights Tool is under development to share data at a granular geographical level.

The Oranga Tamariki Microsimulation Model is designed to understand intergenerational needs and risks. It models the entire population of children aged 17 years and under in New Zealand and projects

each individual through to age 25 using a wide range of information on their material situation, family context, and school experience (including indicators such as truancy, stand-downs, suspensions, offenses, contact with corrections, school leaving age, highest qualification, and education/employment status), as well as health indicators (such as potential avoidable hospitalizations, emergency department visits, chronic conditions, school checks, and mental health and substance use treatment), and contact with the care and protection system. The model is valuable for providing information on the expected outcomes of strengthening support during childhood.

Source: OECD Knowledge Exchange Platform on Well-being and Online workshop on New Zealand's Integrated Data Infrastructure: Using data to identify need and improve the wellbeing of children and youth, May 1st 2024.

Enhancing the identification of risks, vulnerabilities, and needs of children and their families.

Policy planning, resource allocation decisions, and the prioritisation of actions and programme development require a clear understanding of the risk factors that affect children's well-being and development. This includes understanding the needs of populations that are particularly vulnerable due to factors such as personal adversity (e.g., the presence of a physical or intellectual disability), family circumstances (e.g., experience of domestic violence), or social conditions (e.g., experience of poverty or material deprivation). Early identification of these factors is essential to enable policies to intervene as early as possible to avoid the problems growing out of control, leading to consequences for children's development that would be more difficult and costly to reduce or reverse.

The longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland has made it possible to identify, the factors that pose risks and disadvantages for children's development from maternity and birth onwards. This information is utilised to inform policy regarding the multiple risks faced by certain groups of children in disadvantaged situations, with valuable insights on the dynamics of child poverty (OECD, 2024[21]). The enhanced collaboration between DCEDIY and the Central Statistical Office on the Growing Up in Ireland study, together with the addition of a third infant cohort in 2024, is an opportunity to further strengthen the linkage with other data sources. It is also an opportunity to analyse and better understand the interrelationships between aspects of childhood disadvantages across different life domains (e.g., home and family, neighbourhoods, and schools) and over time (Smyth, 2023[22]).

Additionally, the "Care Experiences" programme which examines the lives of children in care and adults who were in care as children, offers significant potential. . The programme includes four key components: enhancing the use of data from the Tusla Case Management system to dynamically track individual pathways of children in care; conducting a cross-sectional study of individuals who left care a decade ago; implementing a 10-year longitudinal study starting when children in care turn 16; and undertaking bespoke studies to provide timely insights into the circumstances of children in care and aftercare.

One challenge is to capitalise on the available information – or that which can be extracted from various data sources – about different cohorts of children to create a database capable of informing decision-making regarding health and social support for children from disadvantaged groups. The BEBOLD – Better Start data platform developed in Australia provides an example of developing information useful for policy planning and implementing better service delivery. The data platform enriches the understanding of the multidimensional risks, vulnerabilities and needs present in the lives of children and their caregivers (Box 3).

Box 3. The BEBOLD – Better Start Initiative

BEBOLD is dedicated to generating Better Evidence (BE) to inform services that produce Better Outcomes (BO), utilizing Linked Data (LD). The goal is to generate better evidence to inform policy and practice, aiming to improve health, wellbeing, and development outcomes. The project is conducted by the University of Adelaide (South Australia), involving an interdisciplinary public health team comprising epidemiologists, biostatisticians, psychologists, and social workers. It operates in close partnership with government and non-government agencies to inform policy and practice, as well as to evaluate innovations in service delivery.

The BEBOLD platform comprises a series of open electronic cohorts[2] that follow 32 birth cohorts (approximately 20 000 births per year) from 1991 onwards. Children not born in South Australia are included in the platform if their families move to South Australia and use services. There are approximately 640 000 children (including around 28 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals) tracked up to their early 30s for those born in 1991. Family files link children and parents to examine intergenerational contact with systems including child protection and Centrelink. BEBOLD stands as one of the richest linked data sources of child and family life-course information in Australia. It encompasses de-identified information regarding child protection contact, pregnancy, early development, well-being in adolescence, education, youth justice, corrections, hospital admissions, emergency presentations, drug and alcohol services, housing and homelessness, community mental health, and Centrelink welfare payments. BEBOLD is continuously updatable, with the addition of new birth cohorts, new calendar years of data, and new data sources.

The linked dataset assists in delineating the target population of a policy, providing insights into the actual size of the population that may require intervention. This helps authorities figure out the intervention coverage required to ensure that all children in need can benefit from it. For instance, the linked dataset was used to develop a public health approach to child maltreatment; to describe priority populations with high prevention potential; and to redesign a model of care.

The dataset makes it possible to explore the relationship between child protection and child health by linking child protection data with births and perinatal statistics, examining the experiences of children born between 1999 and 2005, from birth to age 10. It revealed that 25% of children were reported to child protection services, with 2% experiencing out-of-home care by age 10. Compared to asthma, the most prevalent chronic health condition among Australian children, the cumulative incidence of child protection contact was approximately 2.5 times higher. Analysis of linked data also indicated that increased contact with child protection services correlated with higher rates of developmental vulnerability at age 5. This vulnerability was especially notable among children in out-of-home care but was also present in those only notified to child protection services. These findings highlighted the significant developmental risks faced by children involved in child protection, akin to those experienced by socioeconomically disadvantaged children. The analysis has served as the foundation for government-led community consultations and has been presented in over 40 sessions to government, non-government, and community groups.

Children with high prevention potential were identified using linked data from child protection, perinatal, and births registration records for children born in South Australia between 1999 and 2013, with tracking continuing until the end of 2015. Child “vulnerability” to experiencing poorer outcomes was determined by analysing information on trauma, psychosocial, and health-related risk factors to estimate the levels of risk in each birth cohort in South Australia. Among the estimated 20 000 births per year, approximately 70% are expected to experience none or only one risk factor, indicating a likely need for universal services only. However, 30% are projected to encounter two or more risk factors, suggesting a potential requirement for more intensive support. This research played a direct role in shaping the

development of a new care model. Additionally, through small-area-based adversity profiling, it is guiding resource allocation from areas of lower to higher need based on the absolute number of expected births at varying levels of adversity. Furthermore, it illustrates how data linkage across traditionally separate services can inform the design and delivery of services by providing population-level evidence of the demand for supportive, intensive, and targeted interventions.

Source: (Pilkington et al., 2019[23]), "An innovative linked data platform to improve the wellbeing of children-the South Australian Early Childhood Data Project", Australia's welfare 2019 data insights, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/75c9f692-c72c-438d-b68b-91318f780154/australias-welfare-chapter-8-summary-18sept2019.pdf.aspx.

Improving the profiling of populations needs living in a given local area.

National policies for promoting children's well-being are implemented in territories that are heterogeneous. As the socio-economic profiles and support needs of the population differ, so does the intensity of support needed and the capacity of policies to reach their targets and deliver the expected goals and outcomes. It is therefore necessary for the data to reflect territorial heterogeneity, in order to assess population needs and measure whether the policy measures are reaching the target populations. If they are not, the data should inform on the nature of the specific challenges faced in certain territories and local areas to address children's needs.

In Ireland, Pobal works on behalf of Government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion and development. The role of Pobal is to provide management and support services to 41 programmes, schemes and services in the areas of Social Inclusion and Equality, Inclusive Employment and Enterprise, and Early Years and Young People. One of the tools that Pobal provides to communities and public authorities is Pobal Maps which display information, statistics and details relating to programmes and schemes funded by the Government of Ireland and the Pobal HP Deprivation Index.

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index serves as the primary measure for assessing deprivation across the country, encompassing small areas across multiple censuses conducted in 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2022. This index integrates three dimensions of relative affluence and deprivation: Demographic Profile, Social Class Composition, and Labour Market Situation. Pobal has developed an interactive infographic enabling users to delve into the Pobal HP Deprivation Index and access the underlying data for various geographical regions. Users can select options such as County, Electoral District, or Small Area to explore the index and its associated data. In addition, the Pobal Early Years Map provides a map of the location of over 4000 childcare services (community and private) including contact details. This platform is useful for shedding light on geographical disparities at a fairly fine-grained level, with the dimensions mentioned taken separately. The data made available by this platform are used by various stakeholders and for different purposes, including for budget allocation decisions (Pratschke and Quigley, 2023[24]).

Ensuring user-friendly data access and developing interactive tools for cross-referencing information across various fields and visualising data to highlight relevant insights are crucial for enabling users to integrate this data into their own applications and analysis tools.. Further development of this type of platform may be inspired by the Camden Open Data Portal, of which the aim is facilitating data-driven decision-making processes within the London Camden borough. The platform provides data, tools for displaying, mapping, sharing and downloading data that facilitates access to information for different types of users, including public authorities, researchers, businesses and citizens (Box 4).

Box 4. The Camden Open Data Portal

The Camden Open Data Portal is a cloud-based resource that provides access to a wide range of data about the London Borough of Camden. The platform is specifically designed for use within the public sector, aiming to foster innovation and collaboration. It provides easy access to the latest data for public authorities, researchers, businesses, and community organisations. This accessibility empowers users to use the data effectively, fostering the creation of solutions tailored to addressing local challenges and enhancing overall quality of life. The main features of the platform are the following:

- **Access to Diverse Data**: The platform offers access to a diverse range of datasets covering various aspects of life in the London Borough of Camden, including demographics, housing, transportation, environment, and more.
- **Easy Access and Use**: The platform offers user-friendly tools and interfaces for accessing and using the data, making it accessible to a wide range of users with varying levels of technical expertise.
  - Users can search for specific datasets or filter datasets based on different criteria such as topic, date range, location, and data format. This functionality helps users quickly find relevant data for their needs. For instance, users can leverage the search functionality built into the public data catalogue to learn more about their community, find current information about public programmes and services, and key characteristics of the population residing in the borough.
  - Organisations can also create performance measures to track important metrics or progress towards a goal.
- **Data Visualisation Tools**: Using the visualisation canvas, users can transform data into interactive charts, maps, and tables. The platform provides tools for visualising data in the form of charts, graphs, maps, and other interactive visualizations. These visualizations make it easier for users to understand complex datasets and identify patterns, trends, and insights. These visual elements can be inserted into a story page along with text, video and image content, third party embeds to weave the data into a meaningful narrative that can be shared publicly.
- **Documentation and Tutorials**: The platform provides documentation and tutorials to help users understand how to navigate the platform, access data, use data tools, and interpret the available datasets effectively. This support ensures that users can make the most of the platform's features.
- **API Access**: The platform offers Application Programming Interface (API) access, allowing developers to programmatically retrieve and integrate data into their own applications, websites, or analysis tools. This enables more advanced users to leverage the data in custom ways.
- **Data Download Options**: Users can download datasets in various formats such as CSV, Excel, JSON, or XML, making it convenient to access the data for offline analysis or use in other applications.
- **Feedback Mechanisms**: The platform may include features for users to provide feedback, report issues, or suggest improvements. This helps in continuously refining and enhancing the user experience based on user input.

Incorporated within the data platform, Camden Insights serves as a dashboard designed to assist Voluntary and Community Sector Partners as well as the broader Camden community in comprehending resident needs throughout the borough. This tool enables users to delve into specific areas of interest, reaching down to the Ward or Lower Super Output Area levels, which facilitate more detailed reporting of local statistics in England and Wales. Users have the flexibility to select different types of insights and merge them to uncover intersections, with data presented at both individual citizen and household levels.

Develop the capacity to report on coordinated and interdepartmental action.

Many OECD countries are seeking to implement more integrated policies for children and youth (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023[25]). To achieve this, countries aim to promote joined-up action involving a high degree of coordination between different administrative departments, or even interdepartmental collaboration. In Ireland, Young Ireland, with its emphasis on three Spotlight areas, includes a number of cross-departmental actions to address issues facing children and their families (OECD, 2024[2]). To track such developments, there is a need to capture policy implementation and the impact of coordinated and interdepartmental action, and to develop data accordingly.

Children and families in complex social situations have multiple needs that require the intervention of multiple service providers, whose services and actions are often managed through different programmes and with different administrative partners (Riding et al., 2021[26]). For instance, an interdepartmental action aimed at improving the situation of children with disabilities could encompass improving service delivery, including therapeutic and education services. Coordination between various players or departments is central, and to achieve this, there is a need for access to common information on the range of services available in the area where the families reside. At the level of service delivery, this information is crucial, no less so for the ability to respond quickly to emergency situations. Additionally, this information is necessary to inform longer-term decisions on planning the services offered, allocating the resources required to meet the needs of local populations, as well as to leverage system changes as needed to strengthen policy effectiveness.

At the national level, the development of cross-referenced data on children's access to various services and the characteristics of the populations involved entails matching administrative data and integrating data sources. The potential for such data matching exists in Ireland via two unique identifiers - the Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) and the Individual Health identifier (IHI). As mentioned earlier, data matching has been used successfully by the Central Statistics Office (under the Statistics Act) in collaboration with DCEDIY and Tusla to explore the educational experiences of children in care.

Gathering, analysing, and disseminating data at the local level, where decisions are made regarding coordinating service provision, proves beneficial for connecting with the affected populations. It includes involving them in identifying and implementing solutions to their challenges and contribute to share an understanding of the systemic changes that could be necessary to address needs more effectively. In Canada, several interesting initiatives share the same goal of empowering changes in practices and in support systems through the better use of data, including one initiative led by the Central Alberta Child Advocacy Centre (CACAC) supporting victims of maltreatment, and Kids Help Phone (KHP) providing children with mental health support (Box 5). Both organizations collaborate with various agencies, professionals, and community partners to ensure comprehensive care for children and youth and to address systemic issues related to abuse, trauma, and mental health. CACAC and KHP offer a wide range of coordinated and integrated support services to meet the diverse needs of children and youth, including forensic interviews, medical examinations, therapy, crisis response, and resource referrals.

These two initiatives also share the common practice of using data to guide their decision-making processes and to enhance the effectiveness of their support services for children and youth. By gathering and analysing data from their interactions with children, youth, and families, they identify trends, and risks factors associated with cases of maltreatment and mental health issues respectively. This information is

then used to customise services and engage with stakeholders and communities regarding the needs of the youth population and the necessary support to address those needs. They also use data to shed light on the available resources and gaps in services that exist in certain areas. Both organisations leverage technology, such as cloud-based platforms and data dashboards, to streamline service delivery, enhance data analysis capabilities, and provide insights on support needs and accessible services. Initiatives like the "State of Child Wellbeing" report from the CACAC, along with publicly accessible data dashboards, show the commitment of these organisations to use data insights to engage with communities and stakeholders and develop adequate support based on a shared understanding of issues.

Box 5. Empowering Change for Children and Youth Through Data: Examples from Central Alberta Child Advocacy Centre and Kids Help Phone in Canada

The Central Alberta Child Advocacy Centre (CACA) offers a compelling example of how authorities can effectively use data to tailor support to local needs and drive systemic change. The CACAC is a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting children who have experienced maltreatment or trauma in central Alberta, by providing coordinated and integrated services in a safe, child-friendly environment. They offer a range of services including forensic interviews, medical examinations, trauma assessments, therapy, victim advocacy, and support for families navigating the legal system.

The CACAC collaborates with various agencies such as law enforcement, child protection services, medical professionals, mental health providers, and legal advocates to ensure comprehensive care for each child, and to ensure their needs are met in all domains of well-being. In addition to direct services, the CACAC also focuses on prevention and education initiatives to raise awareness about child abuse and promote strategies for its prevention within the community.

The CACAC develops a data-driven approach to addressing child maltreatment in Alberta, Canada, using the data collected on maltreatment cases to inform decision-making processes at multiple levels. The available data are first employed to assess the risks and proactively deter instances of child maltreatment. This involves analysing statistics to uncover correlations between case numbers and various factors such as housing type, family structure, income level, and proficiency in official languages. Additionally, a risk index is also derived, using integrated data to pinpoint high-risk children for targeted multi-domain interventions. The array of available support is comprehensively outlined through mapping the ecosystem of support provided across different areas, aimed at both preventing child maltreatment and aiding the affected children and families.

The data is also used to leverage systems change, by presenting it in various ways, using different formats for different functions and for reaching diverse audiences. A "State of Child Wellbeing" report is being produced to inform stakeholders and engage with communities. Report insights are used to develop "Data-Driven Community Outreach" for tailored engagement with diverse communities. For example, sharing data on the socio-demographic characteristics of community's district by district, and on the risk factors associated more generally with cases of child maltreatment, is a way of providing access to this information to communities that do not otherwise have it, and initiating a dialogue on how best to meet their needs. An essential role of data insights is to deconstruct myths and misconceptions about child abuse, thereby helping to build trust between the services responsible for providing support and the populations concerned. Insights gleaned from data play a crucial role in fostering agreement on critical issues, thereby enhancing policy effectiveness and potentially exerting influence to drive systemic change. With this goal in mind, efforts are underway to establish a collaborative Data-Sharing Hub, aimed at fostering consensus on strategies required for improving coordinated service delivery.

Kids Help Phone (KHP) is a Canadian organisation that offers mental health support and counselling services to children and youth via phone, text, and online chat, with translation services in 100 different languages. They provide confidential and anonymous assistance on a wide range of issues including mental health, relationships, and bullying, offering a safe space to seek help and support. KHP offers clinically based self-directed tools and activities, health promotion and metal wellness interventions, crisis response services, professional counselling and resource referral in French and English. Specific programmes are also designed and delivered in partnership with population minorities, including First Nation, Métis, Inuit and other indigenous communities, to best meet their needs.

The engagement with children and youth accessing the organisation's services, along with input from trained volunteers, allows KHP to gather data on the issues raised by children and youth and the assistance they require. Using data from over 40 million messages and over 5 million yearly interactions, alongside user and frontline service data, enables comprehensive analysis of the experiences of young individuals who have reached out for assistance. This facilitates the provision of tailored services to users, while also empowering stakeholders, including grassroots organisations and public authorities, to stay informed about real-time developments within their respective provinces. The Aselo platform, a cloud-based, open-source contact centre for helplines, enables young people and professionals to search for resources and support services on a unified system.

Starting from 2020, KHP has introduced KHP Insights, a publicly accessible data dashboard showcasing trends derived from Canada's most extensive mental health dataset, with information by issue (such as anxiety, depression, isolation, bullying, etc.) and by location across Canada. Additionally, Regional Dashboards are furnished to public sector partners in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The dashboard provides access to information by issue and by location. In addition, a dashboard pilot developed for the city of Saskatoon uses data on available mental health services and service referral networks to map them alongside census data, identifying overload points and "local service deserts" – i.e., areas with a high density of youth lacking access to physical services. Although the project is still under development, it provides valuable insights on how data insights on the absence of services relative to the local youth population and the scarcity of referral services can be developed and share to inform policies regarding service needs.

Another KHP initiative currently underway aims to use external information on young people available through news, message boards, and social networks and match it with KHP service users to conduct predictive analysis of trends relating to risks to young people's mental health.

Increase the capacity to measure the effectiveness and impact of child policies.

To assess the impact of policies on child and family outcomes, it's essential to connect data regarding uptake of benefits, services or interventions, with information on child outcomes. Additionally, it's crucial to differentiate between the outcomes of children who are covered by policy measures and those who have not received their benefits. However, the information pertaining to policy coverage and benefit uptake, as well as child and household outcomes, are often provided by separate data sources (administrative data for information on policy reach and uptake, and other administrative sources or survey data for outcomes). Often, as is the case in Ireland, there is little possibility to link these data sources. Administrative datasets used to monitor policy implementation often lack information on household and child outcomes that may be affected. Conversely, datasets or surveys focused on child outcomes frequently do not provide sufficient details about the take up of services and interventions that would for assessing impact. It is often challenging to compare outcomes of those who benefited from certain policy measures against some sort of control group who did not benefit from the measure.

In such a data landscape, using proxy measures for groups of children most likely to be affected by selected policy measures may offer a way to identify beneficiaries of these measures. For instance, child

and family characteristics used as eligibility criteria to target policy measures (such as household income, child age, and levels of area deprivation) can help contrast the trends in outcomes of these children with those not eligible for policy measures, thereby approximating the "influence" of these policies. However, this approach has significant limitations as there is no guarantee that the targeted population has actually taken up the measures they were eligible for. This can lead to incorrect conclusions, particularly in cases of high non-take-up rates, and if the determinants of policy uptake are linked to factors influencing the plausibility and magnitude of a policy's impact (Pomeranz, 2017[27]). Therefore, proxy indicators can indicate a positive correlation between the adoption of certain policy measures and the evolution of child and/or family outcomes, but they do not guarantee capturing a causal relationship, nor do they provide accurate estimates of the exact contribution of policy measures in explaining trends in child outcomes. In response to this limitation, two options are possible:

- The first option is to **include information on policy coverage and uptake more systematically in child and household surveys** by questioning survey respondents, which are primarily dedicated to documenting outcomes. The feasibility of this option varies depending on the type of measure envisaged and the level of knowledge and memory required of the respondent to provide reliable and unbiased information.
- The second option is to **facilitate data matching between different data sources**, including administrative data, and between administrative data and survey data. In this case, the information can be of better quality because it does not depend on the individual's capacity to provide this information.

Matching different data sources provides useful information to monitor the impact of policy measures and programmes administered by different departments and/or that produce several intersecting outcomes. The aim is to examine whether collaborative efforts across various domains contribute to enhancing the well-being of children in each area, and whether they have a stronger impact when support is provided in multiple domains. Additionally, it allows for better documentation of the unintended effects that certain measures have on outcomes not directly targeted by the measures in question – e.g., the negative effect that increases in household income support could have on maternal employment, in contrast with the original objective of lifting families out of poverty.

In the Irish context, the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and Revenue Ireland have used data linking to build a rich picture of the individuals participating in active labour market policies (ALMPs) and their experiences in the labour market. These datasets include recipients of active labour market schemes themselves as well as data on unemployment benefits and claims, earnings and social security contributions. Data on DSP's risk scoring questionnaire, the Probability of Exit (PEX), is available for a sub-set of jobseekers, which provides additional information to look further into for different sub-groups and to assess the extent to which omitted information on individuals may have the potential to bias the conclusions in the central analysis. As the data are limited to those held by DSP, there are limitations on the extent to which the analysis can provide information on broader outcomes, for example on health or take-up of education places (OECD/Department of Social Protection, Ireland/EC-JRC, 2024[28]). The potential of this database for conducting similar counterfactual analysis of measures relating to child poverty could be explored.

Strengthening capacity of impact evaluations to inform the policy cycle

The development of data and indicators is crucial for monitoring policies and responding to the need to account for their implementation and influence on children's outcomes, whether within targeted groups or at a broader population level. Assessing whether policy inputs and activities align with outcomes provides an indication of progress in the right direction and whether policies are on the track to achieve the desired impact. However, while monitoring indicators offer the opportunity to observe correlations, they do not

provide insights into the causal relationships characterising policy impact or the mechanisms through which policies affect outcomes.

Impact evaluations are needed to provide insights into policy effectiveness, impact, and the mediators of policy influence. However, impact studies are costly to carry out in terms of the resources required and the constraints (technical and ethical) to properly evaluate the impact of policy interventions. For this reason, it is necessary to prioritise among the topics and policy measures deserving impact evaluation. Criteria to be considered to make this selection include, for instance, the extent to which interventions are innovative, intended for scaling up, or when there is a need to understand how contextual factors shape policy effectiveness and which factors make a programme transferable to other contexts (Acquah and Thévenon, 2020[29]). Following that perspective, impact evaluations can serve two objectives: lesson-learning and accountability. On one hand, impact evaluations support lesson learning by informing on programme effectiveness, identifying areas for improvement, and informing decision-making by providing data-driven insights about programme development, implementation, and funding. On the other hand, accountability can be supported by providing evidence of programme impact and increasing transparency by allowing stakeholders to have a clearer understanding of effectiveness and impact.

In Ireland, substantial evidence exists regarding the impact of leading parenting support initiatives (OECD, 2024[21]). This evidence demonstrates that evidence-based programmes originating from certain regions in Ireland could certainly be transferred in other regions, yielding positive outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children. The evidence reviewed also underscored that Ireland has good evidence documenting the relationship between children's socio-economic background and the quality of nutrition. Also, while there is evidence that eligibility for free care has a positive impact on the use of general practitioner including for children (Nolan, 2008[30]; Nolan and Layte, 2017[31]), there is no clear evaluations of its impact on child health and developmental outcomes. Such impact evaluations could help getting a greater grasp of the extent to which free GP visits help enhance the health and well-being outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged children (OECD, 2024[21]).

As mentioned earlier, a key issue is assessing the impact of cross-sectoral interventions aimed at addressing the complex needs of the most disadvantaged children and their families. Conducting such impact evaluations is challenging, as it requires comparing the outcomes of children who benefit from joint actions with those who do not. Ideally, to estimate the value added by coordinated action, it would be necessary to compare its effect with scenarios where each action is delivered separately and without coordination, while ensuring that a comparison is made for children with similar characteristics. However, this type of information is rarely available because these situations seldom occur in practice. More likely, however, is a scenario where the impact of integrated services on child outcomes is evaluated by comparing the outcomes of beneficiary children to those of children who do not benefit, though without information on any alternative forms of support the latter children may have received.

A good example of this type of impact evaluation is one that was undertaken of the Sure Start Programmes in England. This particular impact evaluation demonstrates that assessing the impact of integrated services can provide valuable insights into the beneficiary population groups and on mechanisms behind the estimated impact (Box 6) (Carneiro, Cattan and Ridpath, 2024[32]). Conducting impact evaluations of this type is useful for verifying whether cross-sectoral action is achieving the desired impact and for directing cross-sectoral action towards the groups with the greatest potential to benefit from it. However, impact evaluations like these do not address the quality of service integration, which by its very nature can vary (a lot) between sites or programmes.

Service integration often means different things. Integration happens along a continuum, from fragmentation and lack of alignment to unified and coordinated action, reflecting the need to take properly into account the degree of actual integration occurring and the nature of functioning of integrated services. There exists no established measure of integration. It is common practice to measure integration using measures on structural characteristics (e.g., facility adequacy, number and qualification of staff involved),

processes (e.g., continuity of care), and outcomes (including system outcomes (e.g., waiting times) and child outcomes (Kelly et al., 2020[33]).

A small number of quantitative measures of integration exist that provide information that could be used to improve integration quality, particularly at the early stages of integrating services. These measures could be useful for supporting the activities of the new local area child poverty action plans (DCEDIY, 2024[34]) For example, the partnership synergy measure captures the degree to which a partnership's collaborative process successfully combines its participants' perspectives, knowledge, and skills. It builds on the idea that partnership synergy is the primary characteristic of a successful collaborative process. It is a nine-item, 4-point scale designed to measure the extent to which the combined perspectives, knowledge, and skills of the partners strengthen the thinking and actions of the group and the partnership's relationship to the broader community. The measure can help partners identify at an early stage of the process if they are making the most of the collaborative process (Weiss, Anderson and Lasker, 2002[35]). Another useful measure is the human services integration measure, which combines information on the extent, scope and depth of integration. It provides a score measuring the total integration of a service network, ranging from very little to perfect. The scoring can help understand the level of integration among services and pinpoint which services are collaborating and which services are not (Browne et al., 2004[36]).

Box 6. Evaluating the impact of integrated services: the case of the Sure Start Programme

Sure Start, launched in 1999, marked a significant government effort in England to provide comprehensive support to families with children under five. Sure Start centres are local "one-stop shops" that offer various services like health, parenting, early learning, childcare, and employment support to enhance child development and opportunities. Initially targeted at disadvantaged areas, Sure Start evolved into a universal programme over the decade following its introduction. By 2010-11, it received a substantial portion of the early years budget and boasted nearly 3 500 centres nationwide at its peak.

A recent evaluation found evidence of positive short- and medium-term impacts of the programme on educational outcomes. A robust evaluation methodology was used to assess the impact of having had access to a Sure Start centre between ages 0 and 5 on school outcomes, including academic achievement and special educational needs. It looked at variations in impact across different backgrounds and shed some light onto the mechanisms that may have made Sure Start more or less effective. The evaluation drew on administrative education data covering 15 cohorts of children.

Various data to measure impact, focusing primarily on educational outcomes were used, including:

- National Pupil Database (NPD): This comprehensive dataset includes information on all students in England's state schools, covering academic achievements, demographic characteristics, and school attendance records.
- Key Stage Assessments: Standardised test scores from various stages of education, such as Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7), Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11), and Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16), are used to measure academic performance and progress.
- Socio-economic Background Data: Information on students' socio-economic status, including eligibility for free school meals (FSM), is used to understand the context and background of the participants.
- Geographical Information: Data on the location of Sure Start centres and the areas they serve are used to link children's educational outcomes with the availability and use of Sure Start services.

- Census Data: Demographic data from the Census, such as information on family structure, income, and parental education levels, help provide a broader context for the analysis.

The evaluation found that having greater access to Sure Start on children's outcomes, measured as living within 2.5 km of a Sure Start centre, has the following effects:

- Access to a Sure Start centre between the ages of 0 and 5 significantly improved the educational achievement of children, with benefits lasting at least until age 16. These are average impacts across all children living within a short distance (2.5 kilometres) of a Sure Start centre, regardless of whether those families used the centre.
- There are much larger impacts for children from the poorest backgrounds and those from non-white backgrounds. The effects were also six times higher for children eligible for free school meals (an indication of low income) than for those not eligible. Positive effects for children from the poorest backgrounds were spread across white and non-white children. For children not eligible for free school meals, Sure Start only significantly improved attainment amongst children from ethnic minorities.
- Access to a nearby Sure Start centre at an early age increased the likelihood of children being recorded as having a special educational need or disability at age five, but significantly decreased the proportion of children recorded with such need at ages 11 and 16 by 3%. By age 16, the probability of having an Education, Health and Care Plan decreased by 9%.
- Higher benefits were found for children near Centres with extra budget to spend on parental outreach. These centres focused on reaching out to families who were less likely to use SureStart and more likely to benefit from it.
- By 2010, total spending on Sure Start amounted to approximately GBP 2.5 billion in today's currency. The programme's benefits included a reduction in government spending on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities support, offsetting around 8% of its total cost. Moreover, the programme led to improved educational attainment among children, resulting in higher lifetime earnings. For every GBP 1 spent by the government on Sure Start, attending children experienced benefits worth GBP 1.09 solely through improved school outcomes.

Source: Carneiro, Cattan and Ridpath (2024[32]), "The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes", IFS Report R307, Institute for Fiscal Studies, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/SS_NPD_Report.pdf.

While rigorous impact evaluations are essential to determine what works and what doesn't, the budget for conducting such evaluations is not unlimited. Impact evaluations incur significant costs in terms of financial and human resource, manpower, as well as in data collection necessary for thorough evaluation (DCEDIY, 2023[37]). Therefore, it's unlikely that all programmes can be evaluated with equal precision. Prioritisation of measures and programmes for evaluation is essential, considering criteria such as: (i) the breadth of coverage and cost (favouring programmes with broader scope or higher costs), (ii) the anticipated impact on child outcomes (including potential cascading effects on multiple outcome areas), and (iii) the level of uncertainty regarding their beneficial effects for children (especially in cases where ambiguous effects might emerge).

The constraints (and costs) related to the protocol or the complexity of the data matching to be put in place to maximise the chances of identifying causal relationships must be considered when prioritising the envisaged impact evaluations to be carried out. Indeed, identifying causal relationships through impact evaluation of policies is made difficult by the fact that changes in child and youth outcomes are, in fact, a function of a range of mechanisms through which policy interventions can have an impact (as discussed earlier). There are also a number of factors other than policy intervention, such as economic trends, the status of child maturation, and other observable or non-observed characteristics that may drive the

evolution of child outcomes. Ensuring that the measurement of impact is not affected by these factors might require an experimental protocol or data collection that can be cumbersome, complex, costly, or even impossible to carry out. Assessing the feasibility of this approach and its cost compared to the expected benefits must be taken into account when deciding whether or not to conduct an impact evaluation.

3. Monitoring Young Ireland, the national policy framework for children

Steering a strategy or policy framework such as Young Ireland involves “formative evaluation” to inform policy planning and set up priorities (Box 1) (DCYA, 2019[8]). This requires the development of indicators on the situation of children that go well beyond the indicators needed to track the implementation of a policy and its impact. This means relying, as far as possible, on indicators that provide information on the well-being of children at the level of the general population, not just at the level of the population covered by programme or policy measures. It is important to understand that the high-level indicators discussed here, based on global population data, differ from those needed to monitor policies. The data these high-level indicators rely on may not always encompass a representative sample of the groups impacted by policies. Although these indicators are not specifically designed to measure the effect of policies on child outcomes, some of them may still be valuable for capturing the longer-term impact of all measures on the overall situation of children, or for specific population sub-groups.

For instance, while it may not be feasible to use the child poverty rate in the general population to assess the effect of a particular measure, which often only affect a minority of children, it can still serve as an indicator of the broader impact of all existing measures aimed at reducing poverty rates. At this stage, the child poverty rate functions more as an indicator of whether all measures – collectively – are effective in reducing child poverty and whether child poverty remains a persistent challenge.

Child well-being indicator sets serve as frameworks for organising policy development, offering policymakers and key stakeholders a comprehensive view of children's lives and highlighting key challenges (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023[25]). Additionally, these indicator sets help in raising awareness of child-related issues and fostering a shared understanding of child well-being. They provide governments with essential knowledge on child well-being to establish coherent goals and policy priorities, facilitating strategic alignment and cooperation across departments and agencies.

The Children and Young People’s Indicator Set gives a general picture of how children and young people are doing across the Five National Outcomes (DCEDIY, 2023[38]). The indicator set aims to inform decision-making by helping to track progress towards outcomes, assisting in identifying trends, contributing to priority setting or resetting, informing policy formulation and service provision and provide for international comparisons, where possible.

This section explores ways to enhance the role of indicators in identifying and addressing key challenges, and how to use this information to guide policies under Young Ireland. It first addresses how information on child poverty can be improved to ensure that policies are designed in a way that aligns with trends and identifiable challenges. It then proposes a way of organising the information on child well-being outcomes that clarifies the status of the various indicators and highlights the need to disaggregate the information by children’s personal or socioeconomic characteristics to better inform on inequalities.

Enriching the set of indicators to monitor child poverty

Tracking trends in child poverty and its relationships with other child outcomes is key to adjusting policy targets to evolving challenges. This requires child poverty indicators that can identify which groups of children are most at risk, whether the situation of the most vulnerable is improving or worsening, and information on the multidimensional nature of poverty. It also requires better identification of the challenges posed by the fast-evolving environment to child poverty and the cost of raising children.

Understanding which groups of children to prioritise in the action to combat poverty requires indicators to identify how the risk of poverty varies among different groups of children, distinguished according to their personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, or the presence of a disability) or family and social characteristics (e.g., family background, place of residence) (OECD, 2024[21]).

To this end, it is important, where possible, to disaggregate child poverty indicators (including indicators on income poverty, enforced deprivation and consistent poverty) by age groups. In the Irish context, evidence from 2018 suggests that the poverty rate is significantly higher for children in the 6-11 and 12-17 age groups than for the 0-5 age group (Byrne, 2020[39]). Providing information by family status (e.g. whether children are living in two-parent or single parent families), migration background or parental education and health status could also be relevant as lone parenthood, parents being from ethnic minority backgrounds, low levels of maternal education, parents with a disability and larger family size are more frequently exposed to poverty (Maître, Russell and Smyth, 2021[40])). Moreover, it is important to collect information on exposure to poverty of children not living in permanent private households and for whom information is not collected in household surveys. The inclusion of an indicator on income poverty before and after housing costs would help inform a more accurate picture of child poverty risk due to the burden of high housing costs for low-income households (Byrne, 2020[39]).

The inclusion of an “anchored” child poverty rate would enable the assessment of whether the proportion of poor children is decreasing over time after the adoption of policy measures for low-income families. An indicator on persistent poverty would also enable the assessment of the need to strengthen action to help children cope with long-term exposure to poverty compared to those experiencing more episodic poverty.

Information on child poverty rates can also be used to better identify where action is most needed. For example, it is useful to provide information on exposure to poverty according to employment status (e.g., an increase in the risk of poverty for employed individuals suggests the need for aid targeting the employed). Additionally, examining child poverty rates before or after certain expenditures are taken into account can help identify where it is appropriate to prioritise support. For instance, an indicator on child poverty rate after housing costs would provide a more accurate information on the proportion of children at risk of poverty and inform on the need to strengthen support to cover housing costs. The same could apply when considering the cost of food, childcare and education, or transport.

Finally, it is important to include information on child-specific forms of deprivation, even if this information is not available on an annual basis. As of 2021, The EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) collects this type of information every three years in an ad hoc child deprivation module[3]. This information documents children’s access to basic goods and services. Since this information does not completely overlap with income poverty, it is useful for identifying priority areas of support in addition to income support. According to EU-SILC latest data, in Ireland, just under 12% of children experience material deprivation (OECD, 2024[16]).

The aim of developing complementary poverty indicators is to provide a better understanding of trends, thereby facilitating the definition of action targets. However, this endeavour must not result in a proliferation of indicators that could obscure the objectives to be reached. To this end, legislation in New Zealand establishes a balanced suite of indicators to measure and report on child poverty. Four primary indicators of poverty and hardship track progress towards the targets, while six supplementary measures enable international comparison and offer a comprehensive view of children's exposure to poverty (Box 7).

Moreover, short-term objectives, reviewed every three years, complement long-term objectives, allowing for realistic adjustments in line with observed trends.

Box 7. Child Poverty measures, targets and indicators in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the legislation establishes a balanced suite of measures to measure and report on child poverty. The measures will track progress towards the targets, allow some international comparison, and provide a good picture of the impact of policy decisions on the lives of children.

There are four primary measures of poverty and hardship for which the Government must set targets:

- Low income before housing costs (below 50% of median income, moving line)
- Low income after housing costs (below 50% of median income, fixed line)
- A measure of material hardship (reflecting the proportion of children living in households with hardship rates below a standard threshold)
- A measure of poverty persistence (currently being developed, reflecting the proportion of children living in households experiencing poverty over several years, based on at least one of the measures above).

In addition to the primary indicators, the Act outlines six supplementary measures. These measures serve two key purposes: enabling further international comparison and monitoring trends across varying levels of severity. The six measures are as follows:

- Proportion of children in low-income families: Based on a poverty line set at 50% of median equivalised disposable household income after housing costs (AHC) for the financial year.
- Measures of low income before and after housing costs: Based on an income threshold set at 60% of median equivalised disposable household income.
- Measures of low income before and after housing costs: Based on a poverty line set at 40% of median equivalised disposable household income after housing costs for the financial year.
- Measure of severe material hardship.
- Measure of "low income and hardship": Conceptually similar to the definition of consistent poverty in Ireland, this measure assesses the proportion of children in households with less than 60% of median equivalised disposable household income after housing costs for the financial year and experiencing material hardship.

The Act requires the Government to set and review targets for child poverty reduction based on the primary measures. The Act requires 10-year targets to be set, as well as 3-year intermediate targets that support the 10-year long-term targets.

The Government officially set its long-term targets for the three primary measures for which data is available, along with the first three-year targets (for 2018/19 to 2020/21). The second set of three-year targets (for 2021/22 to 2023/24) was set in June 2021.

The longer-term targets seek to at least halve child poverty within ten years. By 2027/28, the Government aims to reduce the proportion of children in:

- low-income households on the before housing costs primary measure from 16.5 percent of children to 5 percent – a reduction of around 120 000 children.
- low-income households on the after housing costs primary measure from 22.8 percent of children to 10 percent – a reduction of around 130 000 children.

- material hardship from 13.3 percent of children to 6 percent – a reduction of around 80 000 children.

The 2021 set of three-year intermediate targets states that by 2023/24, the Government aims to reduce the proportion of children in poverty.

- low-income households on the before-housing-costs measure to 10 percent
- low-income households on the after-housing costs measure to 15 percent
- material hardship to 9 percent.

Source: Child Poverty measures, targets and indicators

Matching the fast-changing context with "real-time" information on families' economic and financial vulnerability

To tackle child poverty, policy measures need to be responsive to issues induced by our fast-changing economic and social contexts. In recent years, families, like other households, have experienced the impact of high inflation on living standards. One of the challenges for policy implementation is the ability to swiftly adapt support to changes in constraints faced by families, ideally in real time. This underscores the importance of data timeliness and the need to collect information that best captures the heterogeneity of such changes, their impact on families' financial vulnerability and ability to meet children's needs.

Income support needs to be responsive and adjusted to cope with shocks that can happen within a short period of time and affect families' exposure to poverty and economic vulnerability. However, traditional poverty measures based on households' living conditions or budget surveys do not always provide the information needed to understand how family living standards are impacted by such shocks, such as the recent cost of living crisis experienced in Europe. Studies carried out in France have suggested that the impact of inflation has been very heterogeneous across households, in a way that is not fully captured by characteristics such as family types, residence area, or household income. Instead, factors such as energy consumption and household composition appear to be stronger predictors of the effect of inflation on household living standards (Jaravel, Méjean and Ragot, 2023[41]; HCFEA, 2023[42]). In Ireland, energy costs were the largest contributor to the estimated inflation rate for most households (e.g., the lowest income decile and rural households) in 2023, while rent was the largest contribution for households privately renting (CSO, 2023[43]).

Household budget surveys are one potential source for documenting family economic and financial vulnerability. Up until recently, these surveys were only carried out every four or five years, which did not qualify them as timely data sources to assess the impact of shocks like inflation on families' economic situation and to inform policy adjustments. Another option is to rely on the potential offered by other data sources, such as bank data or other sorts of private sector data that can inform on household expenditure patterns[4]. These data can be particularly useful due to the 'real-time' information they provide in a context where inflation is not only high but also with determinants that vary a lot throughout a period (Levy, 2023[44]). One challenge in using these novel data sources is their ability to represent vulnerable populations without bias, and to link them to other data sources with information on family characteristics and background. While such data linking may be technically feasible, obstacles may arise from data protection concerns or negative public perceptions regarding the potential use of personal data.

Uncovering what drives the cost of raising children

Exploring the components of the cost of raising children for families and the factors driving its evolution can provide valuable insights for shaping transfer policies targeting families. Family structure and household size are significant determinants of the cost of children and the risk of falling into poverty. For example, large families and single-parent households typically have higher poverty rates compared to others across all OECD countries. Moreover, certain shifts in family behaviours can heighten the risk of poverty for specific family categories.

Non-traditional family forms are becoming more prevalent in OECD countries, following changing marriage and divorce patterns, and more diverse family living arrangements of households (Miho and Thévenon, 2020[45]). Most importantly, the share of single-parent households in the total number of households is rising and a growing proportion of parents has a dependent child outside of their household. Some children also share time between two households. Against this backdrop, some studies suggest that single parents face higher additional costs of raising a child than parents in couple households, and that parents with children living (at least partly) in another household bear some "hidden" burden on their living costs (Pinel, Schweitzer and Virot, 2023[46]; Martin and Périvier, 2018[47]). In addition to alimony payments, parents may still spend money on consumption related to their child.

There is also some evidence that the cost of children is age dependent. Research into parental expenditures suggests that investments during the early years have increased. At the same time, children tend to stay with their parents for longer, which can push up the relative cost of older children. The cost of children also rises with age more steeply in Ireland than in many other European countries (OECD, forthcoming[48]).

In Ireland, as is the case in several other European countries and the United States, families with more children spend a larger share of their household budget on food, transport, and housing, while allocating relatively less to leisure and social activities (OECD, forthcoming[48]; Lino et al., 2017[49]). Moreover, higher-income families spend significantly more overall than their low-income counterparts. Evidence of significant economies of scale with an increasing number of children is limited. In Ireland, the second child tends to cost relatively less than the first, but the third does not result in further cost reductions (OECD, forthcoming[48]). Self-reported data on the ability to make ends meet indicates that the first child is strongly associated with an increased perception of financial strain, compared to subsequent children. In Ireland, there is a modest decrease in the perception of financial strain in two parent families with each subsequent child. However, the same is not true for lone parents. Lone parents perceive high levels of financial strain in raising children, that is higher when there is two children compared to one, and far exceeds actual expenditure on children. Though the same rings true for lone parents in a few other EU OECD countries, the gap between actual expenditure and self-reported economic strain in Ireland is the largest. This finding highlights a potential disconnect between household spending patterns and the financial difficulties families face (OECD, forthcoming[48]).

To effectively design support for families with children and determine where to target it, it is essential to continue monitoring the cost of children. Household budget data can be used to analyse expenditure patterns, identifying which items vary with family size, the age of children, and potentially family living arrangements (OECD, forthcoming[48]). Building on the OECD work outlined above, further research could explore areas where spending differences between low- and high-income families are particularly pronounced and assess whether low-income families have the capacity to meet children's basic needs. For example, in the United States, spending gaps between high-income and low-income families with young children were found to stem equally from increased expenditures on centre-based care for preschool-age children and enrichment goods and activities among high-income families (Kornrich, 2016[50]). Understanding the sources of these spending gaps is essential to ensure that children from low-income families are not deprived of goods and services critical to their well-being and development and to mitigate inequalities between children of different socio-economic backgrounds. Supplementing this

analysis with data on self-reported ability to make ends meet can also provide deeper insights into how the presence of children impacts economic concerns and help assess whether there are differences by family type, for example, single-parent households.

Clarifying the conceptual measurement framework behind the selection of indicators

Child well-being indicators, such as those developed to inform Young Ireland policy framework are useful in assisting agenda setting and policy formulation by identifying challenges to children's well-being emerging from the data. Such indicators provide a kind of ex-ante assessment of children's situation as they help to identify unmet needs, the nature of problems facing, and which groups of children are most vulnerable or exposed to certain types of risks or deprivations.

Ireland is no exception in this area, as around half of OECD countries have a child well-being indicator set or measurement initiative (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023[25]). However, only a few countries have such indicators attached to the development of integrated policy plans for child well-being. Seven countries and regions – including Ireland with Australia, Helsinki (Finland), Ireland, New Zealand, Valencia (Spain), Scotland (UK), and the United States – have established indicator sets to track child outcomes. Colombia has an indicator set integrated into its early childhood plan, offering administrative data on service access. Iceland's indicator set assists governmental and municipal prioritisation, funding decisions, and policy development. Austria utilises headline indicators to monitor progress toward achieving its integrated plan goals, focusing on trends in health behaviours and service enhancements. Chile's indicator set is centred on child rights. It is structured around four axes (survival, development, protection, and participation), with the largest indicator gaps remaining in measuring participation.

New Zealand has established a multi-tiered set of indicators to meet reporting obligations and monitor children's well-being more generally. The advantage of this structure is that it distinguishes between indicators on which policies are expected to have a direct impact (targets) or an indirect impact (Child Poverty Related Indicators), and indicators that provide more detailed information on the state of children's well-being in relation to the six high-level well-being outcomes outlined in the child well-being and youth strategy. The development of Child Poverty Related Indicators is tied to the requirement of regular reporting mandated by law to ensure transparency and accountability. These reports consist of an annual report on the child poverty indicators outlined in Box 7, a report each Budget day regarding progress toward the targets and how the Budget will reduce child poverty, and an annual Government report on child poverty related indicators, which encompasses a set of indicators related to the broader causes and consequences of child poverty (Box 8). At a more general level, a set of child outcome indicators has been designed to document the six areas covered by the child and youth well-being strategy, including whether children are loved, safe and nurtured, have what they need, are happy and healthy, are learning and developing, feel accepted, respected and connected, and are involved and empowered (Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet, 2021[51]).

Box 8. Child Poverty Related Indicators in New Zealand

The legislation requires the Government to report annually on one or more 'child poverty related indicators' or 'CPRIs'. These are measures related to the broader causes and consequences of child poverty, and/or outcomes with a clear link to child poverty. The Act requires that the CPRIs be reviewed every three years.

The Government has identified its CPRIs, which are:

- housing affordability – as measured by the percentage of children and young people (ages 0-17) living in households in the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution who spend more than 30 percent of their disposable income on housing.
- housing quality – as measured by the percentage of children and young people (ages 0-17) living in households with a major problem with dampness or mould.
- food insecurity – as measured by the percentage of children (ages 0-15) living in households reporting food runs out often or sometimes.
- regular school attendance – as measured by the percentage of children and young people (ages 6-16) who are regularly attending school.
- avoidable hospitalisations – as measured by the rate of children (ages 0-15) hospitalised for potentially avoidable illnesses.

Source: Child Poverty measures, targets and indicators.

The conceptualisation and organisation of information on child well-being outcomes, as well as the risk and protective factors arising from children's environments, are crucial for effectively communicating the importance of developing indicators and ensuring that their meaning is well understood by various stakeholders. It is also essential in order to identify gaps and prioritise data collection on dimensions that are essential to improve child well-being, for which either no data are available or the available data do not adequately capture outcomes or risk and protective factors. By developing such a conceptual framework, the aim is to systematise the search for the main risk and protective factors existing in or provided by the various contexts in which children spend time, mainly the family, school, and children's neighbourhood and community environments.

Very few initiatives explicitly outline the 'model' of children's development underlying the selection of well-being indicators in different dimensions. OECD (2021[52]) suggests such a model in a work that seeks to make the case for what needs to be measured through indicators. The wheel shown in Figure 2 summarises the underlying model – consistent with the Bronfenbrenner's "ecological" approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1989[53]).

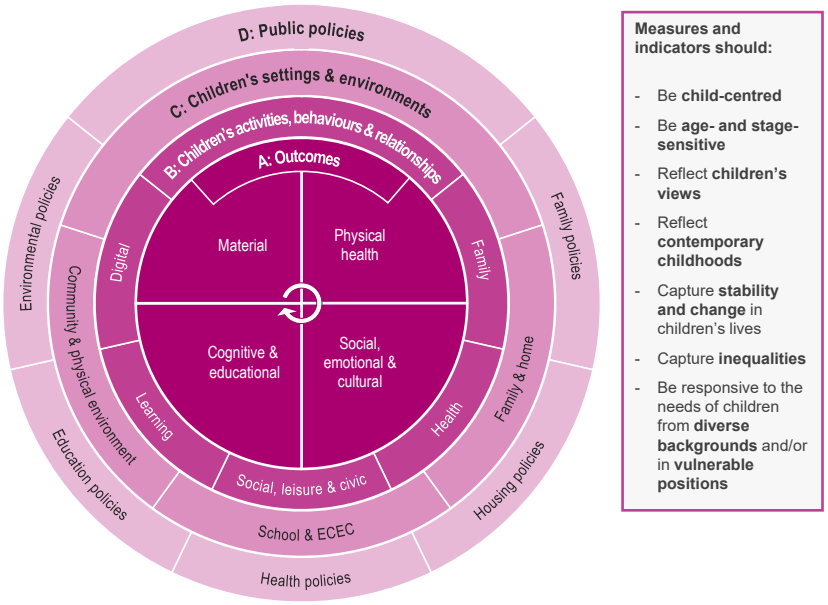
This multi-tiered framework acknowledges the diverse array of influences shaping child well-being, while highlighting those that play the most immediate role or are more readily measurable. While a broader set of relevant economic and societal factors may impact child well-being outcomes, they are not represented here due to their more distal and loosely documented connection to child outcomes. It identifies the major domains of well-being outcomes and their determinants linked to the different environments in which children grow (family, school, community, digital, etc.), the activities, the relationships and behaviours they develop, which may be protective or at risk. The idea, then, is to have a system of indicators for monitoring children's well-being that provide information about their results, and also about the protective or risk factors that can be identified at population level. Some of the indicators in the Children and Young People's (CYP) indicator set fall into this category. For example, in domain of health, the information gathered

includes data on risky health behaviours (such as the use of tobacco, drugs, psychoactive substances) and on protective factors (e.g. the uptake of immunisation).

The measurement framework also emphasises certain aspects that the indicators can seek to capture, such as how children's needs, desires, and capabilities evolve throughout childhood and matter for their future well-being and their cognitive, emotional and social development. Indicators are also required to be age-sensitive, and to include information on children's perspectives, thoughts, opinions, and viewpoints into all aspects of child well-being measurement.

When examining and discussing the indicators used to monitor Young Ireland, it could be beneficial to assess their status using a conceptual measurement framework. This approach would help ensure that everyone understands the significance of the selected indicators and their role within the broader context.

Figure 2. The OECD Child Well-being Measurement Framework



Source: OECD (2021[52]), *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e82fded1-en.

References

Acquah, D. and O. Thévenon (2020), "Delivering evidence based services for all vulnerable families", *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 243, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1bb808f2-en. [29]

Bonnet, O. et al. (2023), "Comment les automobilistes ajustent leur consommation de carburant aux variations de prix à court terme", *INSEE Analyses*, https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/7645853 (accessed on 12 April 2024). [55]

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989), "Ecological systems theory", in Vasta, R. (ed.), *Annals of Child Development*, Greenwich, CT:JAI. [53]

Browne, G. et al. (2004), "Conceptualizing and validating the human services integration measure", *International Journal of Integrated Care*, Vol. 4/2, https://doi.org/10.5334/ijic.98. [36]

Byrne, D. (2020), *Income, Poverty and Deprivation among Children: A Statisical Baseline Analysis*, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Dublin. [39]

Carneiro, P., S. Cattan and N. Ridpath (2024), "The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes", No. IFS Report R307, Institute for Fiscal Studies, London, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/SS_NPD_Report.pdf (accessed on 23 April 2024). [32]

Cavallo, A. (2020), "Inflation with COVID Consumption Baskets", No. 27352, National Bureau of Economic Research, http://www.nber.org/papers/w27352 (accessed on 12 April 2024). [54]

CSO (2023), *Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018 - 2023*, https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/fp/fp-eaacc/educationalattendanceandattainmentofchildrenincare2018-2023/. [5]

CSO (2023), *Estimate Inflation by Household Characteristics March 2023*, https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/fp/fp-eihc/estimatedinflationbyhouseholdcharacteristicsmarch2023/. [43]

DCEDIY (2024), *Minister announces funding for Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans*. [34]

DCEDIY (2023), *Children and Young People's Indicator Set*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/03f4b-children-and-young-peoples-indicator-set/ (accessed on 12 April 2024). [38]

DCEDIY (2023), *Managing Evaluation Challenges*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. [37]

DCEDIY (2023), *Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/80ac4-young-ireland-the-national-policy-framework-for-children-and-young-people-0-24-2023-2028/ (accessed on 12 April 2024). [1]

DCEDIY (2021), *Frameworks for Policy, Planning and Evaluation*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. [7]

DCYA (2019), "Evaluating Government-Funded Human Services", Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Dublin, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/eb5da-evaluating-government-funded-human-services-evidence-into-policy-guidance-note-3/ (accessed on 28 April 2024). [8]

Department of Public Expenditure (2019), *Public Service Data Strategy*, Department of Public Expenditure, Dublin, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1d6bc7-public-service-data-strategy-2019-2023/ (accessed on 8 March 2024). [20]

Department of Taoiseach (2023), *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/573a7-the-child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office-programme-plan/ (accessed on 8 March 2024). [4]

Department of the Prime Minister & Cabinet (2021), *Child and Youth Wellbeing - Indicators - Ngā tohu*, https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/measuring-success/indicators (accessed on 14 May 2024). [51]

Dirwan, G. and O. Thévenon (2023), "Integrated policy making for child well-being: Common approaches and challenges ahead"*, OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities*, No. 16, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1a5202af-en. [25]

Fagan, A. et al. (2019), "Scaling up Evidence-Based Interventions in US Public Systems to Prevent Behavioral Health Problems: Challenges and Opportunities", *Prevention Science 2019 20:8*, Vol. 20/8, pp. 1147-1168, https://doi.org/10.1007/S11121-019-01048-8. [10]

Gottfredson, D. et al. (2015), "Standards of Evidence for Efficacy, Effectiveness, and Scale-up Research in Prevention Science: Next Generation", *Prevention Science*, Vol. 16/7, pp. 893-926, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0555-x. [11]

Government of Scotland (2023), *Child poverty monitoring and evaluation- framework for policy evaluations*, Tackling Child Poverty and Social Justice Network, Edinborough. [14]

Gupta, S. (2021), *Failed to Scale: Embracing the Challenge of Scaling in Early Childhood*, Artefactual Field Experiments. [13]

HCFEA (2023), *Le pouvoir d'achat des familles face au choc d'inflation*, Haut Conseil à l'Enfance, la Famille et l'Âge, https://www.hcfea.fr/spip.php?rubrique11 (accessed on 8 March 2024). [42]

Heikkila, T. and A. Gerlak (2013), "Building a Conceptual Approach to Collective Learning: Lessons for Public Policy Scholars", *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41/3, pp. 484-512, https://doi.org/10.1111/PSJ.12026. [6]

Innovation Network (2005), *Logic Model Workbook*, Innovation Network: Transforming Evaluation for Social Change., http://www.innonet.org•info@innonet.org (accessed on 26 July 2024). [9]

Jaravel, X., I. Méjean and X. Ragot (2023), *Les politiques publiques au défi de l'inflation*, Conseil d'Analyse Economique, https://www.cae-eco.fr/les-politiques-publiques-au-defi-du-retour-de-linflation (accessed on 8 March 2024). [41]

Kelly, L. et al. (2020), "Measures for the integration of health and social care services for long-term health conditions: a systematic review of reviews", *BMC Health Services Research*, Vol. 20/1, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-020-05206-5. [33]

Kornrich, S. (2016), "Inequalities in Parental Spending on Young Children", *AERA Open*, Vol. 2/2, p. 233285841664418, https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858416644180. [50]

Levy, H. (2023), "Nowcasting and provisional estimates of income inequality using microsimulation techniques", *OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities*, No. 12, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c0b88e7f-en. [44]

Lino, M. et al. (2017), *Expenditures on Children by Families, 2015*, United States Department of Agriculture, http://www.cnpp.usda.gov (accessed on 13 October 2020). [49]

Lowe, T. (2023), *The role of public service in child poverty: Doing public management differently*, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/532ab-one-goal-many-paths-first-meeting-of-the-cross-government-network-on-child-poverty-and-well-being/ (accessed on 7 March 2024). [19]

Maître, B., H. Russell and E. Smyth (2021), *The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey*, Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, Ireland, https://doi.org/10.26504/RS121. [40]

Martin, H. and H. Périvier (2018), "Equivalence scales challenged by new family configurations", *Revue economique*, Vol. 69/2, pp. 303-334, https://doi.org/10.3917/RECO.PR2.0114. [47]

Miho, A. and O. Thévenon (2020), "Treating all children equally?: Why policies should adapt to evolving family living arrangements", *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 240, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/83307d97-en. [45]

Nolan, A. (2008), "Evaluating the impact of eligibility for free care on the use of general practitioner (GP) services: a difference-in-difference matching approach", *Social science & medicine (1982)*, Vol. 67/7, pp. 1164-1172, https://doi.org/10.1016/J.SOCSCIMED.2008.06.021. [30]

Nolan, A. and R. Layte (2017), "The impact of transitions in insurance coverage on GP visiting among children in Ireland", *Social science & medicine (1982)*, Vol. 180, pp. 94-100, https://doi.org/10.1016/J.SOCSCIMED.2017.03.026. [31]

OECD (2024), "Analysing child and youth outcomes in Ireland from a comparative perspective", in *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/12f4dfb2-en. [16]

OECD (2024), "Are policies succeeding in reducing child poverty? A review of evidence", in *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/12f4dfb2-en. [21]

OECD (2024), *Monitoring and Evaluation of Child and Youth Policies and Outcomes in Ireland*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/2bd86a9d-en. [3]

OECD (2024), *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/12f4dfb2-en. [2]

OECD (2021), *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e82fded1-en. [52]

OECD (2002), *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management*, OECD, https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/glossaryofkeytermsinevaluationandresultsbasedmanagement.htm (accessed on 3 July 2023). [12]

OECD (forthcoming), “Parenting on a Budget: The Cost of Raising Children in Changing Family Configurations and its Policy Implications”, OECD, Paris. [48]

OECD/Department of Social Protection, Ireland/EC-JRC (2024), *Impact Evaluation of Ireland’s Active Labour Market Policies, Connecting People with Jobs*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/ec67dff2-en. [28]

Pilkington, R. et al. (2019), *An innovative linked data platform to improve the wellbeing of children-the South Australian Early Childhood Data Project*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Australia’s welfare 2019 data insights, https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/75c9f692-c72c-438d-b68b-91318f780154/australias-welfare-chapter-8-summary-18sept2019.pdf.aspx (accessed on 12 April 2024). [23]

Pinel, L., C. Schweitzer and P. Virot (2023), *Comment mieux prendre en compte la diversité des familles dans les échelles d’équivalence ? - Une analyse du coût de l’enfant à travers la consommation et le niveau de vie ressenti des familles, d’après l’enquête Budget de famille 2017*, Direction de la Recherche, des Etudes, de l’Evaluation et des Statistiques - Ministère des Affaires Sociales, https://drees.solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/publications-communique-de-presse/les-dossiers-de-la-drees/comment-mieux-prendre-en-compte-la (accessed on 8 March 2024). [46]

Pomeranz, D. (2017), “Impact Evaluation Methods in Public Economics: A Brief Introduction to Randomized Evaluations and Comparison with Other Methods”, *Public Finance Review*, Vol. 45/1, pp. 10-43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1091142115614392. [27]

Pratschke, J. and M. Quigley (2023), *Pobal HP Deprivation Index 2022*. [24]

Riding, S. et al. (2021), “Looking beyond COVID-19: Strengthening family support services across the OECD”*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 260, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/86738ab2-en. [26]

Roddy, Á. (2021), “Income and conversion handicaps: estimating the impact of child chronic illness/disability on family income and the extra cost of child chronic illness/child disability in Ireland using a standard of living approach”, *The European Journal of Health Economics*, Vol. 23/3, pp. 467-483, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10198-021-01371-4. [17]

Shahat, A. and G. Greco (2021), “The Economic Costs of Childhood Disability: A Literature Review”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 18/7, p. 3531, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073531. [18]

Smyth, E. (2023), *The dynamics of poverty: understanding the impact on child outcomes*, Department of the Taoiseach, Dublin. [22]

Thévenon, O. et al. (2018), “Child poverty in the OECD: Trends, determinants and policies to tackle it”*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 218, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c69de229-en. [15]

Weiss, E., R. Anderson and R. Lasker (2002), “Making the Most of Collaboration: Exploring the Relationship Between Partnership Synergy and Partnership Functioning”, *Health Education & Behavior*, Vol. 29/6, pp. 683-698, https://doi.org/10.1177/109019802237938. [35]

Notes

[1] There are numerous possible obstacles to implementing policies and measures, arising either from challenges specific to policy deployment or from external influences, such as broader economic and political conditions that may change over the period of policy implementation.

[2] Electronic cohorts typically refer to groups of individuals whose health data and other relevant information are collected and stored electronically. These cohorts are often created from existing electronic health records, administrative databases, or other digital sources. Researchers can then use these electronic cohorts to study various aspects of health, disease, treatments, and outcomes on a large scale. Electronic cohorts offer several advantages over traditional cohort studies, such as reduced costs and time, easier access to data, and the ability to follow participants over long periods. They are particularly valuable in epidemiological and health services research, where they can provide insights into disease trends, treatment effectiveness, and healthcare utilisation patterns. Additionally, electronic cohorts can facilitate the rapid identification of research participants for clinical trials and other studies.

[3] More information here: Modules - Income and living conditions - Eurostat.

[4] For example, bank data can be used to estimate the intensity of variability in consumer price indices during periods of crisis (Cavallo, 2020[54]), or the sensitivity of fuel demand to prices (Bonnet et al., 2023[55]).