

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Statement of Strategy 2021-2023
A Submission by the Citizens Information Board

Introduction and context

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of its *Statement of Strategy 2021-2023*. The Department now has a very wide ranging role with many strands all of which will evidently need to be addressed in the new Strategy. It is clear that the new responsibilities assigned to the Department, coupled with its crucially important functions relating to children and young people, will present particular challenges during the difficult Covid-19 period and afterwards. All of the target groups included in the new Department are affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the pandemic. The policy decisions already taken by Government to address the multi-faceted support needs of the population as a whole will have implications for the Department's strategic focus as will the commitments in the Programme for Government. The additional challenges will have to be addressed while at the same time ensuring that the Department's responsibilities in relation to children and young people continue to be reflected strongly in its work and strategic focus.

In relation to children and young people, the core strategic goals set out in the previous Statement of Strategy (2016-2019) remain relevant. Of particular importance is continuing to look at policies across Government through the lens of children and young people and promoting a cross-Government approach to their well-being.

The new functions assigned to the Department (gender equality, disability policy, migrant integration policy, Traveller and Roma inclusion policy, LGBTI+ inclusion policy, work-life balance and supports for working parents and caring responsibility) will clearly present a totally new strategic landscape. This will require the Department to adopt a strong and proactive integrative role across a wide range of policy domains.

The need to ensure that all citizens remain socially engaged through the availability of strong support programmes will be especially important for young people and children, people with disabilities and/or experiencing mental health difficulties, migrants (in particular those in direct provision) and ethnic minorities. The principles of empowerment and voice as these relate to all the groups under the aegis of the Department will need to be reflected in the new Statement of Strategy.

CIB delivery services – the national network of Citizens Information Services (CISs), the Citizens Information Phone Service (CIPS), the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), National Advocacy Service for people with disabilities (NAS) and the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) – have significant engagement with citizens through their information, advice and advocacy roles.¹ The engagement with clients typically involves multiple information requests, requests for advice/assistance and advocacy supports (CISs and CIPS), rescheduling personal debt with multiple lenders (MABS) and complex interventions on behalf of people with disabilities (NAS & SLIS). The availability (or lack thereof) of quality public services and supports is a key concern for many of the people who use CIB services, particularly people with disabilities, lone parents and those in precarious work situations and younger people trying to engage with the labour force.

Feedback from CISs and CIPS, based on the experience of dealing with queries from the public, provides an insight into some of the systemic difficulties experienced by people in respect of staying out of poverty, finding meaningful work and avoiding homelessness. During 2020, as might be expected, many of the issues highlighted by CIB services related to Covid-19, in particular, job losses, reduced income, child care issues, increasing debt problems and mental health difficulties associated with trying to cope with the fall-out from Covid-19. CIB has in various submissions² over the years regularly highlighted issues in relation to children and young people, people with disabilities, migrants and Travellers and other ethnic minorities.

Implications of Programme for Government for Strategy

The Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 will be required to give effect to Programme for Government commitments as well as reflect the priorities set out in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the , *National Disability Inclusion Strategy*, the *Migrant Integration Strategy* and the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*. The implementation of the Assisted Decision-making (Capacity) Act 2015 will have implications for the Department in relation to the provision of decision-making supports to people with different levels of decision-making capacity. Also, centrally relevant to the new Strategy will be the outcomes and findings of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality.

Priorities in the Programme for Government relevant to the Department include:

- Publish and implement a successor to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*
- Develop mechanisms through a new youth strategy for the voice and views of young people
- Establish an agency, Childcare Ireland, to assist in the expansion of high-quality childcare to be part of decision-making at community, county and national levels

¹ CISs dealt with over half a million clients and over 1 million queries in 2019; CIPS had 142,000 callers; MABS helped some 42,000 people with problem debt; NAS provided intensive advocacy support to 1,022 people with disabilities and supported a further 3,500; and SLIS provided over 7,500 interpreting assignments.

² See, for example, Submissions on *Migration Integration Strategy; Travellers and Roma Social Inclusion Strategy, Disability Inclusion Strategy and Gender Equality*.

-see [CIB Website: Submissions and Policy Recommendations](#)

- Develop and implement a new Migrant Integration Strategy
- Implement the National LGBTI+ and the LGBTI+ Youth Strategy
- Review the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 and development of a new one
- Publish a new national Action Plan against Racism
- Develop and implement a new National Strategy for Women and Girls
- Respond to each recommendation of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality
- A range of initiatives relating to people with disabilities, including, resourcing the National Disability Inclusion Strategy with an emphasis on close collaboration between state agencies and civil society

Centrally important for the new Strategy will be retaining the focus on children – their physical health and mental well-being and their need to have a voice. Arising from the experience of our delivery services, CIB wishes to highlight the following as cross-cutting areas crucial to the new strategy relating to children and young people:

- Improving access to quality child care
- Continuing to work towards the elimination of child poverty
- Ensuring that no child will be homeless
- Supporting lone parents
- Anticipating and dealing expeditiously with domestic violence, especially in the context of increase in perpetration associated with Covid-19
- Dealing with the specific needs of children currently in direct provision
- Dealing with the specific needs of Traveller children
- Providing equality of access to educational opportunities at all levels

Access to and affordability of childcare

Feedback from CIB delivery services points to the significant challenge many parents with children, particularly lone parents, face in taking up employment because of the poor availability and cost of child care. The current Covid-19 situation crisis has brought into sharp focus the key role that childcare plays in enabling people to work. A striking feature of investment in education in Ireland relative to other OECD countries identified by Social Justice Ireland³ is its under-investment in early childhood education. Ireland spends just under 0.2 per cent of GDP on pre-primary education compared to an OECD average of 0.8 per cent of GDP.

Protecting children

It is generally acknowledged by Government and civil society that the number of children at risk of poverty or in consistent poverty remains a significant concern. While the Programme for Government commits to work across Government to address food poverty in children and ensure that no child goes hungry, the economic downturn associated with Covid-19 will pose significant additional challenges in this regard. CIB delivery services have reported that throughout the Covid-

³ [Social Justice Ireland. The Importance of public investment in early years. 9 March 2020.](#)

19 crisis many families with children have experienced significant challenges with meeting the costs of daily living– not all of which may have come into the public policy domain.

Protecting children from the worst effects of Covid-19 will be a key strategic consideration. The Ombudsman for Children has acknowledged the severe impact that Covid-19 is having on children in Ireland and has expressed concern for children experiencing, or at risk of, abuse and violence.⁴ He noted that children include children belonging to ethnic minorities, Traveller and Roma children; children with disabilities; children experiencing homelessness; and children experiencing poverty.

There is a clear need for a cross-Departmental approach to tackling child poverty and the fall-out from inadequate child care supports. This needs to be co-ordinated by the Department. Of particular importance here will be liaison with the Department of Social Protection in relation to the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025.

Traveller inclusion

CIB, in its 2019 submission to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee on the matter of how to support Travellers' full equality⁵ identified a number of key areas that need to be addressed when looking at inequality and social exclusion among the Traveller community. These include ongoing policy implementation issues in relation to the delivery of Traveller accommodation at local authority level, the recognition of traveller ethnicity (with specific reference made to the collection of data around the use of public services), financial inclusion, the development of an innovative approach to Traveller employment and participation. reducing health inequality; improving access to mainstream financial services - such as savings and affordable credit options; and addressing incidences of discrimination through targeted interventions for Traveller and Roma communities.

Migrant integration

The Migrant Integration Strategy requires that integration practices and policies in all aspects of Irish society must be firmly embedded across all government departments (national and local) and in public agencies. While significant progress has been made, including the publication of the second National Intercultural Health Strategy and the research partnership with ESRI to enable data collection on ethnicity, significant difficulties remain. For example, many local authorities do not have current migrant integration strategies. There is also an absence of robust data collection, for example, in relation to integration in schools and access to public services generally. Also, data on ethnicity which is important from both mainstreaming and targeting perspectives is not being collected by public agencies at the level required in order to have ethnic minorities (including both Travellers and migrant ethnic minorities) included in the planning, implementation and review of policies and practices for their impact on minority ethnic groups.

⁴ [RTE News. Covid-19 creating "significant challenges" for children - Ombudsman. Updated. Wednesday, 16 Sept 2020](#)

⁵ ["A more equitable Ireland for Travellers". Submission by the Citizens Information Board to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee.](#)

The significant issues relating to people living in Direct Provision and in the administration of the international protection application process are an ongoing cause for concern which must be addressed. CIB welcomes the publication of the recent report of the Advisory Group on the international protection process and accommodation⁶ and has over the years identified a number of difficulties associated with Direct Provision and the international protection application process⁷ including:

- Length of stay arising from the time required to process applications for international protection
- Limited choice relating to location, type of accommodation and dietary requirements
- An inappropriate living environment for children
- Lack of adequate income to maintain a reasonable quality of life
- Some over-occupancy and overcrowding
- Complaints not being addressed by Direct Provision managers
- Lack of housing options for people granted international protection

Information sessions and clinics organised by CIB for people in Direct Provision in 2019 shows that housing issues are consistently the biggest problem for people with status trying to move from Direct Provision centres. The social housing system is largely ineffective for this group of people with a clear housing need. Other areas where issues were identified at these clinics were access to employment, training and education supports and registration and identification matters.

People with disabilities

Many people with disabilities will inevitably have experienced great difficulty during the pandemic arising from, for example, being locked down; people not having access to day care; people in residential care not been able to have physical and personal contact with their loved ones; people with intellectual disability having to grapple with the concept of social distancing; reduced or no access to therapies and personal assistance essential for people's well-being. The outcomes of all of these factors on the well-being of people with disabilities need to be identified and addressed with some urgency by all service providers and, where relevant, provided for in the Department's Statement of Strategy. The matter of people with disabilities continuing to be accommodated in congregated settings, including nursing homes, is of particular concern both during the pandemic and on an ongoing basis, an issue raised in CIB and NAS submissions to the Oireachtas Committee on Covid-19.⁸ There will be a need for the Department to develop liaison mechanisms with the Department of Social Protection in the context of the *Make Work Pay* initiative in order to ensure that the social inclusion aspect of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities remains a central strategic focus.

⁶ [Report of the Advisory Group on the Provision of Support including Accommodation to Persons in the International Protection Process](#)

⁷ See "[Review of Direct Provision and the International Protection Application Process](#)". [Submission by the Citizens Information Board to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality \(May 2019\)](#).

⁸ [Special Oireachtas Committee on Covid 19 Responses: A submission by the Citizens Information Board](#).

Gender equality

CIB has previously identified a need for the analysis of gender issues embedded in our culture and related critique relating to underlying social values as these pertain to the role of women, poverty and wealth differentials.⁹

As part of the Department's Strategy 2021-2023, actions identified relating to the six high level objectives of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 need to be progressed with some sense of urgency. While some progress has been made, much more needs to be done in the areas of gender stereotyping with particular reference to care provision in the home. There should be a strong strategic emphasis on promoting positive gender stereotypes across public policies, and across all media. There should also be more focus on creating family friendly work environments which promote flexible working and which value men's as well as women's roles in childcare.

Suggested strategic principles

The following are identified by CIB as principles which should underpin the 2021-2023 Strategy:

- ✓ A lead role in cross-Government policy development relating to each of the target groups under the aegis of the Department
- ✓ Investment in children and families as an essential requirement for a socially cohesive society
- ✓ Addressing child and family poverty in the Covid-19 context
- ✓ Addressing embedded gender stereotypes and related social norms
- ✓ Delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights Work Life Balance initiative¹⁰
- ✓ Giving a stronger voice in decision-making structures to:
 - Children and young people
 - People with disabilities
 - Lone parents with child-care responsibilities
 - Ethnic minorities

⁹ CIB Submission to Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality [Public Consultation - Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality 2020 Questionnaire](#).

¹⁰ See [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament etc. An initiative to support work-life balance for working parents and carers](#).