

## **Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth**

**25<sup>th</sup> June 2024**

### **Opening Statement by Minister O’Gorman**

Cathaoirleach, Committee Members, I welcome the opportunity to meet with the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the progression on the Sustainable Development Goals. In Ireland, a whole-of-Government approach has been adopted for implementation of the SDGs. My own department has done considerable work towards their attainment, particularly in the areas of poverty, reducing inequality and achieving gender equality, and decent work and economic growth. I will briefly outline some of the progress made in recent years by my Department.

One of the most important ways to address child poverty is through the provision of affordable, quality early childhood care and education. The benefits of high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) are widely acknowledged, with both immediate and long-lasting outcomes. It provides opportunities for children to play, interact with their peers and promotes children’s overall wellbeing, and good physical and mental health. ELC also allows parents to participate in training and employment in the knowledge that their children are safe, happy, and well cared for. Labour force participation in turn increases family income and reduces the risk of poverty. Participation in ELC benefits all children, but has the greatest benefit for children living in poverty, and is a critical intervention in breaking cycles of intergenerational exclusion and deprivation.

Through increased funding in Budget 2023 and Budget 2024, there will be improved affordability for parents, improved availability of early learning and childcare places and additional supports for children with a disability and for children experiencing disadvantage.

Another important way in which my Department addresses child poverty is through investment in youth services for disadvantaged young people to build their personal and social capacity. The ‘UBU Your Place Your Space’ scheme is aimed at providing out-of-school supports to marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable young people to enable them to achieve their full potential. The scheme focuses on developing the emotional intelligence, communication skills, confidence, planning and problem solving, creativity and imagination,

relationships, resilience and determination of disadvantaged young people. Evidence shows that approaches that focus on building social and emotional capabilities such as can have very long-term impacts on young people's well-being and development.

More directly, my department also supports young people as key actors in addressing the Sustainable Development Goals, in supporting impactful youth climate justice projects within the youth sector. My Department is looking at ways to further embed the Sustainable Development Goals in youth service provision in the context of our forthcoming new National Strategy on Youth Work and Related Services.

My department also supports children, parents and families through parenting support programmes and family support services.

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 was enacted on 4 April 2023, and introduces important entitlements for workers, including leave for medical care purposes for parents of children under 12, five days paid Domestic Violence Leave, the right to request flexible working arrangements for parents and carers, and the right to request remote working for all employees.

Reporting under the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021 began in 2022 for employers with over 250 employees and will extend in 2024 those with over 150 employees and, in 2025, to those with over 50 employees. My Department is developing a centralised database for organisations to upload information on their gender pay gaps.

Gender equality has been promoted and advanced in Ireland under a whole-of-government policy framework provided by the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 (NSWG), which was extended, due to Covid-19, for a further year to end 2021. Work has now begun on a consultation exercise to inform the development of the successor Strategy to the National Strategy for Women and Girls that will also respond to the recommendations of the recent Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality.

In 2021, I announced I would be conducting a Review of the Equal Status Acts 2000 and the Employment Equality Acts 1998 (The Equality Acts). The Review, which is ongoing, is examining the operation of the Equality Acts from the

perspective of the person taking a claim under its redress mechanisms. It is further examining the degree to which those experiencing discrimination are aware of the legislation and whether there are practical or other obstacles which preclude or deter them from taking an action.

In March 2022, I announced the development of a National Equality Data Strategy by the Central Statistics Office and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth that will put in place a strategic approach to improving the collection, disaggregation and use of equality data.

Finally, I would like to note that my department continues to ensure children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives through our various participation structures and supports.

I am fully committed to making further progress in these important areas and I welcome the opportunity to discuss matters with the Committee here today.