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Governance snapshot: whole-of-government approach Ireland: Healthy Ireland

Ireland snapshot: a framework for improved health and wellbeing 2013–2025

Healthy Ireland: a framework for improved health and wellbeing 2013–2025 is the national framework for action to improve the health and well-being of people in Ireland over the coming generation. The approach taken by Healthy Ireland draws on Health 2020, the European health policy framework, and on the health-in-all-policies concept.

Healthy Ireland takes a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to tackling the major lifestyle issues that lead to negative health outcomes. This framework aims to shift the focus to prevention, seeks to reduce health inequalities, and emphasizes the need to empower people and communities to better look after their own health and well-being.

The vision of Healthy Ireland is an Ireland in which everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and well-being to their full potential, and where well-being is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone's responsibility.

A key focus of Healthy Ireland is building relationships and strengthening partnerships with other government departments, local authorities, the education sector, and wider business, voluntary and community sectors. Structures supporting the work include a cross-sectoral group, comprising senior officials from government departments and key agencies, and a Healthy Ireland Council, consisting of representation from a wide range of stakeholder sectors.

Inspired by Health 2020, it has four central goals:

1. increasing the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life;
2. reducing health inequalities;
3. protecting the public from threats to health and well-being; and
4. creating an environment in which every individual and sector of society can play their part in achieving a healthy Ireland.

Healthy Ireland sets out a framework of 64 actions for public- and private-sector organizations, communities and individuals across six themes:

1. governance and policy
2. partnerships and cross-sectoral working
3. empowering people and communities
4. health and health reform
5. research and evidence
6. monitoring, reporting and evaluation

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Governance for health and well-being

Governance for health and well-being is understood as the steering of “communities, whole countries or even groups of countries in the pursuit of health as integral to well-being through both whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches”. Governance for health and well-being is a central building block of good governance; it is guided by a value framework that views health as a human right, a global public good, a component of well-being and a matter of social justice.

It builds on experiences gained in the health arena through multi- and intersectoral action, healthy public policy and health in all policies. Whole-of-society, whole-of-government and health-in-all-policies approaches require systematic multi- and intersectoral governance structures and processes that can facilitate and support action. This moves beyond the policy cycle and includes mechanisms for promoting coherence and accountability, enabling regulatory and legal frameworks, utilizing instruments for financing and joint action, and improving capacity within and beyond government actors.

What is a whole-of-government approach?

Whole of government refers to the diffusion of governance vertically across levels of government and arenas of governance and horizontally throughout sectors. Whole-of-government activities are multilevel, encompassing government activities and actors from local to global levels, and increasingly also involving groups outside government.

Health in all policies is one whole-of-government approach to making governance for health and well-being a priority for more than the health sector. This works in both directions, taking account of the impact of other sectors on health and the impact of health on other sectors.

How can a whole-of-government approach strengthen health and well-being?

A whole-of-government approach to health and well-being signifies a commitment to health and well-being at all levels of government, including at the very top. The commitment needs to be coherent vertically through all levels of government, from national to subnational and local, and coherent horizontally across all sectors of government. Many of the complex public health challenges of the 21st century transcend sectoral boundaries and require multi- and intersectoral action. A whole-of-government approach ensures, among other things, that political will is secured, and that coordination and coherence – two of the main challenges to effective implementation of multi- and intersectoral action – are addressed.



Healthy Ireland as an approach to governance for health and well-being

The Healthy Ireland Framework exemplifies many aspects of the governance for health and well-being concept. It reforms approaches to noncommunicable diseases and other health risks, and moves towards health-system strengthening while preparing for the introduction of universal health coverage. Crucially, it also promotes non-health Sustainable Development Goals, such as those on education and the environment.



The Healthy Ireland Framework draws on existing policies but proposes new arrangements to “ensure effective cooperation and collaboration and to implement evidence-based policies at government, sectoral, community and local levels”. Implementation of actions will be managed through an outcomes framework, with key indicators such as health status, weight, diet and activity levels, and measurable targets. Health-inequalities measures and the broader determinants of health, such as the proportion of young people completing second-level education, access to green spaces and indicators measuring the extent to which the population’s health is protected (such as uptake of immunization programmes), will also be assessed.

Healthy Ireland: innovation in practice

The changing demographics of Ireland triggered the initiative. Life expectancy has increased but overall health status has not. A growing population of older people will result in a higher chronic disease burden, with associated costs.

The Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Sector Reform, a cross-sectoral group chaired by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) composed of senior officials from government departments and relevant national agencies, has responsibility for overseeing implementation of Healthy Ireland.

The focus is on implementation science and building cross-sectoral relationships and links to develop an enabling environment for collaborative implementation. The goal is cultural change, operational change and mind-set change so that health and well-being is on everyone’s agenda in

a meaningful way. A key part of this is the development and investment in a national brand, Healthy Ireland, that is a trusted source of information to promote and support health and wellbeing. The brand also acts to connect vertically - national policy to local actions and vice versa - and also horizontally with individual actions being connected providing a cumulative effect and maximising resources and energy.

The Healthy Ireland Framework has political support at the highest level of the Irish Government. The longevity of the initiative (to 2025) gives time for governance processes to mature and activities to bear fruit.

Policy development

Working in partnership with government departments, statutory, community and voluntary agencies, and in consultation with the public, the initial focus of Healthy Ireland has been on developing national policy documents to ensure a consistent and coherent approach. These policy documents include:

- *Tobacco Free Ireland (2013)*
- *National Sexual Health Strategy 2015–2020 (2015)*
- *Get Ireland Active – National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland (2016)*
- *A Healthy Weight for Ireland – Obesity and Policy Action 2016–2025 (2016)*
- *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: a health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017–2025 (2017)*
- *The Healthy Ireland Outcomes Framework (2018)*
- *Skin Cancer Prevention Plan 2019-2022 (2019)*

The Government has committed to, and invested in, conducting an annual Healthy Ireland Survey. This annual survey of the health and wellbeing of the population, which started in 2015, provides an up-to-date picture of the nation's health. The results provide a baseline set of data telling how healthy or unhealthy Ireland currently is. The annual surveys are used to assess trends and if national health and wellbeing policies are working.

Further information on all policies can be found at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/706608-healthy-ireland-policies/>



Policy implementation

The focus now is on implementation of these policies through developing new and utilising existing structures and providing resources to support action at local level. Healthy Ireland is using the Health Settings Approach and has taken the well-established and documented Healthy Cities approach, as it recognizes the need to work in collaboration with organizations across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, particularly at local city and community levels. The Healthy Cities way of working and thinking aligns with the Healthy Ireland Framework by involving local people in decision-making, engaging with the local political system, and focusing on organizational and community development.



Implementation at local level: National Healthy Cities and Counties of Ireland

The involvement and support of local authorities and local political councils is a fundamental part of the success of the Healthy Cities approach. Recognizing this, Healthy Ireland, through the Healthy Cities and Counties approach, is supporting existing cross-partnership groups that have been set up in each local authority in Ireland (31 in total). Working with a range of organizations and groups, these partnership groups are ideally placed to support and implement Healthy Ireland at local level in response to local people's needs.

To acknowledge the importance of action at local level, the Irish Government has allocated €11.8m since 2017 through the Healthy Ireland fund to implement actions from policies developed under Healthy Ireland (see above) through the Healthy Cities and Counties approach. An evaluation has not yet been completed, but feedback has been very positive, with over 1,000 actions, based on local need and delivered through over 6,000 organisations working in local partnerships benefitting almost 1 million citizens.

The Government of Ireland plans to continue to invest in the Healthy Cities and Counties approach through the Healthy Ireland fund. A strategy and plan for future growth to increase membership of the network from its current 18 members to include all local authorities (total 31) in Ireland by end of 2020 is close to being finalised.



This *Governance Snapshot* is part of a series that provides examples of whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to strengthen health and well-being for all from across the WHO European Region. It complements the Multi- and Intersectoral brief series by the Governance for Health Programme, WHO Regional Office for Europe available at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-policy/health-2020-the-european-policy-for-health-and-well-being/implementation-package/1.-introducing-health-2020-to-different-stakeholders-across-sectors/sector-briefs-intersectoral-action-for-better-health-and-well-being>.

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