

CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS

ALLIANCE

Uniting Voices For Children

Child Poverty Monitor 2025

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FOREWORD

The very real danger that we could be the first generation in the history of our country to pass on a poorer society to our children should be a source of national embarrassment.

Community Foundation Ireland, our donors and philanthropists, are committed to working strategically with communities, researchers and advocates to prevent this shameful legacy.

Research, evidence and facts are vital to inform the actions and policies needed to advance our mission of Equality For All in Thriving Communities. Our strategic partnership with the Children's Rights Alliance to deliver the pioneering Child Poverty Monitor provides those facts.

There is no doubt that in its short history the Child Poverty Monitor has informed campaigns that have delivered real results for children and young people, including commitments to provide hot school meals to every child as well as pilot projects to combat holiday hunger. Of that we can be proud.

However, there are also uncomfortable realities which we must act upon.

In the three years since we published the first Child Poverty Monitor the number of children living in emergency homeless accommodation has increased by 1,747 to 4,775. All of us need to stop and reflect on that.

For each child, that means no bed, no family table, nowhere to do homework and nowhere to play. Young lives instead filled with insecurity. Levels of homelessness, poverty and social exclusion are increasing with our children in the frontline.

Community Foundation Ireland, our donors and philanthropists remain committed to addressing these inequalities, informed by 25-years during which we have experienced both successes and setbacks.

We do so through partnerships which are strategic, solution-focussed, and which take a longer-term view. Partnerships like the Child Poverty Monitor.



Denise Charlton,
Chief Executive of Community
Foundation Ireland

INTRODUCTION

The **2025 Child Poverty Monitor** is the fourth edition of this unique series of reports tracking Government progress on reducing the number of children experiencing poverty. The **Child Poverty Monitor** analyses the key drivers of child poverty, puts forward short and long-term recommendations to Government and showcases best practice solutions across a number of different thematic areas including early years, education, food poverty, income inadequacy, and child protection and welfare.

Investing in Children

The Child Poverty Monitor is developed by using a child-rights framework of the European Commission's Recommendation *Investing in Children*. Child poverty is a multi-faceted issue and manifests in different ways in different national contexts. *Investing in Children* draws on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and provides European Union (EU) Member States with a common framework to ensure synergies across policy areas with consideration of the specific local, regional and national needs. This framework encompasses not only children's material security but also the promotion of equal opportunities.

The Recommendation stresses that responding to child poverty requires an integrated, preventative approach, calling on states to:

1. Improve children's access to adequate resources;
2. Provide children with access to affordable quality services including early childhood education and care and healthcare; and
3. Support children's rights to participation in play, recreation, sport, and cultural activities, and promote participation in decision-making that affects their lives.

Breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and preventing more children being pulled into poverty is a crucial investment in Europe's future. Investing to improve outcomes during childhood costs the State significantly less than addressing the

consequences of child poverty throughout a person's life. Building on decades of research and bodies of strategies, literature reviews, and evaluations, *Investing in Children* provides a roadmap for EU countries outlining the most effective measures and actions Governments can take to break the cycle of disadvantage. This informs the development of the Child Poverty Monitor.

Child Poverty in Ireland

One child in poverty is too many. Research shows that long-term exposure to poverty and deprivation impacts children's outcomes including their physical and mental health, educational attainment and socio-emotional well-being and can result in them having low self-esteem. This can lead to mental health difficulties in later life.¹ The longer a child stays trapped in a cycle of poverty, the greater the negative impact on their ability to access opportunities to realise their full potential which help build their sense of self and shape their aspirations.² Poverty denies children of the decent childhood every child should have. However, it does not have to be this way. Child poverty is not inevitable but a direct consequence of policy and political decisions. This means that with the right strategic decisions at policy level and the political will to address child poverty, we can turn the tide.

The harsh reality is, that tide is rising. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) carries out an annual Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC). This is the official source of data on household and equivalised disposable income in Ireland and gives us the national picture of poverty indicators across three different categories: the 'at risk of poverty' rate, the 'consistent poverty rate' and 'rates of enforced deprivation'.³

The most recent SILC analysis revealed that there was over a quarter of a million children experiencing 'enforced deprivation' in 2024 (256,837). This means that one in every five children was living in a household that was unable to afford the goods and services which are considered the minimum essentials for a decent standard of living such as being able to

1 Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth, *The Dynamics of Child Poverty: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021) accessed 4 June 2021.

2 Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth, *The Dynamics of Child Poverty: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021) accessed 4 June 2021.

3 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions Explained*, (CSO 2022) < <https://bit.ly/3u4QXGj> > Accessed 27 May 2025.

buy a winter coat, afford a new pair of shoes or being able to replace broken furniture. Recent research published by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) shows an increased risk of poverty after housing costs for households where the youngest child is under 5 years of age at 24.6 per cent. There are almost 250,000 children and parents living in these households.⁴ This is compared to a rate of 15.2 per cent (comprising of 100,000 adults and children) where the youngest child is between 12 and 17 years of age.⁵ Given the known detrimental impact poverty can have on children's daily life and future prospects, we simply cannot accept that the youngest, most vulnerable children are shouldering the worst levels of poverty.

When we examine the figures by age cohort, children aged 0-17 have the highest 'at risk of poverty' rate at 15.3 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 11.7 per cent.⁶ The 'at risk of poverty' rate describes the proportion of the population who have an income below 60 per cent of the national median income.

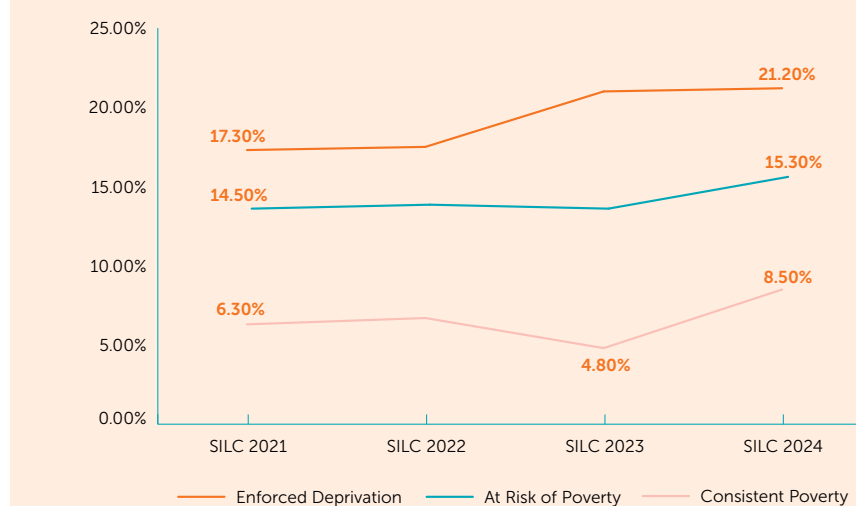
SILC 2024 Child Poverty Statistics

	At risk of Poverty	Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
State population	11.7%	15.7%	5.0%
0-17 age group	15.3%	21.2%	8.5%

Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2024 (CSO 2025).

Most concerning in the SILC statistics is the significant spike in 'consistent poverty' rates for children. Consistent poverty combines the proportion of the population who are identified as being at risk of poverty and experiencing deprivation. It is children and young people who experienced the sharpest rise in this rate; it increased from 4.8 per cent in 2023, to 8.5 per cent in 2024.⁷ This equates to an additional 45,107 children experiencing the worst form of poverty in Ireland.⁸ To put that in perspective, we are talking about over 100,000 children now living in consistent poverty – feeling the grind of deep poverty and the isolation of social exclusion day in, day out.

Rates of Child Poverty



Sources: Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) (CSO 2022 - 2025)

- 4 Roantree, B., Maître, B. and Russell, H., *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Fourth Annual Report* (ESRI and Community Foundation Ireland 2024).
- 5 Roantree, B., Maître, B. and Russell, H., *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Fourth Annual Report* (ESRI and Community Foundation Ireland 2024).
- 6 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).
- 7 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).
- 8 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

Child poverty is multi-faceted and manifests in different ways in Irish society. It is also clear that some children and young people are more at risk of poverty than others. One parent families with children have a higher at risk of poverty rate (24.2 per cent) than two parent families (12.6 per cent). Children in one parent families have a consistent poverty rate of 11 per cent, this is in comparison to the 6 per cent rate for children in two parent families.⁹

While the SILC figures give us some understanding of children and families who experience higher levels of deprivation or are more at risk of being pulled below the poverty line, it does not give us the full extent of child poverty levels in Ireland. The data is based on a household survey that does not provide details of the rates of deprivation experienced amongst members of the Traveller and Roma Communities, children living in direct provision or in the international protection system, children experiencing homelessness or are living in a domestic violence refuge. We know that these groups of children and young people are impacted by child poverty and are likely to experience a multitude of issues in staying above the poverty line.

Recently published SILC statistics on child deprivation indicators also show that 8.5 per cent of families with no working adults were unable to afford new clothes for their children, compared to 0.5 per cent of families with two working adults. One in six households without an Irish-born parent could not afford to pay for leisure activities for their children - things like swimming or participating in a youth organisation. Overall, 5.7 per cent of these families could not afford to invite their children's friends around to play or eat every now and again.¹⁰ These children are being denied the chance of making friends and creating happy memories in their childhood, and are instead, pushed further and further into isolation. Child poverty can further marginalise these children and the solution to breaking this cycle will require more targeted interventions to bridge the widening gap between them and their peers.

The analysis in the Child Poverty Monitor focuses in on the experience of the most vulnerable children and young people and identifies some of the root causes driving the child poverty rates in the wrong direction. Looking back over the past three editions, there are green shoots of progress that should be noted. Recent budgets have seen the introduction of 'cost-of-living packages' and measures that did deliver immediate relief felt instantly by families. This is evident in the analysis produced by the CSO on SILC statistics that report an increase in the at risk of poverty rate when one-off payments are excluded.¹¹ Alongside the steady rollout of new universal measures like the hot school meals programme, free GP care and free school books, the once-off measures made an impact. However, we have seen a consistent pattern of 'once-off' supports being delivered as a response to our child poverty levels. While these measures are effective to put money back in families' pockets to deal with immediate pressures, they can never have the sustained impact needed to break the cycle of poverty as they are not designed to. Persistent and systemic inequalities have cemented the barriers trapping the hundreds of thousands of children experiencing poverty in this country. Breaking that cycle requires sustained political drive, significant investment and resources and strategic universal and targeted measures that work in tandem.

Action to Address Child Poverty

The political shift to prioritise action on child poverty has started. The last Government saw the establishment of a dedicated unit in the Department of the Taoiseach. The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office followed other international models. The Office has provided much-needed leadership on child poverty at the highest level of Government, ensuring child poverty is a key consideration in policy development and implementation. Its recently published *Progress Report* detailed some of the key impacts including developing networks and ownership of the issue across multiple departments and Government agencies, as well as an increased focus on child poverty during the budgetary process.¹²

9 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

10 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024 module on Child Specific Deprivation*, 08 May 2025.

11 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

12 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025).

It is welcome to see the new Government recognise the importance of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in driving change in this area, and it will be critical that it is given the scope and the resources to continue its work throughout the implementation of this *Programme for Government*. However, the Office has also identified challenges given the multi-dimensional needs of children and families experiencing poverty and the noted lack of coordination across services and departments, as well as acute workforce shortages in children's services.¹³

Government strategies informing and driving political action to deliver better outcomes for children and young people are also instrumental tools to ensure efforts to address child poverty are consistent and effective. The new national strategy for children and young people, *Young Ireland*, focuses on three spotlight areas. The framework includes a spotlight on Child Poverty connecting this with the work of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office. The new Programme for Government also contains a number of commitments focused on addressing child poverty including 'setting a new child poverty target and examining ways to lift more children out of poverty' as well as targeted interventions such as 'progressively increasing the Child Support Payment'.¹⁴ These are all welcome but ultimately the Government's progress in reducing the child poverty numbers will be determined by its own implementation efforts.

With the right strategies and government mechanisms in place, responsibility and accountability are critical component parts to ensure implementation continues through social, economic and political changes. A report published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with support from the European Commission and the OECD, assessed recent policy, institutional and legislative developments in Ireland and compared outcomes for children and young people with those in other EU and OECD countries. A common thread in the report's recommendations is placing the responsibility to address child poverty on stronger footing, considering among other things, putting child poverty reduction targets in legislation and setting a 'statutory duty to cooperate for departments and agencies that goes beyond information-sharing'.¹⁵

A commitment in legislation through a Child Poverty Reduction Act would sharpen Government's policy focus and allow for a greater degree of political accountability that is needed to deliver the long-term change we need. Drawing from best practice internationally, and as recommended by the OECD, with an Act, the Government could be required to report on its progress to address child poverty on Budget Day, as in New Zealand.

Increased political attention on child poverty is also noticeable in the most recent national budgets. The last three budgets have been introduced as 'Child Poverty Budgets' with the Government emphasising the provisions included to address child poverty and the cost-of-living crisis putting pressure on families. Positively, there has been sustained investment across a number of anti-poverty measures in successive budgets in recent years, with substantial progress in the provision of universal measures for children. What we need to see now is the same, sustained focus on targeted measures to ensure the over 100,000 children in consistent poverty can reap the benefits of the universal measures taking hold.

A Children's Budget – Budget 2026

Investing in children is not only the right thing to do, but fiscally, it is the most strategic thing to do. The costs incurred addressing the impact of child poverty throughout a person's life are much higher than the investment in the public services and targeted measures in childhood that could break the cycle of poverty. An investment in children and young people today, is an investment in the future of our society.

Budget 2026 is the first budget under the new Government, and it should be considered a real opportunity to build on the progress made in recent years, such as the expansion of universal measures and rolling out incremental change, and crucially, an opportunity to go further. We urge Government to be more ambitious with Budget 2026 and prioritise the targeted supports that are needed alongside universal measures to effectively break the cycle of poverty and lift children and young people out of poverty.

13 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025).

14 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* (2025)

15 OCED, *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework* (OECD 2024).

Addressing the **income** gap will be critical to this over the course of this *Programme for Government*. Too many children and families are living below the poverty line, with increases to social welfare supports not keeping pace with the rate of inflation. In its latest update report, published in June 2024, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre examined the adequacy of social welfare rates for 214 test household cases (97 per cent of which are families with children) over the five-year period 2020 to 2024.¹⁶ The analysis compared the incomes these households received from social welfare with the costs they would incur to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.¹⁷ In 2024, just one-quarter of these households had an adequate income from social welfare. In Budget 2025, once-off lump sums and top ups of universal income supports (Child Benefit) were prioritised, at the expense of meaningful increases to targeted income supports that would benefit the children most in need of additional support, in families struggling to scrape enough money together to just get to the end of each week. In a positive move, the Government raised the Increase for a Qualified Child by €4 for children under 12 and €8 for children over 12, recognising the higher costs of raising older children. However, the incremental increases do not go far enough.

One of the biggest impacts on household incomes is housing costs and the interplay of these issues is something warrants more government attention. The country faces the same prevailing challenges as last year – a **housing** crisis compounded by spiralling rents and a scarcity of available housing with shamefully high levels of child and family homelessness. For many families, rent is the primary pressure point, eating away at the household income each month. Since the first Child Poverty Monitor was published in 2022, the number of children experiencing homelessness has risen from 3,028 in May 2022 to 4,775 in April 2025. All the evidence points to the detrimental impact homelessness has on a child. Children experiencing homelessness are more likely to have developmental and learning delays, poorer academic attainment. They are deprived of appropriate places to play and socialise, and it can have a profound impact on their mental health.¹⁸ With building targets far short of where they should be, the conditions for improving

the outcomes for children and young people become far more challenging. Without urgent action and renewed energy behind addressing the housing crisis, it will be extremely difficult for other child poverty measures to work effectively.

The last Government took bold strides when it came to the investment in **early childhood education and care**, reaching the historic investment of over €1 billion in the sector in Budget 2023, five years ahead of schedule. Positively, this has been maintained since, with the past two budgets investing €1.1 billion and €1.37 billion respectively. However, affordability still remains an issue. The most comprehensive data available is captured by Pobal in its Annual Early Years Sector Profile. This highlights the vast geographical disparity in childcare fees with huge variance in the median fees, from a high in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown of €258.57 a week, to a low of €150 a week in Leitrim.¹⁹ Affordability is just one part of the puzzle. Access is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly for those on lower incomes. The new *Programme for Government* includes commitments to address both issues; reducing costs for parents and the development of a public model of childcare.

Investing in early childhood education and care is the most effective way the Government can break the cycle of poverty. Recently published OECD research identified a number of ways the Government can reduce inequalities including a mix of both universal and targeted approaches that can ensure a focus on children and families experiencing the most disadvantaged. In the last two years, we have seen the launch and roll out of Equal Start – the Government's DEIS-type model of early years service provision – that enables organisations to provide targeted, wraparound supports for children and families experiencing poverty. However, for this programme to deliver the desired impact, we need to see significant increase in the level of funding in Budget 2026.

Since the first Child Poverty Monitor published in 2022 began tracking the issue and impact of **food poverty**, we have seen a staggering increase in the cost of basic essentials. For households on the lowest income, the increased cost of food alongside energy were the largest contributors to their estimated rate of

16 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024).

17 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

18 Muran S. and Brady, E. 'How does family homelessness impact on children's development? A critical review of the literature' (2023) *Child and Family Social Work* 360-371.

19 Pobal, 'The 2022/2023 Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey has opened' <<https://bit.ly/3JppOI9>> accessed 19 April 2024.

inflation.²⁰ Alongside this has been a growing concern for children, young people and families and their access to hot, nutritious food. Previous Governments have pushed forward with the establishment and subsequent expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme, with 271,842 children and young people expected to benefit in 2024/2025 academic year. The Government is on course to achieve its landmark commitment and ensure universal provision by 2030, but it is critical that sustained investment continues, and includes a focus on the provision of high-quality, nutritious meals to every child in Ireland. However, with the emerging issue of 'holiday hunger' arising during school holiday periods when universal provision is not available, it is essential that pilots earmarked for 2025 to address this are evaluated and embedded in a sustained way to bridge this gap for children and young people.

Tackling the cost of **education** is one area where there has been substantial progress. With Budget 2025, the Government expanded the Free School Book Scheme to Senior Cycle, bringing the provision from a pilot in 102 schools to a guaranteed support for 940,000 primary and secondary students. While there is still too much of a financial burden on families at back-to-school time, the success of this provision demonstrates that ambitious steps can be taken with political will and sustained investment. Cost is just one barrier when it comes to addressing educational inequality and the impact child poverty has on children's educational attainment and aspirations. The complex and acute needs of children who are experiencing poverty has been noted by principals, teachers and support staff across the DEIS programme, and beyond. The trauma these children experience can have a negative impact on their participation in school.²¹ It is very welcome that in the first 100 days of the new Government, the Minister for Education and Youth announced her intention to prioritise the development of a DEIS Plus Scheme that would increase resourcing to schools in areas with a high concentration of disadvantage to enable them to provide wraparound supports for their students. Similar consideration should be given to investing in non-DEIS schools and alternative education supports so every child has equal opportunity to reach their full potential.

For the children, young people and families who experience serious levels of poverty and deprivation, services and supports have to meet them where they are. Intervening early with tailored supports for children and their families is an important means to address poverty and adversity in childhood. **Family supports** are critical to address social exclusion and marginalisation as they strengthen the key relationship between family members and existing community services and infrastructure that can be a foundation of support. Increased engagement and collaboration with the community and voluntary sector is needed to increase the capacity of these services to meet the demand in their local area. A phased plan with sufficient funding to achieve universal access to home visiting for all first-time parents by 2026 is required, but as a first step, children and families in identified marginalised groups and communities should be priorities for access to home visiting programmes.

The bedrock of family support and alternative care should be the national child protection and welfare services. However, years of chronic underinvestment and extensive recruitment challenges have meant that significant reform and funding is required to ensure the system is fit for purpose. Tusla's referrals have doubled in a ten-year period with a steady increase in referrals being observed in the past five calendar years showing a cumulative increase of 68 per cent in referrals since 2019.²² One-fifth of all children in care do not have a care plan.²³ These children and young people are the ones most at risk in the country. Budget 2026 must increase Tusla's budget by €50 million to provide investment in the core child protection and welfare system that is the safety net for these children. The Government must also ensure that the budget delivers funding for at least 300 social workers and social care workers, and provides funding for capital so the agency can acquire enough appropriate residential facilities.

Access to **quality healthcare** is essential for children's development. Ensuring children have this access early, in their local community, removes detrimental delays and barriers to prevention and early intervention supports when children need them. The pandemic had a significant impact on the developmental screening checks from public health nurses, with only 53.6 per cent of babies receiving checks in 2021.

20 CSO, Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023 (CSO 2023).

21 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), *Equalities in Children's School Lives: the Impact of Social Background*, (NCCA 2024).

22 See Tusla Annual Reports, 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023.

23 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (Tusla 2024).

There has been a welcome return to pre-pandemic levels with the most recent data indicating 86 per cent of babies receiving screening within 12 months.²⁴ Public Health Nurses (PHN) play an essential role in a child's early development. PHNs can raise the first warnings signs of a child's need for interventions and supports. Thus the development of a dedicated PHN service could be instrumental in breaking the cycle of disadvantage early, improving health outcomes for children into the future. The cost of healthcare also remains far too high, placing undue pressure on families living on low incomes. The Medical Card gives access to medical services, prescription medicines and hospital care for free, however, the thresholds for this measure have not been revised in twenty years. We are once again calling for Budget 2026 to revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum, these should be set above the poverty thresholds.

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in One Generation

This fourth edition of the Child Poverty Monitor adds to a growing body of evidence on the systemic issues and pull factors that force children and families into poverty. However, there is also ample evidence on solutions and initiatives that can be delivered to break the cycle of poverty. Over the course of the last Government, there has been a tangible shift in policy development, strategic thinking and budget investment to address the impact of child poverty on children, young people and families. But not every child begins that journey on equal footing and as a result, universal measures are not enough on their own to bridge that widening gap. The focus for Government must now be on delivering targeted measures that are designed to support children and young people experiencing the worst levels of deprivation.

We know it is morally wrong that there are over a quarter of a million children living in poverty today and 185,359 at risk of being pulled below that poverty line. Budget 2026 is Government's chance to get ahead of the curve which is why we are calling on them to make it a Children's Budget. As it stands, it will take Ireland four-to-five generations to break the cycle of poverty and bring those on lower incomes on par with the median income. If we continue to only progress universal measures without prioritising targeted supports for the children most in need, Government will fail to steer us back in the right direction. We are calling on the new Government to utilise the bank of evidence as a blueprint for policy development and take a more ambitious approach to breaking the cycle of poverty in one generation.

24 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April – June 2024* (HSE 2024) 30. The latest available data relates to April to June 2024 when 86 per cent received their developmental assessment within 12 months.

Adequate Income



INCOME ADEQUACY

Ensuring that children and their families have access to adequate resources is a central pillar of the *Investing in Children* Recommendation.¹ It states that adequate benefits, including specific income supports for families and children and access to schemes providing minimum income, are of primary importance.² The commitments under this pillar are concerned with supporting parents' participation in the labour market and providing for adequate living standards through a combination of cash income and in-kind benefits.³ The Recommendation proposes that eligibility for support should be sensitive to the adequate redistribution of resources across income groups.⁴ EU Member States need to ensure that disincentives to work are not created for lone parents and that targeted supports avoid stigmatisation and poverty traps.⁵ *Investing in Children* echoes Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that while parents and guardians have the primary responsibility to provide for the child's material needs, the State also has the responsibility to assist them to alleviate poverty where needed.⁶

In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty

and Well-being Programme Office.⁷ Income support and joblessness is a key priority area.⁸ The plan recognises that national and international evidence indicates that changes to the social welfare system can have a positive impact on child poverty.⁹ The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office recognises the importance of not only targeting initiatives towards those outside of the labour market, but also supporting those who are working and in receipt of a low income.¹⁰ The key areas of focus include ensuring that the Increase for a Qualified Child (now known as the Child Support Payment)¹¹ and Working Family Payment¹² are cognisant of increases in the cost of living.¹³ There is also a focus on promoting labour market inclusion policies for those families furthest from the labour market, and supporting the income and employment situation of families headed by a lone parent.¹⁴

In January 2025, the Programme Office published a progress report on its first 18 months of work.¹⁵ Over this period there have been two Budget cycles resulting in both permanent and temporary increases to income. In response to each Budget, the Programme Office published an overview and analysis

- 1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 6 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 27.
- 7 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).
- 8 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 9 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 10 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 11 In Budget 2025 the Increase for a Qualified Child, which is paid to social welfare recipients with a dependent child, was renamed the Child Support Payment. Government of Ireland *Budget 2025 Expenditure Report* (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform) 146.
- 12 Citizens Information 'Working Family Payment' <https://bit.ly/437vw6b> accessed 20 May 2025.
- 13 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 14 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 15 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 18.

of the key measures introduced to break the cycle of poverty.¹⁶ As part of a deepening of its work during the Budget 2025 process, the Programme Office set out six principles to bear in mind when addressing child poverty in Budget allocations.¹⁷ Three of these are relevant to adequate income:

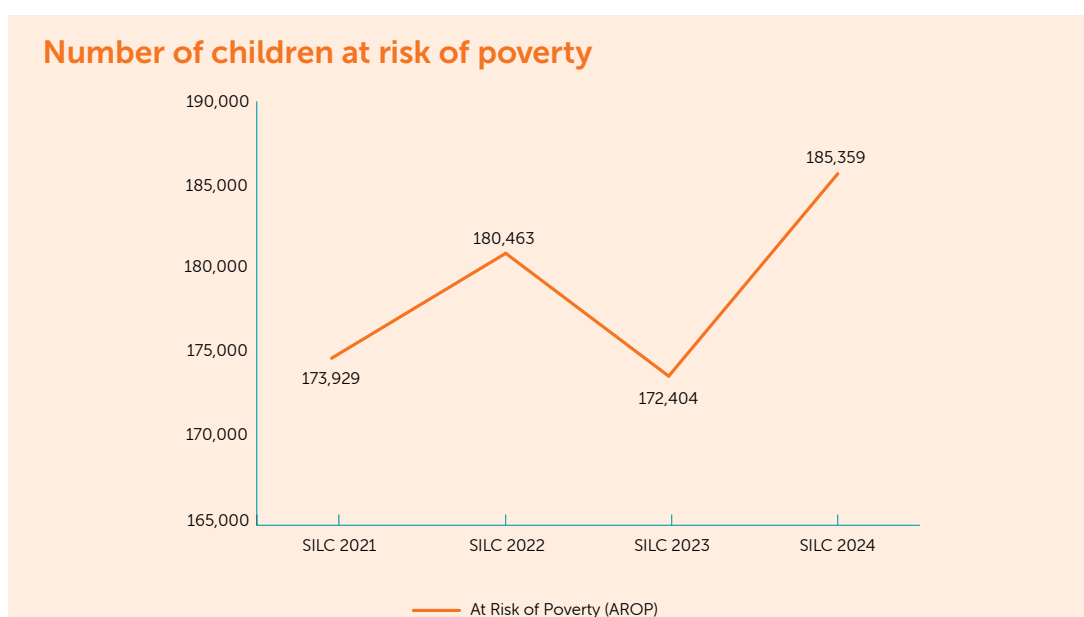
- ensuring that progress on universal measures is not to the detriment of targeting responses to those with greatest need;
- ensuring that measures both address income and other services and supports; and,
- focusing on increasing the income low-income families by more than the overall population.¹⁸

The progress report outlines that it has focused on ensuring that targeted income support (such as the Child Support Payment) have not been undermined by once-off cost of living measures and that primary social welfare payments contribute to addressing child poverty by working with key relevant departments.

The Office has also focused on the income and employment situation for one parent families and the promotion of labour market inclusion for those furthest from the labour market.¹⁹

Access to an adequate income

Investing in Children calls for the provision of an adequate standard of living through a combination of cash and in-kind benefits.²⁰ The annual poverty statistics captured by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) provide important data on the proportion of the population without an adequate income. The latest statistics available relate to 2024.²¹ The 'at risk of poverty' rate describes the proportion of the population who have an income below 60 per cent of the national median income.²²



Source: Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

16 Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2024 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2023); Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2025 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2024).

17 Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2025 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2024) 7.

18 Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2025 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2024) 7.

19 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 18.

20 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.

21 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

22 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).



Children make up
30%
of population in
Ireland at risk of poverty

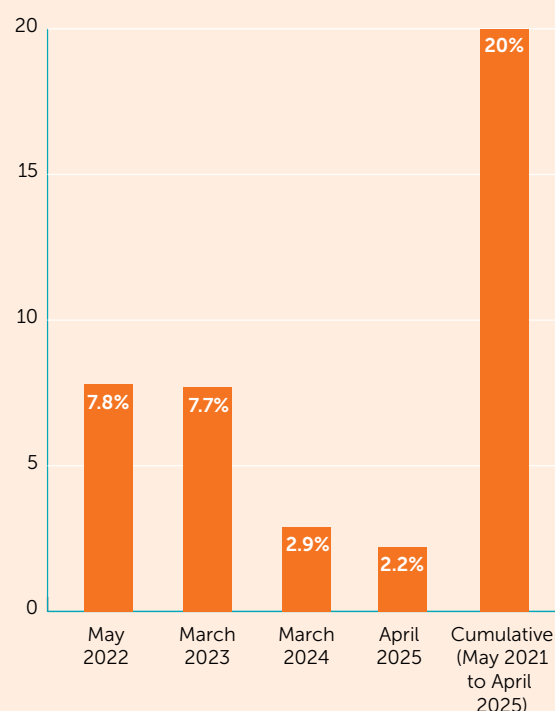
While children make up just 23 per cent of the entire population in Ireland, they comprise 30 per cent of those at risk of poverty.²³ When examined by age cohort, children have the highest at risk of poverty rate at 15.3 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 11.7 per cent.²⁴

Overall, the at risk of poverty rate for children fell between 2021 and 2023 but increased in 2024.²⁵ The increase in the at risk of poverty rate for children from 14.3 per cent in 2023 to 15.3 per cent in 2024 means that there were an extra 12,955 children living in households with incomes less than 60 per cent of the median income level.²⁶

Consumer Price Index Trends

Households on a low income are particularly impacted by increases in prices. There have been sustained increases in prices over the past number of years, particularly in 2022 and 2023. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7.8 per cent between May 2021 and May 2022.²⁷ A similar rate of inflation was observed in the 12 months between March 2022 and 2023 when inflation was 7.7 per cent.²⁸ Inflation had fallen to 2.9 per cent between March 2023 and March 2024²⁹ and the latest data shows that between April 2024 and April 2025 it was 2.2 per cent.³⁰ However, over the entire period (May 2021 to April 2025) inflation has risen by 20 per cent overall.³¹ Therefore, while rising prices may not be as much of a concern in 2025 compared to a number of years ago, the cumulative impact of inflation remains a challenge for those families on the lowest incomes.

Consumer Price Index



Sources: Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index April 2025* (CSO 2025). Central Statistics Office, *CPI Inflation Calculator*, <<https://bit.ly/49qXtFI>> accessed 14 May 2025.

In 2023, the CSO published insights into how overall inflation impacts households with different patterns of consumption of goods and services.³² By using data from both the Household Budget Survey and the Consumer Price Index (CPI), estimates of inflation were broken down by different characteristics such as household income and household composition.³³ For example, for households on the lowest income, the increased cost of energy and food were the largest contributors to their estimated rate of inflation.³⁴ For households on the highest income, mortgage interest payment, and expenditure on restaurants and hotels were their biggest contributors.³⁵ This research was not repeated in 2024 or 2025.

23 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

24 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

25 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

26 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

27 Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index May 2022* (CSO June 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3NO8UgN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

28 Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index March 2023* (CSO 2023).

29 Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index March 2024* (CSO 2024).

30 Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index April 2025* (CSO 2025).

31 Central Statistics Office, *CPI Inflation Calculator* <<https://bit.ly/49qXtFI>> accessed 14 May 2025.

32 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

33 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

34 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

35 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

A year-on-year analysis of inflation indicates that households with the highest incomes had a higher rate of inflation, up to 6.9 per cent, compared to some households on a lower income at 6.0 per cent.³⁶ However, between September 2018 to September 2023, households in the lowest income decile experienced price increases of 20 per cent compared to an overall rate of 19.1 per cent and a rate of 18.7 per cent for those in the highest income decile.³⁷ This is due to price increases in daily essentials that comprise the majority of items in the budget of households on the lowest incomes. When examined by household type, those comprising of one parent families had an even higher rate of 20.3 per cent, second only to single adult households.³⁸ This means for low-income families, ensuring children and young people have access to an adequate diet and a warm home has become increasingly difficult. This cumulative impact on low-income households needs to be addressed through investment in targeted income measures for these families.

Introduction of measures in response to rising inflation

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in January 2023, called on the Irish Government to raise social welfare rates to reflect the cost of living as a key means by which to ensure children have access to an adequate standard of living.³⁹

Government has intervened to address increases in the cost of living both outside of (in February⁴⁰ and May 2022⁴¹), and as part of, the Budget cycle (see Budget 2023,⁴² Budget 2024,⁴³ and Budget 2025).⁴⁴ These interventions have included the introduction of measures to help households and families to meet the costs of energy,⁴⁵ health,⁴⁶ transport,⁴⁷ and additional income supports.⁴⁸ In their latest intervention as part of Budget 2025, lump sum and double payments were announced for beneficiaries of certain social welfare schemes. This included two double payments of Child Benefit, and a €100 lump sum for those in receipt of the Child Support Payment.⁴⁹

The CSO's analysis of SILC data highlights the positive impact that these one-off measures have had on poverty rates. In SILC 2024, this analysis shows that the at risk of poverty rate for children would have been almost 2 percentage points higher at 17.2 per cent if the cost-of-living measures were excluded.⁵⁰ However, these measures do not represent permanent increases in income that are needed for many families who are in receipt of social welfare or receiving a low wage from employment at rates inadequate to meet the minimum essential standard of living.

36 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

37 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

38 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

39 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 34.

40 Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 'Ministers McGrath and Donohoe announce €505 million package in measures to mitigate the cost of living' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3zAS0y1>> accessed 14 June 2022.

41 Department of the Taoiseach, 'Government announces further measures to help households with rising cost of energy' (Department of the Taoiseach 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Oghd4R>> accessed 25 March 2025.

42 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2023: Expenditure Report*, (DPER 2022), p. 26.

43 Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 'Your guide to Budget 2024', <https://bit.ly/3PLAJsY> accessed 25 March 2025.

44 Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 'Your guide to Budget 2024', <https://bit.ly/41YVaYZ> accessed 25 March 2025.

45 Three instalments of an energy credit of €200 (November 2022 and January and March 2023) and three €150 instalments (December 2023, January 2024 and March 2024). A €125 lump sum payment in March 2022 and €100 in May 2022 for those in receipt of the fuel allowance. A lump sum once off payment of €400 for Fuel Allowance recipients as part of Budget 2023 and a €350 lump sum in Budget 2024.

46 A reduction in the drug payment threshold to €80 per month.

47 A 20 per cent reduction in public transport fees until the end of 2024 and the expansion of the 50 per cent travel fare for young people to aged 19 to 25.

48 A double payment to all social welfare recipients in both October and December 2023 (Christmas Bonus) as well as a double payment of Child Benefit in Budget 2023 and 2024. A €100 once off payment to recipients of an Increase for a Qualified Child(ren) on their social welfare payment in November 2023. A lump sum payment of €500 in Budget 2023 and €400 in Budget 2024 to all recipients of the Working Family Payment.

49 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces record Social Protection Budget package of over €2.6 Billion', Press Release, 1 October 2024.

50 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

The need for targeted increases in social welfare rates

Investing in Children calls for benefits to be adequate and coherent.⁵¹ A Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)⁵² is a measure which establishes the minimum needed to live and participate in Irish society and is a standard of living which no one should be expected to live below.⁵³ Through its work, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre not only establishes the cost of a MESL, but also the adequacy of social welfare payments and the national minimum wage rate in terms of meeting this cost.

In its latest update report, published in June 2024, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre examined the adequacy of social welfare rates for 214 test household cases (97 per cent of which were families with children) over the five-year period 2020 to 2024.⁵⁴ The analysis compared the incomes these households received from social welfare with the costs they would incur to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.⁵⁵ In 2024, just one-quarter of the test household cases had an adequate income from social welfare,⁵⁶ meaning their income was sufficient to cover the costs associated with a minimum essential standard of living. One-third had an income that meets between 90 and 100 per cent of the MESL costs, and were therefore categorised as having an inadequate income.⁵⁷ However, in 43 per cent of these test household cases, income from social welfare met less than 90 per cent of the MESL costs meaning that they cause deep income inadequacy.⁵⁸ This means that these families were unable ‘to meet basic needs and to take part in normal day-to-day activities and participate in society’.⁵⁹

This includes children having access to adequate food and clothing, basic materials for school or attending birthday parties.⁶⁰

While overall there have been improvements in the adequacy of social welfare rates between 2023 and 2024, the proportion of the test household cases in receipt of an adequate income from social welfare has not returned to the same level as between 2020 and 2022 (see below).⁶¹ Furthermore, the proportion of households with a level of deep income inadequacy is higher in 2024 than in the period between 2020 and 2022.⁶² This means that more households have fallen into a deeper level of income adequacy. This analysis highlights that while one-off payments have helped to address rising costs, the overall rates of social welfare were inadequate for many households to begin with.

Benchmarking Social Welfare Adequacy to MESL costs			
	Adequate	Inadequate	Deep Inadequacy
2024	24%	33%	43%
2023	13%	28%	59%
2022	31%	38%	31%
2021	33%	33%	35%
2020	28%	34%	38%
Source: MESL Research Centre, <i>Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report</i> (MESL Research Centre 2024), vii.			

51 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 3-4. The need for social welfare payments to be set at an adequate rate is emphasised in the Concluding Observations of Ireland’s review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which calls on the State to index these supports to the cost of living. UNCESCR ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 35.

52 Since 2004, the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) has focused on establishing the cost of a standard of living which no one should be expected to live below. This research, known as a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL), is updated annually to reflect the impact of changes to policy and prices. In July 2022 the MESL research transferred from the VPSJ to the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) with the establishment of the Vincentian MESL Research Centre.

53 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, ‘What is minimum essential budget standards research?’ <www.budgeting.ie> accessed 23 June 2022.

54 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024).

55 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

56 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

57 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

58 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

59 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

60 MESL Research Centre, *Detailed Budgets* <https://bit.ly/44IKn84> accessed 28 April 2025.

61 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

62 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024) 36.

Following the announcement of Budget 2025, analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre indicated that the changes to social welfare rates and other supports would mean more households would have an adequate income in 2025.⁶³ Notably, the analysis highlights the contribution that measures such as the introduction of hot school meals and free school books make towards income adequacy. For instance, the roll-out of hot school meals to all primary schools effectively reduces the number of test case households expected to experience deep income inadequacy in 2025 by 2.8 per centage points.⁶⁴ However, despite these positive developments, one-third of the 214 test case households will still experience deep income inadequacy, meaning there is more to be done to improve social welfare rates.⁶⁵

Benchmarking weekly social welfare rates to MESL can ensure that such income supports are responsive to the actual costs incurred by families and are less likely to be masked by inflation. Commitment number 25 in the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* will '[c]onsider and prepare a report for Government on the potential application of the benchmarking approach to other welfare payments'.⁶⁶ In April 2025, the Minister for Social Protection indicated that a report on benchmarking and indexing working-age social protection is being considered by the department.⁶⁷

Reducing poverty through income supports

The government provides both universal and targeted income support payments for families with children. Child Benefit is a universal payment made each month to parents of children under the age of 16.⁶⁸ The payment is also made in respect of children aged 16, 17, and 18 who are in full-time education or training or, who have a disability and cannot support themselves.⁶⁹ To access Child Benefit, recipients must meet the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC).⁷⁰ The HRC has a disproportionate impact on certain groups of children and families, such as those living in Direct Provision, or those from Traveller and Roma communities, who can face difficulties in accessing Child Benefit. While Child Benefit is paid to all families regardless of their income, adults in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment and who have a dependent child receive additional support with the Child Support Payment (previously known as the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC)).⁷¹

The analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre highlights the inadequacies of current social welfare rates, making a strong argument for targeting increases in the Child Support Payment as a means of tackling child poverty. Previous analysis from the Parliamentary Budget Office noted that raising this income support is more impactful in addressing child poverty.⁷² Increasing the targeted Child Support Payment (IQC) by €37.50 per week delivers a greater change for those on the lowest income (a 4.4 per cent increase in disposable income) compared to a €38 monthly increase in Child Benefit (1.78 per cent increase in disposable income).⁷³ Both measures would have the same net impact on the exchequer (€537 million and €535 million respectively), but the former effectively targets these resources towards those most in need.⁷⁴

63 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2025* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024).

64 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2025* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 8.

65 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2025* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 7.

66 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (DEASP 2020).

67 Minister for Social Protection, Dara Calleary TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Social Welfare Schemes, 10 April 2025 [18094/25].

68 Citizens Information 'Child Benefit' <https://bit.ly/43lcUQx> accessed 26 March 2025.

69 Citizens Information 'Child Benefit' <https://bit.ly/43lcUQx> accessed 26 March 2025.

70 Citizens Information 'Habitual Residence Condition' <https://bit.ly/3XZklE0> accessed 26 March 2025.

71 Citizens Information 'Claiming for a Child Dependent' <https://bit.ly/41ZMtNW> accessed 26 March 2025.

72 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Child Benefit Increases and Alternative Policy Options: Costs and Distributional Impact', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 5 April 2024.

73 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Child Benefit Increases and Alternative Policy Options: Costs and Distributional Impact', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 30 April 2025.

74 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Child Benefit Increases and Alternative Policy Options: Costs and Distributional Impact', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 30 April 2025.

Addressing the additional costs of older children

Investing in Children calls for income supports to differentiate between children’s needs.⁷⁵ Adequate social welfare rates that address the changing needs of a child are vital to ensuring their basic needs are met. MESL research has consistently identified older children as having additional and distinct needs in comparison to younger children. In 2024, the minimum needs of children in second-level education cost an average of €156 per week, which is at least 55.4 per cent more expensive than the minimum needs of younger children.⁷⁶ The weekly MESL costs for infant children are €98 per week, €60 for pre-school children, and €100 for children in primary school.⁷⁷

To compare the cost of a child living in a family in receipt of social welfare supports, the MESL expenditure is adjusted to take account of the impact of having access to a full Medical Card (i.e. this reduces the overall MESL as items in the health budget are now covered by the Medical Card). Comparing these costs with child-related social welfare income⁷⁸ highlights the gap in adequacy for older children, in particular.

In 2024, the costs for a pre-school child were fully met by income supports (supports cover 145 per cent of costs).⁷⁹ However, income supports for all other age groups were inadequate, with the social welfare income for infants and primary school children meeting just 84.8 per cent and 87.7 per cent of MESL costs respectively.⁸⁰ The shortfall for children at second-level is even greater, with just 62.9 per cent of the MESL costs being met by social welfare income supports.⁸¹ This underlines the importance of targeting increases in income supports towards those in most in need, such as older children and families in receipt of social welfare.

MESL by child age-group and child related social welfare adequacy				
	Infant	Pre-School	Primary School	Second Level
MESL (core adjusted for full Medical Card)	€94.42	€55.04	€94.78	€149.29
Total Social Welfare (SW)	€80.08	€80.08	€83.15	€93.87
Adequacy (SW – MESL)	-€14.34	€25.04	-€11.63	-€55.42
% of MESL met by SW	84.8%	145.5%	87.7%	62.9%
Source: MESL Research Centre, <i>Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report</i> (MESL Research Centre 2024), 52.				

Introducing a Second Tier Child Benefit Payment

In the run up to Budget 2024, Barra Roantree and Karina Doorley at the Economic and Social Research Institute published a report examining four different options to reduce child poverty through income supports.⁸² Amongst these proposals was the option to introduce a second-tier child benefit payment as recommended by the Commission on Taxation and Welfare in 2022.⁸³

The researchers modelled a number of different scenarios to reduce the at risk of poverty rate for children through income supports. The first and second options looked at raising existing child-specific income supports. Achieving a similar outcome, of reducing the at risk of poverty rate by 1 per cent, required investing an additional €535 million in Child Benefit or €334 million in the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC)/Child Support Payment paid to all social welfare recipients with dependent children.

75 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 3-4.

76 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024), 49.

77 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024), 49.

78 The income included for this calculation includes the monthly Child Benefit payment; Child Support Payment; the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. The additional Christmas Bonus and January 2024 Seasonal Bonus are included in 2024.

79 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024), 52.

80 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024), 52.

81 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2024 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2024), 52.

82 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023).

83 Commission on Taxation and Welfare, *Foundations for the Future* (Government of Ireland 2022).

Focusing investment on the Child Support Payment represents a more targeted approach than directing resources to Child Benefit as beneficiaries are at the lower end of the income distribution. Targeting increased resources towards Child Benefit would mean much of the spending would go towards parents on higher incomes.⁸⁴

The third proposal looked to address the potential disincentives to work that increases to the Child Support Payment may present by increasing the Working Family Payment (WFP). To achieve the reduction in the at risk of poverty rate for children, spending would need to increase by just €187 million, substantially lower than the two previous proposals. However, this proposal would not benefit children in households on the lowest incomes. Therefore, the authors suggest that a combined approach with, for example, Option 2, may help with reaching those on the lowest incomes. However, this could still exclude some children living in households which fall between both the WFP and Child Support Payment. For example, these families may be ineligible for WFP and receive little from the Child Support Payment as they are in receipt of a means tested payment impacted by employment.⁸⁵

The final option considers the recommendation from the Commission on Taxation and Welfare to introduce a second-tier child income support. By integrating the Child Support Payment and the Working Family Payment, each family would receive an income support based on their means and the number of dependent children. This would mean providing increased resources to those who currently do not qualify for the Working Family Payment. A worked example from the authors proposes that a one parent family with one child (aged 13), in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, would receive €222.60 per week, versus the then existing rate of €50 per week. This simplified version of this proposed reform calculates that the at risk of poverty rate for children would reduce by 3.8 percentage points, or 40,000 children, at a cost of €691 million per year.

In addition, it would move those on incomes lower than the poverty line closer to the poverty line.⁸⁶ The distributional impact of this proposal indicates that those on the lowest incomes would benefit the most.⁸⁷

While the introduction of a second-tier child benefit payment achieves a greater impact than other proposals in terms of reducing the at risk of poverty rate for children, the introduction of this measure would require reform of existing social welfare payments. The researchers caution that the introduction of such a proposal needs 'careful consideration and analysis' to minimise the unintended interactions with other taxation and social welfare measures.⁸⁸ For example, there is a need to consider how a second-tier payment would interact with existing entitlements to secondary benefits and whether it could act as a disincentive to work. Support for introducing such a measure has gained momentum, with a commitment in the new *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future* to explore a 'targeted Child Benefit Payment and examine the interaction this would have with existing targeted supports to reduce Child Poverty such as the Working Family Payment and Child Support Payment'.⁸⁹ This is a welcome development.

Access to an Adequate Income for Families in Direct Provision

In 2021, the Government published *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service*. This committed to the introduction of a monthly International Protection Child Payment that would be provided at the same rate as Child Benefit.⁹⁰ The Government made provision in two budgets for this payment but this has not been implemented. Children in Direct Provision currently receive a Daily Expense Allowance (DEA) weekly payment of just €29.80.⁹¹ Historically, the rate of DEA has been significantly lower than other social welfare payments for children.

84 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 18-20.

85 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 22-24.

86 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 24-27.

87 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 24-27.

88 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 25.

89 Government Of Ireland, *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 101.

90 Government of Ireland, *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Government Publications 2021) 64-65.

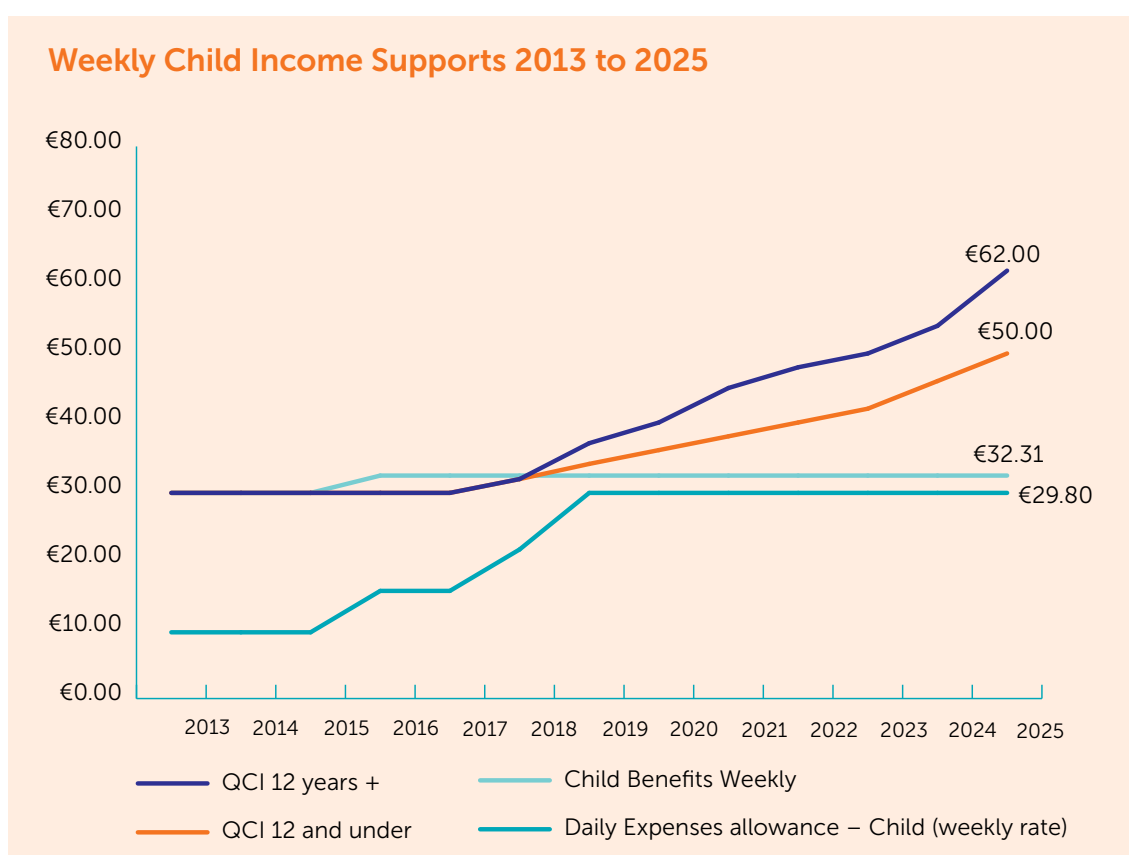
91 Citizen's Information, Direct Provision System <<http://bit.ly/3S3dydD>> accessed 2 February 2023.

The DEA rate has remained unchanged since 2019 despite increases being applied to the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC)⁹² and a separate rate being established for children under and over the age of 12.⁹³

While families in Direct Provision can access the annual Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme, and the Exceptional Needs Payment Scheme,⁹⁴ children living in Direct Provision system do not have access to the Child Benefit payment given to all children habitually resident in the State. The Vincentian MESL Research Centre published a working paper in May 2023 on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) costs for families in Direct Provision.

This desk-based research exercise found that the income supports provided to each individual family member living in Direct Provision accommodation are inadequate to meet their estimated MESL need.⁹⁵

The failure of Government to implement this payment following the allocation of funding in two successive Budgets is extremely disappointing. This is in spite of the commitment made in the *White Paper* as well as the clear rationale for it provided by Government itself in terms of cost effectiveness and in reducing child poverty.⁹⁶ The International Protection Child Payment must now be implemented as a matter of urgency.



Sources: Citizen's Information, Direct Provision System <<http://bit.ly/3S3dydD>> accessed 2 February 2023.

92 A social welfare payment is made up of a weekly payment called a personal rate. Parents may also get an extra amount for their child called an Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC) if they are getting certain payments and the child meets certain conditions.

93 Citizen's Information, *Budgets* <<https://bit.ly/3LNBjdj>> accessed 9 May 2023.

94 Citizen's Information, *Budgets* <<https://bit.ly/3LNBjdj>> accessed 9 May 2023.

95 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Estimating the MESL costs for families in Direct Provision* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023).

96 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2025 Expenditure Report* (Government Publications 2025) 62.

Ensuring that one parent families have sufficient access to income supports

Investing in Children calls for Member States to ensure that means-tested and targeted benefits avoid creating work disincentives for lone parents and second earners. Since 2016, nine reports on one parent families and poverty have been published, including the 2017 Joint Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland.⁹⁷ Each of these reports paints a similar picture of children and young people growing up in the grip of poverty.

The latest poverty statistics (SILC 2024) continue to demonstrate high levels of poverty in households consisting of one adult, with children under 18 years of age, in contrast to the overall rates and those experienced by other households with children.⁹⁸ One-quarter of households with children headed by one adult are at risk of poverty (24.2 per cent).⁹⁹ This is over twice the at risk of poverty rate for the population as a whole (11.7 per cent) and significantly higher than households of two adults with children (12.6 per cent) and other households with children under 18 (13.3 per cent).¹⁰⁰

A similar pattern is evident with regard to consistent poverty. Over one in ten one parent households with children experience consistent poverty (11 per cent) compared to just 5 per cent of the total population.¹⁰¹ The rates for households with two adults with children, and other households with children under 18, are both significantly lower at 6 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively.¹⁰²

Finally, but perhaps the starkest insight into the experience of poverty by one parent families is the fact that almost half (46.3 per cent) are experiencing enforced deprivation – a rate almost three times higher than the entire population.

Comparison of Poverty Rates between 1 adult and 2 adult households with children

	At risk of poverty	Enforced Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
State	11.7%	15.7%	5.0%
1 adult with children aged under 18	24.2%	46.3%	11.0%
2 adults with 1-3 children aged under 18	12.6%	16.2%	6.0%
Other households with children aged under 18	13.3%	19.8%	8.0%

Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2024 (CSO 2025).

Over the past four years, the at risk of poverty, enforced deprivation and consistent poverty rates have remained high for one parent families. While the trends indicate that all three measures fell to rates lower than 2021 in 2023, the increases observed in the 2024 data indicates that it is critical that the government introduces measures to enable these families to move out of poverty.

⁹⁷ Joint Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland ((Houses of the Oireachtas 2017).

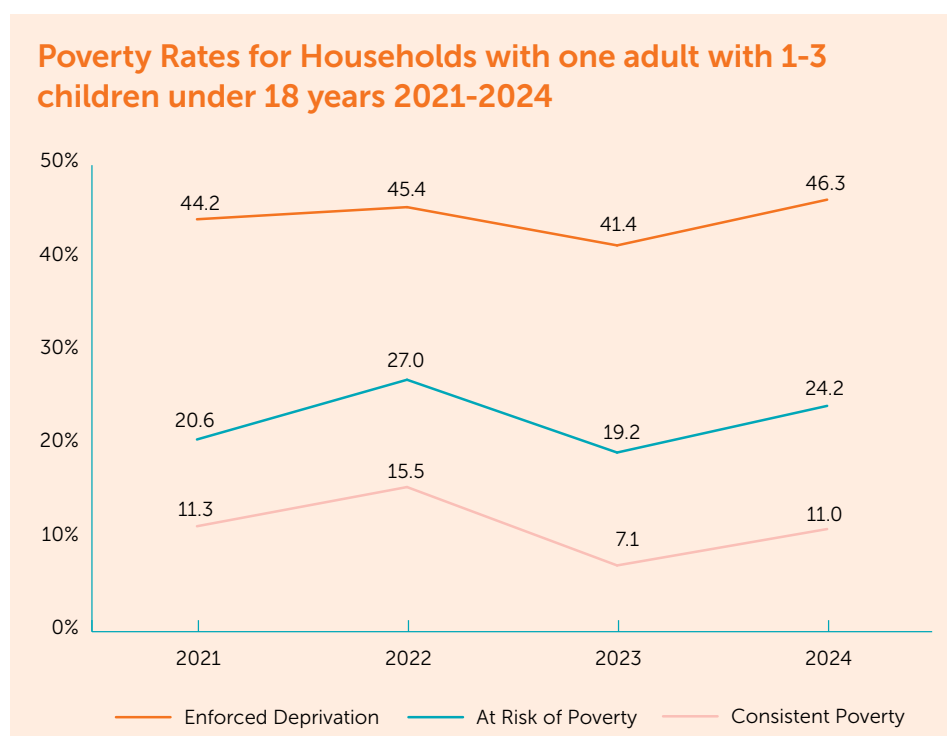
⁹⁸ Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) 2024 (CSO 2025).

⁹⁹ Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) 2024 (CSO 2025).

¹⁰⁰ Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) 2024 (CSO 2025).

¹⁰¹ Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) 2024 (CSO 2025).

¹⁰² Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (SILC) 2024 (CSO 2025).



Sources: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2024 (CSO 2025).

Further insight about the lack of adequate income experienced by one parent families to meet all expenditure costs is provided in the *SILC: Enforced Deprivation 2024* report.¹⁰³

In 2024, 46.2 per cent of all households reported some level of difficulty in making ends meet, with 5.6 per cent reporting great difficulty.¹⁰⁴ Two adult households with one-to-three children under the age of 18 experienced a higher 'overall rate of difficulty' and a higher 'rate of great difficulty' making ends meet than the general population (53.1 per cent and 5.8 per cent respectively).¹⁰⁵ However, households comprising of one adult with children under 18 reported much higher rates across all levels of difficulty. Almost three-quarters of all one parent households reported some level of difficulty making ends meet (73 per cent), with one in five reporting great difficulty (21.5 per cent).¹⁰⁶ The high cost of housing is an important aspect of this, with the at risk of poverty rate doubling for one parent households with children when this is taken into consideration.¹⁰⁷ This is further explored in **Section 6: Housing and Homelessness**.

In Budget 2020, the earnings disregard for the One Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's Transitional payments was increased by €15 (a weekly rate of €165), and it remains at this rate in 2025.¹⁰⁸ This means that a lone parent can earn up to €165 per week and they may still be entitled to their full rate of the One Parent Family Payment. However, since then, the National Minimum Wage has increased by €3.40 to €13.50.¹⁰⁹ This means that while the disregard equated to 16.3 hours of the National Minimum Wage in 2020, it now only equals 12.2 hours. The Vincentian MESL Research Centre notes that the cumulative impact of this erosion in value means a lone parent working full-time on the National Minimum Wage would qualify for €19 less per week in the partial adult One Parent Family Payment personal rate in 2025 compared to 2020.¹¹⁰ Increasing the earnings disregard in line with the National Minimum Wage would contribute to the commitment in *Investing in Children* to remove disincentives to work for lone parents, as well as ensuring targeted supports avoid stigmatisation and poverty traps.¹¹¹

103 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024* (CSO 2025).

104 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024* (CSO 2025).

105 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024* (CSO 2025).

106 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024* (CSO 2025).

107 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO 2025).

108 Citizens Information, 'Budget 2020', <https://bit.ly/45BejBH> accessed 21 June 2024.

109 Citizens Information, 'Minimum Wage' <https://bit.ly/426vgm3> accessed 27 March 2025.

110 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, Budget 2025 MESL Impact Briefing, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 12.

111 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, Budget 2025 MESL Impact Briefing, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 12.

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Close the gap between MESL costs for a child over 12 years of age through targeted increases in the weekly Child Support Payment - applying a 20 per cent increase over the next four budgets. This can be achieved by increasing the rate by:
 - €12.40 in Budget 2026;
 - €14.88 in Budget 2027;
 - €17.85 in Budget 2028; and
 - €21.42 in Budget 2029.
- Increase the Child Support Payment for under 12s by 10 per cent over the next four Budgets. This would mean increasing the rate by:
 - €5 in Budget 2026;
 - €5.50 in Budget 2027;
 - €6.05 in Budget 2028; and
 - €6.65 in Budget 2029.
- Implement the €4.7 million and €8.4 million allocated to the International Protection Child Payment from Budgets 2024 and 2025, for all children living in the international protection system as a matter of urgency.
- Increase the earnings disregard of the One Parent Family Payment to €220 per week to restore its value to 2020 levels and index link future increases to the National Minimum Wage rate.

Medium-term

- Publish a green paper and undertake a consultation process with rights holders, civil society, and academic researchers on the merits of a second-tier payment and review its effectiveness for different income groups.

Long-term

- Benchmark all social welfare rates to MESL to ensure that all households with children can afford a minimum standard of living.

Food Poverty



FOOD POVERTY

The European Commission's Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* proposes three integrated strategies to address child poverty. Actions related to food poverty are included in two of the Recommendation's three-pillars: access to adequate resources and access to affordable quality services.¹ Member States are encouraged to provide for an acceptable standard of living through a combination of cash and in-kind benefits.² This includes in-kind benefits related to nutrition.³ *Investing in Children* also urges Member States to tackle 'the social gradient in unhealthy lifestyles' by providing children with 'access to balanced diets'.⁴ Furthermore, the Recommendation calls for investment 'in prevention, particularly during early childhood years, by putting in place comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures'.⁵

In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office.⁶ While the *Programme Plan* does not name food poverty as one of its six priority focus areas, it recognises the extra challenge that children and young people who are experiencing food poverty have with regard to engaging fully in education.⁷ The initial work plan places a focus on expanding the provision of free school meals for children and young people at greatest risk of food poverty.⁸

In January 2025, the Programme Office published a progress report on its first 18 months of work.⁹ The *Progress Report* highlights the expansion of hot school meals to non-DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) primary schools and increased investment in the funding available for this initiative over two Budget cycles as key measures of progress.¹⁰ The introduction of a pilot initiative to tackle the gap in the provision of hot school meals during the school holiday period is also highlighted.

Food poverty is 'a social determinant of health and is associated with significant adverse health outcomes. Food poverty occurs when an individual or family has insufficient access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory and socially acceptable diet'. Children who grow up experiencing food poverty often experience a long-term impact.¹¹ The *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* notes that high levels of hunger amongst children have been associated with poor mental health.¹² Separate research shows that parental stress can negatively affect emotional and behavioural development of school-age children, and can have lasting impacts.¹³ Food poverty is understood to affect children's physical health as well, with one study referring to obesity as a form of malnutrition.¹⁴ The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) found that children attending schools participating in the DEIS programme, located in areas of concentrated

- 1 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013).
- 2 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013) 7.
- 3 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013) 7.
- 4 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013) 8.
- 5 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final), 8.
- 6 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025* (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).
- 7 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025* (Department of the Taoiseach 2023) 15.
- 8 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023) 15.
- 9 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 18.
- 10 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 18.
- 11 H Russel, B Maitre, et al., *Child Poverty on the Island of Ireland*, (ESRI 2025) 62.
- 12 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 2.
- 13 L Ribas, B Montezano, et al., *The Role of Parental Stress on Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Offspring: a Systematic Review with Meta-Analysis*, (Jornal de Pediatria 2024).
- 14 D Carvajal-Aldaz, G Cuccalon, and C Ordonez, 'Food Insecurity as a Risk Factor for Obesity: A Review' (Frontiers in Nutrition 2022) <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnut.2022.1012734/full> accessed Barnardos, *Child Food Poverty 2022* (Barnardos 2022) <www.barnardos.ie/news/2022/february/child-food-poverty/> accessed 25 March 2025.

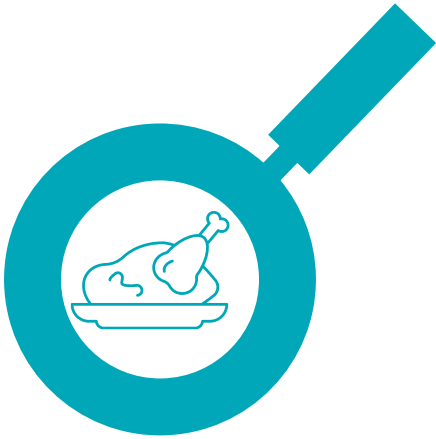
socio-economic disadvantage, have significantly higher levels of overweight and obesity than children in non-DEIS schools.¹⁵

Access to adequate income and in-kind supports to tackle food poverty

Children in enforced deprivation

Households are categorised as living in enforced deprivation if they are unable to afford two out of a list of 11 items deemed to be the norm for people in society.¹⁶ Two of these items relate to food.¹⁷ In the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024, just 3.7 per cent of the population as a whole indicated that they are unable to afford a roast once a week.¹⁸ This rate fell to 2.2 per cent for households containing two adults and one to three children. However, 13.5 per cent of households with one adult and one to three children were unable to afford a roast once a week, substantially higher than the SILC 2023 rate of 7.5 per cent.¹⁹ When examined by age group, 4.3 per cent of children were living in households that were unable to afford a roast once a week in 2024.²⁰

4.3% of children were living in households that were unable to afford a roast once a week in 2024.



A second indicator looks at ability to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day with 1.8 per cent of the population experiencing this deprivation measure.²¹ This rate was marginally higher for children, with 2 per cent living in households unable to afford this.²² For households containing one adult and one to three children this rose to 8 per cent, another stark increase from the SILC 2023 figure of 4.6 per cent.²³ Households containing two adults and one to three children had a much lower rate at 0.9 per cent.²⁴

SILC 2024 Statistics				
	Population	Households containing 1 adult and 1-3 children	Households containing 2 adults and 1-3 children	0-17 year olds
Unable to afford a roast once a week	3.7%	13.5%	2.2%	4.3%
Unable to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day	1.8%	8.0%	0.9%	2.0%
Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025).				

15 O Kilduff, et al., *The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) in the Republic of Ireland - Findings from 2022 and 2023* (HSE 2024) 25.

16 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025)

17 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025)

18 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025)

19 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025)

20 Central Statistics Office, 'SIA131 Type of Deprivation Item Experienced' (CSO 2023) <https://bit.ly/43wbwu7> accessed 25 March 2025.

21 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025)

22 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023 - Table 2.1 Food related deprivation items by demographic characteristics and year (% of individuals)' (CSO 2024) <https://bit.ly/4jED3ya> accessed 25 March 2025.

23 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024' Table 3.3, (CSO 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4bXqM5C>> accessed 19 March 2025.

24 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025)

Children in consistent poverty

SILC 2024 examined the proportion of households and individuals living in consistent poverty and experiencing food-related deprivation. Consistent poverty is a measure of poverty that defines individuals as being at risk of poverty and experiencing enforced deprivation. In SILC 2024, 5 per cent of the population were experiencing consistent poverty. Of the 95 per cent not living in consistent poverty, 2.8 per cent were unable to afford a roast once a week, and 1.3 per cent were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day.²⁵ In comparison, 20.8 per cent of individuals living in consistent poverty were unable to afford a roast once a week, and 11.4 per cent were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day.²⁶ Therefore, those living in consistent poverty are significantly more likely to experience food related deprivation.

SILC 2024 Statistics ²⁷		
	Percentage of individuals in consistent poverty	Percentage of individuals not in consistent poverty
Unable to afford a roast once a week	20.8%	2.8%
Unable to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day	11.4%	1.3%
Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024 (CSO 2025).		



Food costs make up the largest individual component of a household's budget for families with children.

Food costs make up the largest individual component of a household's budget for families with children (23.7 per cent for urban families and 20.9 per cent for rural families).²⁸ As children get older, the weekly cost of a healthy food basket increases, with a pre-school child costing €27.90, a primary school child costing €42.23 and a young person in secondary school costing €62.64 in an urban area.²⁹ The cumulative impact of rises in inflation over the course of the last number of years has only exacerbated this (see Section 1: Income Adequacy).

Being able to buy nutritious food locally or having access to transport to a local supermarket helps prevent food poverty. *Growing Up in Ireland* – the national study on children – has found that where you live determines where you shop. More economically advantaged households do not have as far to travel for food shopping.³⁰ Rural households have higher costs of accessing a healthy diet.³¹ Access to supermarkets in rural areas is more challenging. Research which explored the issue of food poverty in a rural area noted that the closest supermarkets were 10 km away with limited public transport access.³²

25 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024' SIA80, (CSO 2025) <https://bit.ly/45axSST> accessed 15 May 2025.

26 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024' SIA80, (CSO 2025) <https://bit.ly/45axSST> accessed 15 May 2025.

27 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024' SIA80, (CSO 2025) <https://bit.ly/45axSST> accessed 15 May 2025.

28 Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 20.

29 Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024: Appendix Tables* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 3A.

30 Richard Layte and Cathal McCrory, *Growing Up In Ireland Overweight And Obesity Among 9-Year-Olds* (DCYA 2011) 36.

31 Safefood, 'Cost of a healthy food basket in Ireland?' (Safefood 2023) 6-7.

32 Department of Social Protection, *The Prevalence of Food Poverty in Ireland* (Amárach 2023) 62.

A lack of storage for fresh food and limited cooking facilities also impact negatively on eating habits as some parents have to buy energy-dense, non-perishable food if they are staying in emergency homeless accommodation like B&Bs and hotels.³³ A qualitative study about the experiences of 52 families living in homeless accommodation in Dublin was published in 2024.³⁴ While the study provides important insights about the families' experiences, they are not generalisable to the entire population of families experiencing homelessness.³⁵ In the study, one quarter of participants raised concerns about dietary and food needs.³⁶ While some families had access to a kitchen to cook, this was not without its challenges regarding the quality of the facilities and time allocation to cook. However, many families needed to buy take-aways or fast-food.³⁷

In 2024, the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) weekly food basket for a family of two parents and two children (one in primary and one in secondary school) was €187.05 for families in urban areas and €197.85 for families in rural areas.³⁸ Children and young people living in families unable to afford a nutritious and adequate diet are at risk of experiencing hunger. The *Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey* found that children in lower social class groups are more likely to go to school or bed hungry than their peers in other social class groups.³⁹ If the School Meals Programme is effective at reducing childhood hunger, 'it has the potential to improve children's mental health outcomes'.⁴⁰ This is supported by other studies.⁴¹

The effects of inflation on individual food items

While the sustained increases in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) are showing signs of slowing down,⁴² the increase in the prices of individual items can have a disproportionate impact on certain households.⁴³ Between April 2024 and April 2025, the cost of food increased by 3.4 per cent in Ireland.⁴⁴ In terms of individual items, the price of breakfast cereals increased by 4.2 per cent, the price of fresh whole milk increased by 12.4 per cent, and the price of butter increased by 16.4 per cent in this time period.⁴⁵



Between April 2024 and April 2025, the cost of food increased by 3.4 per cent in Ireland.

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- 33 Michelle Share and Marita Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation* (Focus Ireland 2018) 9-11.
- 34 O'Donnell, L., Slein, A. and Hoey, D. *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024).
- 35 O'Donnell, L., Slein, A. and Hoey, D. *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024) 6.
- 36 O'Donnell, L., Slein, A. and Hoey, D. *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024) 6.
- 37 O'Donnell, L., Slein, A. and Hoey, D. *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024) 26.
- 38 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 'Core MESL Weekly Expenditure Budget: Food - TP 2b' (Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2024) 1A – 2A <https://bit.ly/3YMgyjr> accessed 15 May 2025.
- 39 Gavin., A et al *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2022* (University of Galway and Department of Health 2024) 44.
- 40 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 2.
- 41 Food Research and Action Centre (FRAC), *The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior*, (FRAC 2018).
- 42 Central Statistics Office (CSO), *Consumer Price Index April 2024* (CSO 2024).
- 43 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).
- 44 The Central Statistics Office (CSO), *Consumer Price Index 2024* (CSO 2024).
- 45 The Central Statistics Office (CSO), *Consumer Price Index April 2024* (CSO 2024).

MESL 2024 research found that between March 2023 and March 2024, the cost of a MESL food basket increased by 1.4 per cent for urban households and 1.6 per cent for rural households.⁴⁶ This demonstrates a slowing of food inflation since the previous year, however, the cumulative increase in the MESL food basket between 2020 and 2024 was 23.1 per cent for urban households and 17.8 per cent for rural households.⁴⁷ This increase over time presents difficulties for families relying on lower incomes.

In particular, MESL 2024 found that the food budget for an infant has seen the highest increase of all age-groups, with an overall increase of 27.3 per cent between 2020 to 2024.⁴⁸ This is the highest increase in all MESL food budgets over four years.⁴⁹ The research found that this increase was largely due to a 37 per cent increase in baby formula over four years. Baby biscuits also increased by 30 per cent and baby food jars by 36 per cent in that time frame, with baby food jars seeing an increase of 21 per cent in 2023 alone.⁵⁰

Food budgets for infants have seen the highest increase of all age-groups, with an overall increase of 27.3 per cent between 2020 and 2024.



- Baby formula +27%
- Baby biscuits +30%
- Baby food jars +36%

Weekly Cost of a MESL Food Basket

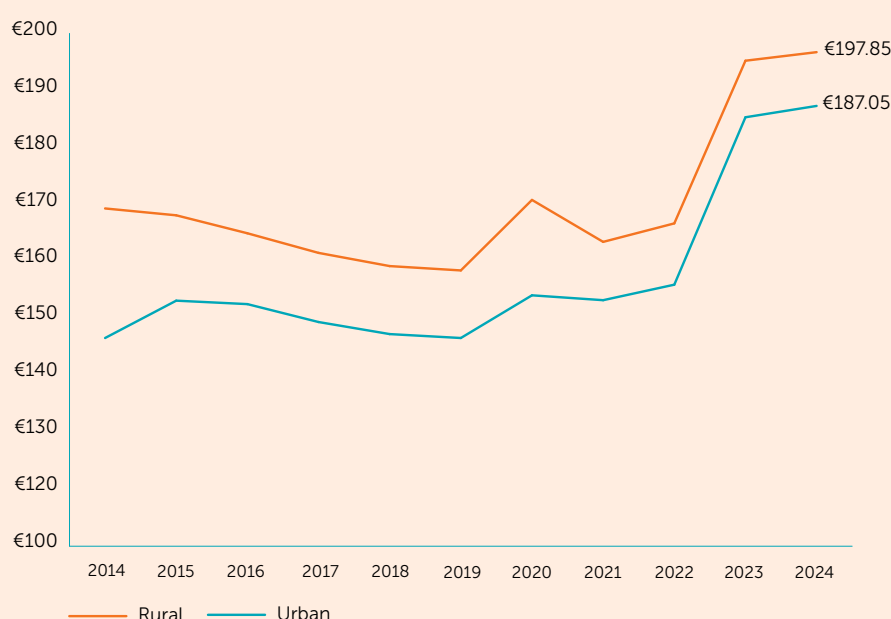


Table 2, weekly cost of a MESL Food Basket for a two-parent family, with one child attending primary school, and one child attending secondary school between 2014 and 2024.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 20.

⁴⁷ Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 20.

⁴⁸ Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 21.

⁴⁹ Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 21.

⁵⁰ Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2024* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 21.

⁵¹ Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 'Urban Budgets' (Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2014-2024) <https://bit.ly/3HqwZvX> accessed 29 April 2024; Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 'Rural Budgets' (Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2014-2024) < <https://www.budgeting.ie/rural-budgets/> > accessed 29 April 2024.

Addressing food poverty through school meals

The *EU Recommendation on Investing in Children* recommends that States ‘invest in prevention, particularly during early childhood years, by putting in place comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures’.⁵² Building on the Recommendation, in June 2021, the European Child Guarantee was adopted at EU level.⁵³ It aims to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion by supporting the 27 EU Member States to make efforts to guarantee access to quality key services for children in need. The Child Guarantee calls on Member States to ensure effective and free access to a healthy meal each school day for children in need.⁵⁴

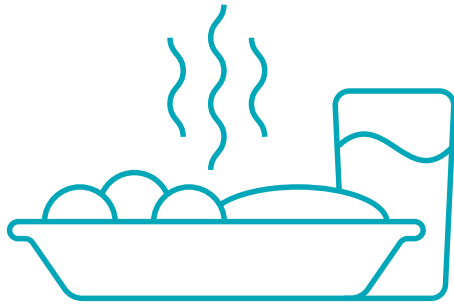
Ireland’s *National Action Plan* on the Guarantee, published in June 2022, restates the current services, programmes and supports in place across relevant government departments within the scope of the Guarantee, including those that promote healthy eating and the provision of meals in schools.⁵⁵ This aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which states that every child has the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical health and governments have an obligation to combat disease and malnutrition through the provision of adequate nutritious food.⁵⁶

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that in implementing this right, providing food in school is ‘desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day’ and recommends that this is combined with education on nutrition and health.⁵⁷

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) funds the School Meals Programme. The programme provides funding towards the provision of food through the allocation of a per pupil rate.⁵⁸ This includes a cold meal option for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as well as a hot meal option.⁵⁹ The objective of the scheme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to enable them to take full advantage of the education provided to them.⁶⁰

In September 2019, the DSP launched a hot school meals pilot which involved 37 primary schools benefitting 6,744 students for the 2019/2020 academic year.⁶¹ Since then, the Government has done significant work in expanding the provision of hot school meals with annual increases in allocations in Budgets 2022, 2023, and 2024. Budget 2025 allocated €72 million to expand the Hot School Meals Programme to all remaining primary schools, completing the roll-out at primary level.⁶² There has been an overall expansion of the programme from the initial cohort of 37 schools in 2019,⁶³ to an expected 3,200 schools by the end of 2025.⁶⁴ In the 2023/2024 academic year, over 266,000 pupils availed of hot school meals, and over 316,000 were eligible.⁶⁵ In the academic year 2024/2025, 344,617 children will be eligible to receive a hot school meal and 271,842 are expected to benefit.⁶⁶

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- 52 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 53 European Commission, Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, Brussels, 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final.
- 54 European Commission, Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, Brussels, 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final.
- 55 Government of Ireland, *EU Child Guarantee Ireland’s National Action Plan* (DCEDIY 2022) 38.
- 56 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 24.
- 57 UNCRC General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24) CRC/C/GC/15, para 46.
- 58 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 17.
- 59 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 17.
- 60 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 14 December 2023 [55945/23].
- 61 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 29 July 2020 [18482/20]. All primary schools (over 3,000) were invited to apply with 506 schools registering interest, suggesting high demand for the limited pilot. The schools chosen to participate in the pilot were selected randomly, having regard to geographical spread, numbers enrolled, range of suppliers and the overall budget available.
- 62 Government of Ireland, Budget 2025 Expenditure Report (Government Publications 2025) 146.
- 63 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 16 January 2023.
- 64 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 7 January 2025.
- 65 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 7 January 2025.
- 66 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 7 January 2025.



In the academic year 2024/2025, 344,617 children will be eligible to receive a hot school meal and 271,842 are expected to benefit.

The Department is currently working on the development of a school meals programme strategy for up to 2030.⁶⁷ This aligns with the Concluding Observations of Ireland's last examination by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that call for the expansion of the school meals programme along with providing nutrition services.⁶⁸

The new *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future*, commits to completing the roll-out to primary schools in 2025 and commencing the roll-out of the Hot School Meals Programme to all secondary schools over the lifetime of the Government.⁶⁹ In 2023, then Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys T.D., announced that universal provision of a free hot school meal to every school-going child by 2030.⁷⁰ Considering the roll-out to primary school students is expected to be completed in 2025, the Department of Social Protection would still have a further four years to expand the programme to all secondary school students. This is an achievable goal in the context of the successful expansion thus far. The rollout of this initiative to post-primary schools needs take a similar approach, focusing first on schools in the DEIS programme by adopting a phased universalism approach. This means prioritising areas of highest need as part of an overall universal strategy to

provide access to hot meals.⁷¹ It means a prioritisation of those most in need without adopting a stigmatising approach.⁷²

As of January 2023, there was an increase in the rates of funding for school meals for the first time since 2003. The rate for breakfasts increased by 15 cent, cold lunches by 30 cent, dinners by 60 cent, and hot school meals by 30 cent.⁷³ This is an average increase of 22 per cent. While these increases are welcome, in the context of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, they do not go far enough. In 2022, school meal suppliers warned that the system was at 'breaking point'; since the last time the prices were increased, inflation for the cost of food has increased by at least 33 per cent.⁷⁴ A 22 per cent increase in rates is not enough to cover this change.

There has been some concern from experts on the nutritional standards of the food provided under the School Meals Programme. However, there is limited comprehensive data or research on the quality of hot school meals with much of the evidence to date being raised in the media. In December 2024, the Health Service Executive (HSE)'s Clinical Lead for Obesity called for an evaluation into the nutritional standards of the hot school meals programme, warning against providing 'ultra-processed' foods under the scheme.⁷⁵ These sentiments were echoed by a food policy consultant and lecturer in food policy at University College Cork, who found that some meals provided under the scheme contained additives which are 'are disease-promoting and contribute to creating an [Ultra-Processed Food]-based diet for children.'⁷⁶ Furthermore, media reports highlight that the Department of Social Protection has received 80 complaints or messages or feedback about school meals. This has included a letter from the Coeliac Society of Ireland who have highlighted that the current options available are limited for children who have coeliac disease.⁷⁷

67 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 7 January 2025.

68 UNCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

69 Government of Ireland, Draft Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future (Government of Ireland, 2025) 101.

70 Department of Social Protection 'Minister Humphreys announces plans for roll-out of Hot School Meals to all Primary Schools' (Press Release 30 March 2023).

71 Paul Downes, 'Educational Disadvantage Discussion' *Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science debate* 17 December 2020, Houses of the Oireachtas.

72 Paul Downes, 'The Importance of Hot Meals in Schools' *In touch*, no. 190 (January / February 2020).

73 Department of Social Protection, 'School Meals Scheme', <<https://bit.ly/3ULOViv>> accessed 25 March 2025.

74 C O'Brien, 'It's at breaking point': Thousands of pupils risk losing school meals' (The Irish Times 2022).

75 C Purcell, 'Hot school meals scheme: 'We are institutionalising consumption of ultra-processed food in our children'' (The Irish Times 2025) <<https://bit.ly/42tAz0y>> accessed 25 March 2025.

76 C Purcell, 'Hot school meals scheme: 'We are institutionalising consumption of ultra-processed food in our children'' (The Irish Times 2025) <<https://bit.ly/42tAz0y>> accessed 25 March 2025.

77 J. Casey 'It was disgusting': 80 complaints or feedback messages about school meals' (Irish Examiner 2025).

The DSP has an oversight role in relation to the School Meals Programme and had indicated that it conducts regular inspections of schools.⁷⁸ Under the existing process, 400 schools are inspected annually. Inspections for 2024 have concluded and just less than 1 per cent of cases were found to have an issue with menu compliance.⁷⁹ In April 2025, Minister for Social Protection, Dara Calleary T.D., announced that a review of the nutritional standards of the hot school meals will be conducted and submitted to the Minister by the end of 2025. This review will be carried out by a dietician supervised by the Department of Health and will coordinate with the Interdepartmental Group on School Meals.⁸⁰ In addition to this, the Minister announced that by September 2025, high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) foods would be removed from the Hot School Meals Programme.⁸¹ The expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme through sustained and incremental investment over multiple budget cycles is a good example of how pilot initiatives to tackle child poverty can be scaled up, and one that can be mirrored by other government departments. However, the failure to address the nutritional aspects will impact negatively on child health.

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028 is Ireland's first ever cross-departmental strategy to support babies, young children and their families.⁸² The whole of government strategy to improve children's early years commits to addressing food poverty through measures such as piloting a meals programme in Early Learning and Care (ELC) Settings, and an evaluation after one year.⁸³ The Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme, also known as the 'Hot Meals Pilot Scheme', was completed over the course of six weeks in May 2023.⁸⁴ As a measure under First 5, €150,000 was provided to support the purchase

of food, kitchen equipment, and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) food safety training. During the pilot programme, 353 children across nine providers in five different counties were eligible to receive meals.⁸⁵ As part of the programme, providers were supported by a dietician in terms of menu options, and parents were provided with a hard copy of the *101 Square Meals* book published by SafeFood.⁸⁶

Prior to the pilot programme, 80 per cent of parents sent their child to the service with at least one meal. Over the course of the pilot, this figure reduced to 23 per cent.⁸⁷ Staff in service providers noted that the implementation of the pilot allowed them to address certain situations they had in the service. One service gave the example of a child who relied on one packet of biscuits for the entire week. The staff were able to step in and ensure nutritious meals and snacks were provided for this child.⁸⁸ Overall, the pilot appears to have been successful with 94 per cent of parents reporting a positive experience, and 98 per cent in support of this programme continuing.⁸⁹ The pilot programme also had benefits beyond providing regular nutritious meals to children. The reported 94 per cent of parents who had a positive experience correlated this with observing improved behaviour and attitudes of their children during the course of the pilot.⁹⁰ Further to this, the pilot had a holistic impact on families' attitudes and behaviours towards food, helping them to create healthy eating habits. Most parents (at 59 per cent) said that they had started to have family meals at home because of the pilot, and 65 per cent said that they would like to explore healthy eating more because of this programme.⁹¹ This demonstrates the positive impact on children's behaviours and attitudes, and the social and health benefits of this pilot for families.

78 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 31 January 2025.

79 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 31 January 2025.

80 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Calleary announces expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme and Review of Nutritional Standards', Press Release, (Department of Social Protection 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4iBuKm4>> accessed 29 April 2024.

81 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Calleary announces expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme and Review of Nutritional Standards', Press Release, (Department of Social Protection 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4iBuKm4>> accessed 29 April 2024.

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

83 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Annual Implementation Report 2021/2022* (DCEDIY 2023), 92.

84 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 5.

85 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 6.

86 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 12.

87 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 12.

88 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 15-16.

89 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 23.

90 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 24.

91 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023), 24.

Cross-government approach to addressing food poverty

Following its review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), it was recommended that Ireland 'adopt a comprehensive national strategy for the protection and promotion of the right to adequate food.'⁹² The Concluding Observations from ICESCR noted that this strategy should be created in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, and should effectively combat food insecurity, all forms of malnutrition, including obesity, and ill health linked to an unhealthy diet.⁹³

In May 2021, the cross-government Food Poverty Working Group was established by then Minister of State with responsibility for social inclusion, Joe O'Brien T.D.⁹⁴ The group comprises of representatives from across a number of government departments, and representatives from the community and voluntary sector, including the Children's Rights Alliance, Society of St Vincent de Paul, and Crosscare.⁹⁵

Since its inception, the Food Poverty Working Group has worked on a number of publications that have been important in understanding the nature of food poverty in Ireland. A mapping exercise was carried out to establish what government initiatives currently exist to address food poverty. This resulted in the publication of a report in July 2022 highlighting the various schemes, initiatives and programmes delivered across government departments to address food poverty.⁹⁶

The report highlighted that in 2021, €89 million was provided in funding for programmes that directly address food poverty (such as that provided under

European Social Fund+) with a further €399 million allocated to schemes with a broader focus but with a food poverty aspect.⁹⁷

In 2022, the Department of Social Protection commissioned case study research on the prevalence and drivers of food poverty.⁹⁸ This research was published in 2024 and examined two case study areas; one of a rural area, and another of an urban area.⁹⁹ The research found that nearly all households in both communities have been impacted by rising costs; many who may have donated before are now struggling themselves, and the most deprived members of the communities continue to struggle.¹⁰⁰ The report highlights a number of issues for consideration, including; the need for food nutrition related poverty and associated issues, such as obesity, to be normalised in the conversation; the issue of overcoming pride and food poverty as a highly sensitive topic.¹⁰¹

In Budget 2023, Minister O'Brien announced an allocation of €400,000 in funding to support the piloting of a case worker approach to tackling food poverty.¹⁰² Crucially, a casework approach to food poverty helps families regain independence.¹⁰³ The pilot case worker model is operational in Cork, Dublin, and Limerick since September 2023.¹⁰⁴ Initially the programme was to run for 18 months until March 2025, however, this has now been extended for another nine months until November 2025.¹⁰⁵ An evaluation report on the pilot is expected to be published in Q2 2025 and any further extension will be dependent on the outcome of this report, availability of additional funding and a public procurement process.¹⁰⁶

92 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 43.

93 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 43.

94 Department of Social Protection 'Minister O'Brien Announces New Working Group on Food Poverty' (Department of Social Protection 2021).

95 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

96 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3OgXILM>> accessed 25 March 2025.

97 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022).

98 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

99 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

100 Department of Social Protection, 'The Prevalence of Food Poverty in Ireland (Amárach 2023)' 5.

101 Department of Social Protection, 'The Prevalence of Food Poverty in Ireland (Amárach 2023)' 6.

102 Department of Social Protection 'Minister Humphreys announces Social Protection Budget worth €2.2 billion', Press Release, 27 September 2023.

103 Y Flemming, 'Making the case for food poverty casework' <https://bit.ly/3vNLAM0> accessed 25 March 2025.

104 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

105 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 31 January 2025.

106 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 31 January 2025.

The mapping report and the case study research informed the Working Group's Action Plan published in July 2024, which outlines 21 actions across multiple Government Departments to tackle the issue of food poverty between 2024 and 2027.¹⁰⁷ Some of these actions include;

- continue to expand the Hot School Meals scheme;¹⁰⁸
- monitor nutritional content in the hot school meals programme;
- scope initiatives to tackle Holiday Hunger;¹⁰⁹ and,
- extend the food poverty caseworker programme for a further two years following the evaluation of the scheme.¹¹⁰

The Working Group could be key in addressing food poverty over the coming years, and a commitment to reestablishing this group over the lifetime of this Government would be welcome.

Tackling the gaps in school meal provision during holidays

The use of the phrase 'Holiday Hunger' first appeared in the UK in 1909.¹¹¹ The phenomenon refers to a situation whereby 'economically disadvantaged households with school-aged children experience food insecurity during the school holidays'.¹¹² Many stakeholders are concerned about the gap in provision of meals outside of school term, particularly with regard to exam time and holiday periods and how this is compounded by other factors.¹¹³ Although it is not a new phenomenon, thousands of children in Ireland are still at risk of Holiday Hunger.¹¹⁴ This lack of school meal provision in holiday periods means that many children go hungry.¹¹⁵

In March 2023, a report on the *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* was published.¹¹⁶ Amongst the key findings highlighted by the evaluation is the issue of holiday hunger. The report notes that this phenomenon is compounded by external factors such as the cost of living and other challenges that disadvantaged families face in Irish society.¹¹⁷ The report notes that the issue of Holiday Hunger is an issue that requires a 'broader Government response' and that any decision on how to address holiday hunger would have to 'align with the Working Group on Food Poverty'.¹¹⁸ Amongst the report's short-term to medium-term improvements to be delivered by 2025, there is a call to 'extend a modified version of the School Meals Programme to beyond term time to address holiday hunger'.¹¹⁹

Budget 2025 committed €1.3 million in funding to address holiday hunger through a summer pilot programme. This pilot will be implemented through cooperation between the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education. The Department of Social Protection's School Meals Programme and the Department of Education's Summer Programme will be used to implement this pilot holiday hunger project. This is expected to take place in Summer 2025,¹²⁰ meeting the *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme's* recommendation. It is expected that this pilot will support up to 40,000 children with complex special educational needs and those at the greatest risk of educational disadvantage.¹²¹

107 Department of Social Protection, *Action Plan on Food Poverty – July 2024* (DSP 2024).

108 Department of Social Protection, *Action Plan on Food Poverty – July 2024* (DSP 2024) 3.

109 Department of Social Protection, *Action Plan on Food Poverty – July 2024* (DSP 2024) 5.

110 Department of Social Protection, *Action Plan on Food Poverty – July 2024* (DSP 2024) 2.

111 A Connolly via M Long, M Defeyter, P Stretesky, *Holiday Hunger in the UK: Local Responses to Childhood Food Insecurity*, (Routledge 2021) 3.

112 A Connolly via M Long, M Defeyter, P Stretesky, *Holiday Hunger in the UK: Local Responses to Childhood Food Insecurity*, (Routledge 2021) 11.

113 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 110.

114 T Ward 'Food poverty over the Christmas period' (Irish Times 2023) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/2022/12/14/food-poverty-over-the-christmas-period/>> accessed 25 March 2025.

115 Food Cycle, 'What is Holiday Hunger?' (Food Cycle 2022) <<https://foodcycle.org.uk/what-is-holiday-hunger/>> accessed 6 March 2024.

116 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022).

117 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 4.

118 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 113.

119 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 7.

120 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 8 January 2025.

121 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 8 January 2025.

In addition to this, Budget 2025 allocated €500,000 to a pilot programme to address food poverty during the summer months among an older cohort of young people, aged 10 to 18 years, who are at risk of not having access to a hot or substantial meal during the school holidays. This will be run in Summer 2025 by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE). The pilot is proposed to be carried out by the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and delivered through the UBU (Your Place Your Space) services.¹²² UBU services provide out-of-school supports to young people in their local communities to enable them to achieve their full potential by improving their personal and social development outcomes.¹²³ The pilot project will aim to deliver the programme in both urban and rural settings with the potential to reach approximately 1,500 marginalised or vulnerable young people. The pilot will test a range of approaches to providing food for those attending youth services every weekday for the 12-week duration of the secondary school summer holiday.¹²⁴ It is hoped that, if successful, this pilot initiative will inform how best to operate a larger programme in subsequent years to address holiday hunger.¹²⁵

It is welcome that Budget 2025 acknowledges the real and pressing issue of holiday hunger and makes substantial steps to bridge the gap left when children and families reliant on school meals cannot access them when schools close for the holidays. The cross-government action on this issue is also very positive. It will be important for these programmes to be evaluated after implementation this Summer, with the intention of expanding the pilot in the future.

Food poverty for children living in Direct Provision

Investing in Children calls on states to pay particular focus to children who may be at increased risk due to multiple disadvantages including those from an ethnic minority or who are migrants.¹²⁶ Children living in Direct Provision are particularly at risk of food poverty and there are specific actions needed to address the issue impacting them. There are 9,389 children currently being accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS).¹²⁷ Of these, 7,226 children are living in emergency accommodation centres.¹²⁸ Overall standards, including in relation to the provision of food, vary both in permanent and emergency accommodation centres and between them. One of the most pressing issues is children accessing nutritious food. Centres either offer a canteen service, preparing meals for residents, or a kitchen where residents can prepare their own meals with their own ingredients, which they either get with food vouchers or food bought by the centre management.¹²⁹

Parents report in both types of centres that the nutritional needs of their families are not met.¹³⁰ In the canteen service, parents report unsuitable food for children and babies, instances of undercooked food and concerns about diarrhoea and children being underweight.¹³¹

122 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 8 January 2025.

123 UBU, 'About' (UBU 2025) <<https://bit.ly/40SGP0Y>> accessed 25 March 2025.

124 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 8 January 2025.

125 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 8 January 2025.

126 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013) 8.

127 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – April 2025* (DCEDIY April 2025).

128 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – April 2025* (DCEDIY April 2025).

129 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) 34.

130 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) 33.

131 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) 34.

Where parents live at centres with access to a kitchen and can cook for their children, problems include overcrowded kitchens, for example one stove for 80 residents and inadequate storage facilities, for example two/three fridges for a whole centre. This means residents are forced to cook meals daily, since there is no place to store cooked meals, and to shop for groceries every day or almost every day since there is nowhere to store ingredients, leading to additional transportation expenses.¹³²

132 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) 34-35.

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Realise the commitment made in response to the publication of the evaluation of the School Meals Programme to fund all DEIS secondary schools to provide a hot school meal by 2025.
- Extend and expand the Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme to an increased number of early learning and childcare providers and scope the possibility of a permanent Additional Nutrition Programme for these service providers.
- Evaluate, extend, and expand the Holiday Hunger Pilot Programme to the Christmas Holidays 2025 and Summer Holidays 2026.

Short-term

- Publish a report on the results of the 2024 inspections of schools and conduct a more comprehensive audit of the nutritional aspects of the meals provided under the School Meals Programme.

Long-term

- Develop a national action plan to tackle food poverty with a view to associated plans being put in place at local level.

Spotlight

BEST PRACTICE IN ADDRESSING FOOD POVERTY

Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services

What is the issue?

Children and young people are significantly impacted—physically, mentally, and emotionally—when they go without food or experience malnourishment. Low-income families often have a difficult time providing healthy, nutritious, and filling meals for their children. This means that, for many children, meals can be infrequent or inadequate. For those already struggling to put food on the table on a daily basis, the rapid rise in food prices in recent years has made this all the more difficult. The provision of Hot School Meals has helped to address this gap, providing a guaranteed hot meal every day for over 270,000 thousand children during the 2023/2024 school year. However, when schools close for the holidays, there is a gap for families who rely on this provision.

Children living with domestic violence or who have become homeless due to domestic violence can experience poverty due to related financial abuse. Leaving a situation that is unsafe is especially difficult when a parent or guardian does not have access to their own money. Along with other pressures, this makes accessing a nutritious, balanced diet even harder for children in such situations. The provision of Hot School Meals has helped to address this gap, providing a guaranteed hot meal every day for over 270,000 thousand children during the 2023/2024 school year. For children exposed to domestic violence the guaranteed access to food that the School Meals Programme provides during term time might not be available to them. They may not have access to their school at all for safety reasons. This means the guarantee of a hot school meal is not available to them not only during school term, but also during holiday periods.

What is the solution?

Domestic violence support services are an effective pathway to supporting children who experience several barriers in accessing nutritious food. Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services is one such example. The service supports children and young people who are living with domestic violence or have become homeless because of it. The children in their service are also becoming increasingly aware of the increase in the cost of living and know this has an impact on their food. Having a nurturing, safe, and supported space has had a positive impact on children and young people within the service.

How does it work?

Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services works with children and young people who are living in refuge accommodation and those living within the community to make sure their right to be safe and protected from harm is upheld. The team provides one-to-one supports, group programmes, parenting supports, play therapy, and adolescent counselling services. Importantly,



they support families financially by providing cash grants for various needs, including food provision. Children and young people talk about being provided with a safe space where they can share their experiences of domestic violence in a judgement-free way.

During school holidays, the service works to bridge the gap of supports they see in the children and families who access/attend their services. In 2024, Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services applied to the Children's Rights Alliance annual Christmas Food Provision Scheme that provides grants to members who are working to tackle the issue of food poverty and holiday hunger. The service was successfully allocated funding from the scheme to purchase food vouchers from Aldi and distribute them to families within their service. Families supported by Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services received food vouchers for grocery stores in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Families who said they were overwhelmed and anxious in the leadup to the holiday said that the funding allowed them to provide meals for their children. By assisting families financially through opportunities like this, as well as their own fundraising, Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services has been able to reduce financial strains on the families they work with to put food on the table for their children.

What is the impact?

The model of care at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services has proven to be very positive. From the moment children and young people enter the service, the Child & Youth Support Team is there to support them and create a safe space for them to express themselves. The increase in staffing has also meant the service has been able to provide additional group spaces and one-to-one sessions, aiding children and young people's recovery of domestic violence. Those in the service have said they feel safe to engage and express their expediciencies in a judgement-free environment. Staff have also noted how remarkable it is to see how by providing and nurturing a safe and supported space, which offers supports through play and creative mediums, can have a positive impact on children and young people.

From the Christmas Food Provision Scheme funding, Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services was able to provide food vouchers to 168 young people and 68 families. Of those families, 33 identified as being from an ethnic minority, migrant background, or a member of the Traveller or Roma Communities. Families shared that they felt significant

relief after getting these vouchers—they noted that the holidays

can be an extra stressful time, and it can be harder to put food

on the table during this season. The vouchers "provided a

lifeline" for children and their families experiencing both

domestic violence and food poverty. Meath Women's

Refuge and Support Services has seen the positive

impact this programme has had on children, young

people, and their families in recovery of domestic

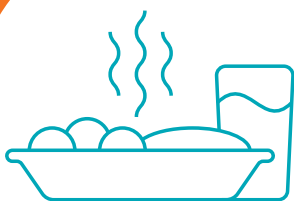
violence. Staff have noted how remarkable it is to see

how by providing and nurturing a safe and supported

space, which offers supports through play and creative

mediums, can have a positive impact on children and

young people.



How can it be emulated?

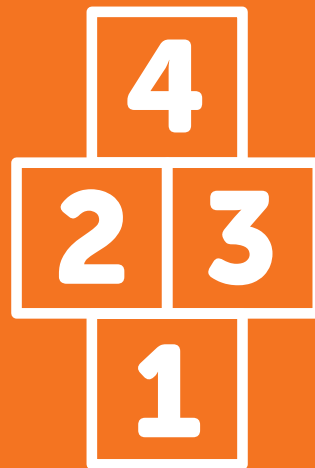
It is evident through the work of Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services that strong supports must be provided to children and young people who may be experiencing domestic violence. This includes emotional support as well as physical support, including the provision of food for children who go hungry. Risk assessments are also crucial to this to ensure that the supports provided are child-centred, engage with children where they are at in their recovery of domestic violence, and seek their voice and input.

While there have been successful initiatives delivered by Government to tackle food poverty, there needs to be a more sustained approach to addressing holiday hunger or bridging gaps where families are over-reliant on the hot school meals programme. For children who attend services like Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services, the school setting may not be a safe or appropriate place to access food provision. These families may need targeted income supports to open access routes to healthy food for their children.

"The staff, they just made it really easy for me because we came here with just the clothes on our backs. I came in here and they sorted food out, they sorted clothes out, PJs for the kids, underwear, everything. I also worried a lot about their toys and that. [Older child], she loves Barbies, and they got her Barbies. She was so happy with that. They had two baby dolls that they let [younger child] keep. It was just magical, stuff that I worried about, they took that off of me". - A mother

"I didn't want to say, but this month I didn't get any maintenance, so that will be really big help." - Mother and two children in receipt of the Christmas Food Provision Scheme.

Early Years



EARLY YEARS

The EU Recommendation, *Investing in Children*, recommends that the State provides 'access to high quality, inclusive early education and care, ensure it is affordable and adapt provision to the needs of families'.¹ It calls on Member States to focus on the social inclusion and development potential of early childhood education and care, thereby recognising it as social investment and as a means to address inequality and disadvantage through early intervention.² This can be achieved by ensuring that there are specific incentives to make sure children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in early childhood education and care in a way that doesn't stigmatise or segregate.³ The *Recommendation* recognises that early childhood education and care can act as an early warning system to identify specific child- or family-related challenges that may require further intervention.⁴

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises that support for parents in the early years of a child's life is particularly important. In interpreting this provision, the UN Committee requires the State 'to take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services, maternity protection and facilities for which they are eligible'.⁵ In its Concluding Observations on Ireland's last examination under the UNCRC in 2023, the Committee called for increased access to affordable childcare for parents engaged in the labour market, especially those experiencing disadvantage.⁶

In July 2023, the Department of An Taoiseach published the initial Work Plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office.⁷ One of the six priority issues for the Office is early learning and childcare.⁸ The Work Plan recognises not only the benefit of early learning and care to children living in poverty, but also its ability to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.⁹ The Programme Office aims to bring particular focus to targeted provision of places to children experiencing socioeconomic deprivation and the development of the new model of funding that seeks to tackle disadvantage through and within early childhood education and care settings.¹⁰

In its 18-month Progress Report on developments in the area of early learning and childcare, the Programme Office acknowledges the progress made in terms of reaching €1.1 billion investment in the sector in 2024.¹¹

Recognising the benefit to participation in early learning and childcare, particularly for children living in poverty, the Programme Office highlights key developments such as the launch of Equal Start and investment in schemes that work to ensure children can access early learning and childcare at no cost or at significantly reduced out-of-pocket costs to parents.¹²

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- 1 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 2 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 3 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 4 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 5 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 7 on Implementing Rights in Early Childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1 para 21
 - 6 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 26
 - 7 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).
 - 8 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 14-15.
 - 9 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 14-15.
 - 10 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 14-15.
 - 11 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 23.
 - 12 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 23.

Access to affordable ECEC for all children and their families

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is defined as non-parental care provided to children before they enter the formal education system.¹³ Historically, Ireland's comparative expenditure on ECEC has lagged behind other countries. Data from the Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) comparing public spending on childcare and early education shows that up until a few years ago, Ireland's public spending in this area was the second lowest across Europe.¹⁴ In 2019, Government pledged to continue increasing investment in ECEC in order to bring Ireland in line with OECD averages.¹⁵ The Government has taken significant steps in this regard, with the last three Budgets committing to €1 billion annual investment. The realisation of this goal in Budget 2023 was achieved five years ahead of the schedule set out in *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028*.¹⁶ The two subsequent Budgets continued to maintain and build on this achievement with €1.1 billion allocated for the sector in Budget 2024¹⁷ and €1.37 billion allocated in Budget 2025.¹⁸

The OECD publishes a series of reports, *Starting Strong*, that are focused on providing comparable international information on ECEC, including thematic reports on key policy areas. The latest report, published in January 2025, considers how inequalities can be reduced by investing in ECEC.¹⁹ The report identifies a number of means by which inequalities can be reduced by Government.²⁰ A policy mix of both universal and targeted approaches can ensure that, while everyone benefits, there is also a specific focus on children and families experiencing the most disadvantage.²¹ Ensuring that childcare is affordable, available and accessible for families is critical for those facing participation barriers.²² In order to address issues of affordability, *Starting Strong* notes the importance of providing targeted financial supports.²³ This is of particular importance given the way in which services have developed in Ireland, whereby a market-based system has predominated with fees set by each individual service.



Ensuring that childcare is affordable, available and accessible for families is critical for those facing participation barriers.

- 13 Parliamentary Budget Office, *Childcare in Ireland: An Analysis of Market Dynamics, Public Programmes and Accessibility* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019) 70.
- 14 OECD, 'OECD Family database PF3.1: Public spending on childcare and early education' <<https://bit.ly/3az4cRP>> accessed 14 April 2025.
- 15 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 'Minister Zappone announces Expert Group to develop a new Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare' (Press Release 18 September 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2YEo1Bk>> 14 February 2022.
- 16 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman secures €1 billion investment in early learning and childcare', (Press Release 28 September 2022).
- 17 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Budget 2024: Overview and FAQ for Early Learning and Childcare Providers', (DCEDIY 2023).
- 18 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes record €837m investment from Budget 2025' (Press Release 1 October 2024).
- 19 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025).
- 20 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025).
- 21 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025).
- 22 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025).
- 23 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025).

The most comprehensive data on the early years sector is captured by the Annual Early Years Sector Profile, which is developed and published by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE).²⁴ Data from the survey highlights the vast geographic disparity in the level of childcare fees charged to parents, with a huge variance from the national median across the country. In 2023/2024, the median full-day care fee was €190.00. This ranged from a high of €258.57 in Dún Laoghaire - Rathdown to a low of €150.00 in Leitrim. The median fees for part-time care were €110.00, €134.89, and €85.00 respectively.²⁵

A similar pattern was observed for sessional childcare which had a national median fee of €75.00. The highest median fee was in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown at €85.00 and the lowest was in Leitrim at €64.50.²⁶

At present, the State provides subsidies directly to all providers of childcare services to reduce the financial cost for parents and carers availing of services at market prices.²⁷ Since November 2019, the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) is the primary means by which parents are provided support from the Government in relation to childcare costs.²⁸ Under the NCS, parents earning the least income receive the highest subsidy rate²⁹ in line with the principle of progressive universalism.³⁰ Investment in the NCS in Budget 2023 and Budget 2024 focused on the universal aspect of the scheme and ensuring that costs improve for all parents. From September 2024, the universal subsidy was increased to €2.14 per hour per child.³¹ While Budget 2025 did not apply a further increase to the subsidy, uptake of the NCS continues to grow significantly, with almost 220,000 children benefitting from the scheme in 2024.³²

Cost of Childcare	Median	Dún Laoghaire Rathdown	Leitrim
Full-day Care	€190.00	€258.57	€150.00
Part-time Care	€110.00	€134.89	€85.00
Sessional	€75.00	€85.00	€64.50*
Source: Pobal, <i>Early Learning and Childcare Data 2022-2023</i> (Pobal 2023/2024).			
*The median sessional fee in Donegal and Monaghan was also €64.50.			

24 Pobal, 'Early Learning and Childcare Data' <<https://bit.ly/4aPMIEG>> accessed 28 May 2025.

25 Pobal, *Annual Sector Profile Survey 2022-2023*, <<https://bit.ly/4aMSS39>> accessed 7 February 2025.

26 Pobal, *Annual Sector Profile Survey 2022-2023*, <<https://bit.ly/4aMSS39>> accessed 7 February 2025.

27 Government of Ireland, 'National Childcare Scheme', <<https://bit.ly/3LwNhAK>> accessed 14 February 2022.

28 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 'Minister Zappone launches communications campaign on the National Childcare Scheme' (Press Release 23 September 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2XZJeFH>> accessed 14 February 2022.

29 Two types of childcare subsidies are available under the scheme: 1) A **universal subsidy** for children under fifteen years. Children over three who have not yet qualified for the ECCE are also eligible. This is not means-tested. 2) An **income-assessed subsidy** for children up to fifteen years old (Government of Ireland, 'National Childcare Scheme: Types of Subsidy' <<https://bit.ly/3rM6E0U>> accessed 14 February 2022).

30 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 6 November 2020.

31 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 15 January 2024.

32 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Departmental Schemes, 1 April 2025 [15788/25].

Public funding (including funding to subsidise childcare) is only provided for programmes offered through providers registered with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency (Tusla). Other forms of childcare, such as those provided by relatives or unregistered childminders, are not covered by publicly funded childcare subsidies or schemes.³³ Central to the reform of childminding has been the introduction of regulations. Following a public consultation process, the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 was enacted in July 2024.³⁴ New regulations for childminders and relevant parts of the Act came into effect on 30th September 2024. Following the introduction of these regulations, childminders are now able to register themselves and avail of the benefits and supports offered to other early learning and childcare providers, including being able to make subsidies available to parents of the children they are minding.³⁵ Childminders must have insurance, references, and first aid training. Once these requirements are fulfilled, the application is then assessed by Tusla before registration can be finalised and the certificate can be issued.³⁶ The progression of the childminding regulations provides more options for parents wishing to avail of childcare subsidies as well as ensuring improved quality of provision.

While the Government has made good progress on tackling the cost of childcare, many barriers still exist in terms of ensuring that services are affordable for all parents. According to comparative analysis by the OECD, the introduction of childcare subsidies in Ireland has substantially reduced costs for low income and one parent families.³⁷ However, some middle-income families still have high childcare costs.³⁸ The childcare fees charged by providers receiving Core

Funding has remained at either the rate charged since 30 September 2021 or at the rate when they first signed up to Core Funding. However, to balance the needs of providers and parents, the Department undertook a fee increase assessment process in the latter half of 2024. In October 2024, the Department indicated that 926 services had applied for a sanctioned fee increase.³⁹ There were 659 services deemed eligible to move onto the next stage of the process and in the assessment stage.⁴⁰ While the fee increase is capped at €33 per week, this erodes any benefit parents were due to receive from the NCS increase applied from September 2024. Furthermore, while the expansion of the availability of the NCS to parents using registered childminders is welcome, from 1 October until the end of December 2024, just seven childminders have been fully registered, indicating that it may take time until a substantial number of parents benefit from this measure.⁴¹

Support for families on low incomes

The OECD is clear that if ECEC is not sufficiently subsidised, fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds will participate in it.⁴² This echoes the concerns made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to discrimination in early childhood when the provision of services does not follow a universal model.⁴³ An analysis of OECD data indicates that supporting parents from low-income families to participate in full-time employment is a critical objective in terms of significantly reducing child poverty.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this, challenges exist in relation to accessing work with decent pay and conditions, and a substantial number of households

33 Parliamentary Budget Office, *Childcare in Ireland: An Analysis of Market Dynamics, Public Programmes and Accessibility* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019) 70.

34 Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024.

35 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Public consultation on the draft childminding regulations', <<https://bit.ly/43ObUT0>> accessed 8 April 2024.

36 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Public consultation on the draft childminding regulations', <<https://bit.ly/43ObUT0>> accessed 8 April 2024.

37 OECD, Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2021 (OECD 2022), 17.

38 OECD, Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2021 (OECD 2022), 13.

39 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes strong commitment from early learning and childcare services to Core Funding for third year running', Press Release (DCEDIY 2024) <<https://bit.ly/4aX3GvG>> accessed 7 February 2025.

40 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes strong commitment from early learning and childcare services to Core Funding for third year running', Press Release (DCEDIY 2024) <<https://bit.ly/4aX3GvG>> accessed 7 February 2025.

41 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 07 February 2025.

42 OECD, *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. (OECD 2019) 165.

43 UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 12.

44 M. Daly *Fighting Child Poverty: The Child Guarantee* (European Parliament 2019), 5.

continue to experience in-work poverty.⁴⁵ Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most when ECEC services are closely linked to employment, health, and social policies that promote a more equal distribution of resources across the population.⁴⁶ To support parental labour market participation, *Investing in Children* calls for all families, particularly those in vulnerable situations and in disadvantaged areas, to have access to ECEC.

This is further emphasised in the EU Child Guarantee, which requires Member States to work towards providing free access to early childhood education and care.⁴⁷ To realise this commitment, the State needs to provide free or nearly-free access to ECEC. This could mean, for example, that families in consistent poverty or on the lowest incomes would only need to contribute a fee of no more than €10 per month. This would include those currently on welfare payments or in low-paid jobs.

Providing access to affordable childcare is the single most important measure in addressing child poverty based on the evidence that providing quality employment alongside quality childcare is what works the best.⁴⁸ In Ireland, while access to the National ECCE programme; a universal two-year pre-school programme, is free for all children, access to other forms of ECEC services are not. Households with a reckonable income below €26,000 per annum qualify for the maximum hourly childcare support subsidy under the NCS.⁴⁹ The original design of the scheme proposed that the base income threshold would be set at a rate that would ensure that all families living on incomes below the poverty line would receive the maximum subsidy rate.⁵⁰

In the year the National Childcare Scheme was launched, this rate was €26,179 for a household containing two adults and one child.⁵¹ However, the latest data shows that this has risen to €33,643.⁵² In their contribution to a discussion on the impact of Budget 2024 at the Oireachtas Budget Oversight Committee in October 2023, the ESRI highlighted the impact of an effective freeze on the income thresholds to access the higher subsidy rates.⁵³ They noted that it was having a negative impact on households with lower incomes, those of which may experience wage inflation and receive less support for childcare costs.⁵⁴ For instance, the National Minimum Wage rate has risen from €9.80 per hour in 2019⁵⁵ to €13.50 per hour in 2025.⁵⁶

The post-Budget 2025 impact analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre highlights that in 2025, a one parent family with two children (one pre-school and one primary school aged) would be entitled to a lower NCS subsidy in 2025 compared to 2024.⁵⁷ The reduction in the payable NCS subsidy from €214 per week at the end of 2024 (from September, when the increased universal subvention was introduced) to €208 per week in 2025 is due to the increase in the National Minimum Wage and adjustments to in-work social welfare supports.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the analysis notes that the subsidy payable in 2025 is €8 lower than in 2020 for the same household type.⁵⁹ The base income threshold should be reviewed to ensure that all families below the current poverty line receive the maximum subsidy rate.

45 Social Justice Ireland 'Substantial portion of workers cannot achieve a socially acceptable standard of living', <https://bit.ly/2X8w78p> accessed 13 October 2021.

46 John Bennet, *ECEC for children from disadvantaged backgrounds: findings from a European literature review and two case studies* (European Commission 2013).

47 European Commission, Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, Brussels, 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final.

48 Daly, M., *Fighting Child Poverty: The Child Guarantee* (European Parliament 2019), 5

49 Government of Ireland, *National Childcare Scheme Policy Guidelines* <<https://bit.ly/42Mpbx5>> accessed 7 February 2025.

50 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Policy Paper on the Development of a new Single Affordable Childcare Scheme* (DCYA 2016).

51 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2019* (SJI 2019).

52 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2024* (SJI 2024).

53 Doorley, K. *Post-Budget Engagement: Economic and Social Research Institute*, Committee on Budgetary Oversight (Houses of the Oireachtas 18 October 2023).

54 Doorley, K. *Post-Budget Engagement: Economic and Social Research Institute*, Committee on Budgetary Oversight (Houses of the Oireachtas 18 October 2023).

55 Workplace Relations Commission, 'Previous rates of pay under the National Minimum Wage' <<https://bit.ly/3QNZd5w>> accessed 7 February 2025.

56 Citizens Information, 'Minimum Wage', <<https://bit.ly/3QNVznn>> accessed 7 February 2025.

57 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2025 (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 13.

58 Vincentian Research Centre MESL Impact Briefing | Budget 2025 (Vincentian Research Centre 2024) 13.

59 Vincentian Research Centre MESL Impact Briefing | Budget 2025 (Vincentian Research Centre 2024) 13.

The NCS has a Sponsor Referral where special arrangements are made for vulnerable children and families. The Sponsor Referral, which comes from a Sponsor Body (e.g. Tusla or the HSE), addresses instances where childcare is needed on child welfare, child protection, family support, or other specified grounds. The decision is based on the particular need of the child in line with their defined criteria.⁶⁰ The hourly rates for referrals is the same across all Sponsor bodies, ranging from €5.87 for a child under 12 months to €4.31 for school-aged children.⁶¹

National Childcare Scheme hourly rates for Sponsor Referrals	Previous Rate	Updated Rate from September 2024
< 12 months	€5.87	€5.87
Pre-ECCE	€5	€5.30
ECCE/ECCE-eligible/ Early Start	€4.54	€5.30
School-age	€4.31	€5.30
Source: National Childcare Scheme 'What is a Sponsor Referral?' https://bit.ly/3SUjNBJ accessed 28 May 2025.		

There were 7,982 children benefitting from an NCS sponsorship claim year-to-date in November 2024.⁶² Organisations working with families experiencing homelessness have raised concerns about the adequacy of the sponsorship rate and how this responds to the current demand for childcare places.⁶³ Of central concern is the challenge in accessing sponsored places for children experiencing homelessness.⁶⁴ In some instances, the sponsorship subsidy falls below the actual childcare fee being

charged by a childcare provider.⁶⁵ In response to these issues, the then-Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth indicated that the Department was examining these in the context of Budget 2024.⁶⁶ The changes to the rates introduced came into effect in September 2024 and should help to alleviate some of the pressures observed by those working directly with families supported through NCS sponsorship. However, it is critical that there is engagement between the Department and stakeholders to explore whether this has been effective in addressing the concerns raised. An evaluation of the NCS, initially planned for 2024,⁶⁷ is now planned for 2025.⁶⁸ The evaluation should take account of these barriers and identify solutions to addressing them.

As part of the calculation of reckonable income under the NCS, Child Benefit and child maintenance are currently included. Child Benefit is not assessed as means for any other payment or service, representing a significant shift in policy and practice. Furthermore, from 4 June 2024, maintenance paid to lone parents is no longer assessed as means for social welfare payments.⁶⁹ This demonstrates a lack of policy coherence in a context where Government wishes to support more lone parents in employment and where poverty rates among working lone parents are increasing.

The challenge with the provision of subsidies through the NCS is that it does not take account of the actual variance in cost due to a predominantly private market-based system. This is partially addressed in the new *Programme for Government Securing Ireland's Future*, which aims to progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child.⁷⁰ This will mean rethinking the current approach which

60 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 23 February 2023.

61 National Childcare Scheme, 'NCS FAQ: Sponsor Referrals', <https://bit.ly/3JiwT6Y> accessed 10 April 2024.

62 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 6 November 2024 [45318/24].

63 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

64 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

65 This is due to the Sponsorship rate being based on the maximum possible NCS subsidy rate plus 15 per cent as opposed to the actual fee being charged. As the rules of the Sponsorship scheme prohibit providers seeking a 'co-payment', they must accept a lower fee income and given the current demand for childcare places there is no financial or other incentive for them to accept children on the Sponsorship Scheme.

66 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 26 September 2023[41483/23].

67 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 26 September 2023[41483/23].

68 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 11 January 2025.

69 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces implementation of landmark legislation to reform child maintenance system' Press Release 4 June 2024.

70 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 62.

provides subsidies based on family income rather than on the fee being charged. In April 2025, the Minister commented that a reduction to this level of fee will take time to implement and will occur within the context of increasing the capacity of the sector, and addressing sectoral staffing issues, including pay.⁷¹

A new model to tackle disadvantage

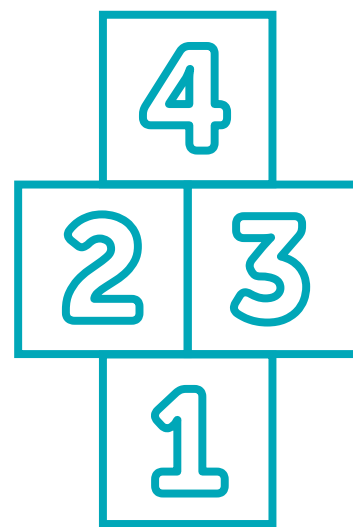
Insights from early years providers delivering services to children and their families experiencing poverty and disadvantages were captured in a recent survey carried out by the Children's Rights Alliance in October 2024. The survey had 95 responses representing a good geographic spread with at least one response from 23 counties. Respondents were asked about the type of service they operate and 55 (58 per cent) indicated they operate a community service with the remaining 40 (42 per cent) operating a private service. While the survey findings are not representative of the entire sector, the responses provide important insights into the needs and challenges of delivering early years services.

Community childcare providers were more likely to have specific groups of children requiring additional supports, such as disabled children, those experiencing adverse childhood experiences, or those from ethnic minorities in their services. For example, while 60 per cent of all services indicated that children living in homeless accommodation attended their services, this rose to 71 per cent of community services and fell to 45 per cent of private services. When asked about the specific needs of children accessing their service, respondents noted that many children have unmet needs, including addressing the impact of poverty. Just under half of respondents indicated that all or most children in their service have access to sufficient food. Food poverty was a prevalent issue for services responding to the survey with children presenting as hungry, asking for more food, or often eating fast or in excess.

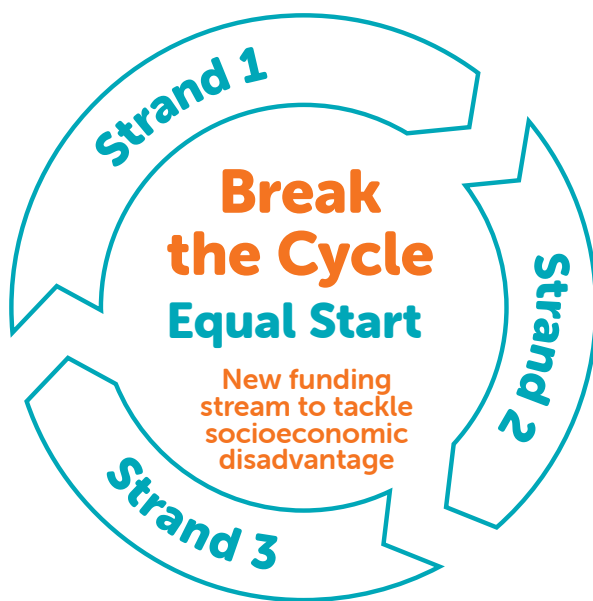
A review of international evidence from programmes across five countries shows that investing in early years is one of the most effective methods to break the cycle of poverty.⁷² It shows that investing in specific programmes targeted at those living in poverty, along with wraparound supports, has proven to have positive impacts on children's educational attainment; long-term employment opportunities; physical health; an increase in lifetime earnings; a reduction in crime and number of lifetime arrests; improved mental health; and improved socioemotional skills.⁷³

The latest *Starting Strong* report published by the OECD reinforces this point, noting that children who participate in ECEC are more likely to succeed in education and access secure jobs and are less likely to be engaged in crime, meaning that investment in quality services for children's early years leads to savings later on.⁷⁴ *First 5* committed to develop a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) type model for early childhood education and care.⁷⁵ The Report of the Expert Group on the Funding Model addresses this commitment by recommending the introduction of a new funding stream to tackle socioeconomic disadvantage.⁷⁶

Children who participate in ECEC are more likely to succeed in education and access secure jobs.



- 71 Jane Mathews, "Won't happen overnight": Foley says introducing €200 monthly childcare will be 'long journey' *thejournal.ie*, 3 April 2025
- 72 Conor Cashman, Margaret Buckley and Grainne Mulcahy, *Briefing Document on Early Interventions and Public Childcare Approaches*, (Children's Rights Alliance and UCC 2023).
- 73 Conor Cashman, Margaret Buckley and Grainne Mulcahy, *Briefing Document on Early Interventions and Public Childcare Approaches*, (Children's Rights Alliance and UCC 2023).
- 74 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025) 3.
- 75 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018) strategic action 8.3.
- 76 Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 119.



Equal Start, a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support children experiencing disadvantage.

Equal Start, a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation for children and their families who experience disadvantage, was launched in May 2024.⁷⁷ Supports are provided across three strands:

- **Strand 1** provides universal measures for every child in every setting. This means that supports are provided to children from disadvantaged backgrounds regardless of the setting they are in. Supports include initiatives aimed at providing information to parents about what services are available to them in their community; supporting services to be more inclusive through Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training; and the development of an Inclusion Coordinator role, which will strengthen interagency cooperation in child welfare and protection.

- **Strand 2** provides child-targeted measures for every child with a priority designation in all settings. These measures include the provision of semi-flexible funding to support the practical needs of children from priority groups in all settings and developing solutions to tackle barriers to access and participation in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) for children from priority groups.

- **Strand 3** provides targeted measures to settings with a designation status as identified through the Equal Start identification model.⁷⁸

The Equal Start identification model uses a combination of data from the NCS and Pobal's HP Deprivation Index, along with data on the location of accommodation for families experiencing homelessness or applying for international protection. This allows for the identification of the number of children in settings both from disadvantaged communities and priority groups. Priority groups include groups of children experiencing disadvantage as identified through research, the EU Child Guarantee, and national policy responses.⁷⁹

Given the strong evidence base that investment in early childhood education and care is a key measure to break the cycle of poverty, the investment in Equal Start to date has been disappointingly low. An initial allocation of €4.5 million in funding for Equal Start was provided in Budget 2024, equating to €13.5 million in a full programme year.⁸⁰ In Budget 2025, further funding was announced for the programme, bringing investment in 2025 to €17.2 million.⁸¹ In the first two programme years of Equal Start, a total of €25.2 million will be allocated.⁸²

This will include an Enhanced Nutrition Programme in Equal Start Priority Settings, which is in addition to the existing regulatory requirements. The provision of meals in early years settings aims to contribute to the objective of addressing disadvantage.⁸³ Complementary to the development of Equal Start, a pilot scheme to provide hot meals in ELC settings was

77 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Equal Start for children experiencing disadvantage' Press Release (21 May 2024).

78 Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Equal Start*, (DCEDIY 2025) 6-7.

79 Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Equal Start*, (DCEDIY 2025) 5.

80 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes substantial investment under Budget 2024', (Press Release 10 October 2023).

81 Sligo County Childcare Committee, 'Budget 2025 letter from Minister O'Gorman and Budget Overview and FAQs' (Sligo County Childcare Committee 2024) <<https://bit.ly/4hxLTNZ>> accessed 7 February 2025.

82 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 7 February 2025.

83 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 11 January 2023.

initiated and an evaluation was published in 2024.⁸⁴ Insights from a Children's Rights Alliance survey of early years providers shows that the provision of measures to address food poverty are welcome and very much needed. However, to truly break the cycle of poverty, it will be critical that funding is provided for other measures. This could include access to transport and additional wrap-around supports such as family and parenting programmes. This will be important for those children who may be experiencing multiple disadvantages or where the family is dealing with challenges such as addiction, domestic violence or poor parental mental health. An increased funding allocation of €50 million per programme year needs to be delivered in Budget 2026 to ensure the greatest impact early on in the lives of children experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

In September 2024, the then-Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth announced that 246 settings were designated with Tier 1 status, thus benefitting from a 15 per cent increase in staffing hours. Similarly, 370 settings were designated as Tier 2, receiving an 8 per cent increase in staffing hours.⁸⁵ These designations benefitted 11,000 and 18,000 children respectively.⁸⁶ The latest available information from February 2025 shows that 770 settings supporting 30,000 children will receive Equal Start supports.⁸⁷ This includes 4,700 children from priority cohorts, with 3,000 children in Tier 1 settings and almost 1,700 in Tier 2 settings.⁸⁸ These services have been objectively identified as operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage and have been given 'priority designation' – for a three-year period – and now receive additional supports.⁸⁹

There is a need to provide practical supports to marginalised families, such as families from the Traveller Community, to access ECEC. The latest *First 5 Implementation Plan* includes a target to increase the participation rates of Traveller and Roma children so that they are 'more closely aligned to the national average'.⁹⁰ The participation rates for Traveller and Roma children is 76 per cent and 70 per cent respectively, compared to an overall participation rate of 96 per cent.⁹¹ Traveller organisations supporting families on the ground have found that families are often not aware of the subsidies available for ECEC or how to apply for them. Even with the information about the supports available, families often face other barriers, such as low levels of literacy, difficulties completing the necessary paperwork, as well as a lack of flexibility with regard to hours of provision. Since September 2023, an ethnic identifier has been introduced for applications to the National Childcare and ECCE schemes.⁹²

Traveller and Roma children are a key priority group under Equal Start, with specific targeted actions developed to support parents and families from these communities. These actions include the development of inclusive information campaigns on available supports and how ethnic information will be utilised; a review of guidance materials on inclusion policies; and specific tailored responses, which include the appointment of Family Link Workers, to support Traveller parents of young children to attend and participate in early childhood education and care.⁹³ In the first year of funding for Equal Start (September 2024 to August 2025), priority actions include extending responsibilities for Family Link Workers in the Traveller Parenting Support Programme and the appointment of Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists to work in Better Start.⁹⁴

84 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2024) <<https://bit.ly/3QbjRMh>> accessed 7 February 2025.

85 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth '35,000 children experiencing disadvantage to benefit from funding boost for early learning and childcare settings', (Press Release 22 September 2024).

86 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth '35,000 children experiencing disadvantage to benefit from funding boost for early learning and childcare settings', (Press Release 22 September 2024).

87 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 12 February 2025.

88 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 12 February 2025.

89 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 12 February 2025.

90 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023), 126.

91 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023), 126.

92 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023), 126.

93 Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Equal Start*, (DCEDIY 2024).

94 Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Equal Start Programme Rules Programme Year 2024/2025* (DCEDIY 2024) 4.

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Funding for the National Childcare Scheme should focus on the income assessed subsidies and sponsorship rates in order to unlock the potential of early childhood education and care to break the cycle of poverty. Specific measures include:
 - Adjusting the income thresholds to enable more families to access higher subsidies. Align the base income threshold to the poverty line, as was the original intention with the scheme, by raising it to €33,643.
 - Excluding Child Benefit and child maintenance as reckonable income for the purposes of the National Childcare Scheme.
- Commence a programme of work to determine how to reduce childcare fees to €200 a month within the existing funding framework for the sector.
- Budget 2026 should continue to build on the sustained investment in early childhood education and care by investing an additional 0.15 per cent of GDP in early years and commit to increasing investment by this rate in subsequent budgets. Government should set out a plan to deliver a longer-term objective of moving closer to the world leader, Iceland, which invests 1.8 per cent of GDP in early years.
- Allocate €50 million in funding in Budget 2026 to continue to build momentum around the implementation of Equal Start.

Education

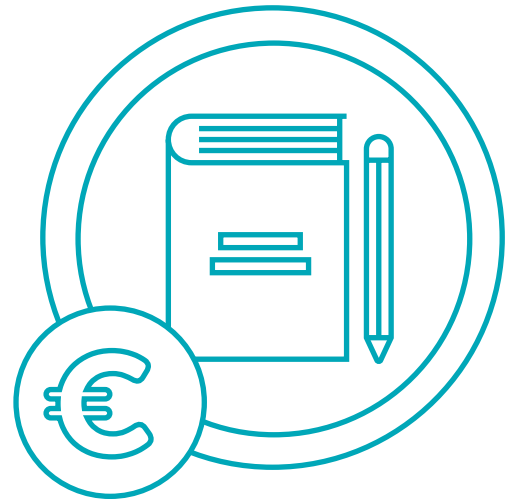


EDUCATION

Investing in Children emphasises the importance of working to address the impact that the education system has on equal opportunities.¹ This can be achieved by increasing the capacity of education to break the cycle of disadvantage and by ensuring that children can gain access to high quality education that supports their development from an emotional, social, cognitive and physical perspective.²

Specific measures identified in the Recommendation include providing 'for the inclusion of all learners... by targeting resources and opportunities towards the more disadvantaged'.³ The Recommendation further emphasises that the State should take measures to address barriers, including financial, which hinder children attending school by providing targeted educational aid.⁴ The introduction and implementation of policies to reduce early school leaving and initiatives for those at risk of early school leaving are also outlined in *Investing in Children*. The Recommendation stresses the need for responses to social diversity and the deployment of role models to support the integration of children from ethnic minorities into schools. Furthermore, the Recommendation calls for strengthened equality legislation and a guarantee that learners experiencing the most marginalisation have the basic right to a quality minimum qualification.⁵

Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty, and break down cycles of disadvantage.⁶ Living in a household with a low-income can prevent children and young people from participating fully in education.⁷ Furthermore, those living in low-income families during childhood are less likely to access education beyond post-primary than



Up to 26%

individuals with only primary education have an increased chance of being 'at risk of poverty', up to 26% higher than those with third-level education.

those living in higher income families.⁸ Individuals with only primary education have an increased chance of being categorised as being 'at risk of poverty', with research indicating that this can be up to 26 per cent higher than those with third-level education.⁹ These statistics should be considered in the context of how the education system can be transformative, but also how it reproduces intergenerational inequality and poverty.¹⁰ There is little evidence to suggest that different social classes view the importance of education differently, as it is seen by all classes as one of the key factors to social mobility and success.¹¹

- 1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
- 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
- 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
- 4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
- 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
- 6 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (DEASP 2020) 48.
- 7 Joint Committee on Education and Skills *Report on education inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019).
- 8 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022).
- 9 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022).
- 10 European Commission, *INCLUDE-ED Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education, Project 6/WP22: Case analysis of local projects working towards social cohesion, Priority 7: Citizen and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society* (European Commission 2011)
- 11 Reay, D., *Rethinking social class: Qualitative perspectives on gender and social class*. (Sociology, Vol. 32 (2) 1998 259-275).

In 2022, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office was established at the Department of the Taoiseach to drive cross-departmental action on addressing child poverty. Reducing the cost of education is one of the six priority areas in the initial work plan for the Programme Office which was published in July 2023.¹² The plan emphasises that the Programme Office will provide a particular focus on alleviating the costs of education for post-primary school students, such as those associated with school books and other materials, and addressing the pressure put on parents to make voluntary contributions.¹³ The Programme Office acknowledges the important developments in budget measures to reduce educational costs in this regard and identifies its role as monitoring the implementation of these commitments and helping to identify next steps.¹⁴

In its first *Progress Report*, published in January 2025, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office acknowledges the significant progress that has been made in recent years regarding the reduction in the cost of education. Most notably there has been positive developments in the areas of school meals, school books and school transport.¹⁵ The Programme Office notes that reducing the attainment gap between Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS schools remains a focus of the Government to ensure equity in education.¹⁶ The Programme Office also identified several key interventions as important in continuing to narrow that education gap:

- Expansion of the DEIS programme;
- Targeting resourcing under the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030; and,
- Supporting those living in poverty to access further and higher education, including alternative education and training for those who have left school early.¹⁷

Referencing the 2024 OECD report¹⁸, the Programme Office identifies that not all young people impacted by educational inequalities attend DEIS schools, and so the methods of allocating resources and evaluation of existing allocation must be kept under ongoing review, with capacity for refinement.¹⁹

Targeting resources towards those experiencing disadvantage

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme

Since its launch in 2005, the DEIS Programme has been the State's main vehicle for supporting children and young people who experience educational disadvantage. Schools in the DEIS Programme avail of a range of targeted supports aimed at tackling educational disadvantage, including additional classroom teaching posts, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator posts, additional grant funding, and access to the School Completion Programme.²⁰

12 Department of the Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Initial Programme Plan July 2023-December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office) 5.

13 Department of the Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Initial Programme Plan July 2023-December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office) 15.

14 Department of the Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Initial Programme Plan July 2023-December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office) 15.

15 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 21.

16 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 21.

17 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 20, 21.

18 OECD, *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies for Education (OECD 2024).

19 OECD, *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies for Education (OECD 2024).

20 Department of Education and Science, *DEIS: (Delivering Equality Of Opportunity In Schools) An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion: Summary* (Department of Education and Science 2005).

The current DEIS Plan, published in 2017²¹ outlines the Government's vision for social inclusion in education and contains a set of objectives and actions to support children who are at the greatest risk of educational disadvantage.²² This includes a commitment to develop a more robust and responsive framework for assessing individual schools for inclusion in the DEIS Programme.²³



2024 saw the single largest expansion of the DEIS Programme since its inception

In March 2022, the Department of Education published the new DEIS identification model.²⁴ Originally, schools were classified as DEIS based on two different approaches.²⁵ Previously, primary schools were identified as being part of the DEIS Programme by school principals providing survey data on socio-economic variables such as parental unemployment, local authority housing tenure, family size and make-up and Traveller ethnicity.²⁶ Post-primary schools were classified as being part of DEIS based on available centralised information such as the percentage of students with medical cards, school retention rates and achievement data for the Junior Certificate.²⁷ The new DEIS identification model uses data from the Department of Education and Youth and the Pobal HP Deprivation Index.²⁸ The latter data provides an insight into the relative level of affluence or disadvantage for a geographic area and is used by many State agencies to target funding to communities most in need.²⁹

Upon publication of the new identification model, an expansion of the DEIS Programme was announced, representing a €32 million investment.³⁰ This was the single largest expansion of the DEIS Programme since its inception, bringing the Department's overall allocation for the DEIS Programme to €180 million in 2024.³¹ There are now approximately 1,200 schools included in the DEIS Programme (30 per cent of all schools), supporting approximately 260,000 students (25 per cent of the student population).³²

The DEIS Programme has previously been recognised as having a positive effect on tackling educational disadvantage for the majority of young people.³³ The Department of Education invited the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Strength through Diversity: Education for Inclusive Societies Project to review the current policy approach for the allocation of resources under DEIS but was

21 Department of Education and Skills, *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering equality of opportunity in schools* (DES 2017). This replaced the 2005 Action Plan; see Department of Education and Skills, *DEIS (Delivering Equality Of Opportunity In Schools): An action plan for educational Inclusion* (DES 2005).

22 Department of Education and Skills, *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DES 2017).

23 Department of Education and Skills, *DEIS Identification Process*, (DES 2017) < <https://bit.ly/3YRLyOV> > accessed 20 May 2025.

24 Department of Education, *The Refined DEIS Identification Model* (Department of Education 2022).

25 Department of Education, *The Refined DEIS Identification Model* (Department of Education 2022) 6.

26 Department of Education, *The Refined DEIS Identification Model* (Department of Education 2022) 9.

27 Department of Education, *The Refined DEIS Identification Model* (Department of Education 2022) 6.

28 Department of Education, *The Refined DEIS Identification Model* (Department of Education 2022) 6.

29 Department of Education, *The Refined DEIS Identification Model* (Department of Education 2022) 6.

30 Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, *Educational Disadvantage* 17 Jan 2024 [1702/24] [1768/24].

31 Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, *Educational Disadvantage* 17 Jan 2024 [1702/24] [1768/24].

32 Minister for Education. Helen McEntee TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, *School Staff* 7 May 2025 [22575/25]

33 Department of Education, *Review of Class Size in DEIS Urban Band 1 Primary Schools* (DE 2022) 6.

clear to reiterate that this was not a review of the DEIS Programme itself. The *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* report was published in July 2024 and its findings will inform future policy development of the DEIS resource allocation model, and school resourcing policies aimed at addressing educational disadvantage in all schools.³⁴

Supports available in DEIS schools

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 provides for the entitlement of a minimum level of education for every child and emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation, and retention.³⁵ The work of the Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) is governed by this Act and comprises of the Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and two school support services, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL)³⁶ and the School Completion Programme (SCP).³⁷ The purpose of these services is to work collaboratively with schools, families, and other services to ensure children and young people can achieve the best educational outcomes.³⁸

The Department of Education's social inclusion budget measures provided funding of €5 million in 2024 for additional Educational Welfare Officers posts.³⁹ In Budget 2025, over €10 million of additional funding was allocated for social inclusion programmes

targeted at children most at risk of educational disadvantage and to prevent early school leaving.⁴⁰ This included providing supports and resources to children and young people attending alternative education settings.⁴¹

Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs)⁴² are a central part of the Education Welfare Service. They play a critical role in relation to early intervention, in supporting school attendance for children aged 6 to 16 years. There are currently 159 EWOs (Whole Time Equivalents) in the six TESS regions.⁴³ Each region is supported by a regional manager and business support team. Of the 159 EWOs, 23 are providing services for children living in homeless accommodation or in care, and there are a further five temporary EWO posts using innovative approaches to support all schools in 2025.

Performance data captured by TESS indicates that the number of EWOs currently in post does not meet the growing demand for these supports. In the first seven months of the 2024/2025 academic year, there were 6,265 referrals, which is a 24 per cent increase from the same period in the 2023/2024 academic year.⁴⁴ Data at the end of March 2025 shows 4,627 referrals on a waiting list for educational welfare services, which is 25 per cent more than February 2025.⁴⁵ TESS also reports an overall increase in the number of new children they are working with compared to the

34 OECD, *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, (OECD 2024)

35 Tusla, 'Tusla Education Support Services', <https://bit.ly/3wssOKH> accessed 3 April 2025.

36 The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme is a key intervention provided as part of the DEIS programme. The HSCL coordinator, normally a teacher from a relevant school without teaching duties, works closely with parents and guardians to improve children and young people's educational outcomes. The intervention is delivered primarily through home visits and the provision of courses and classes that enable parents to support a pupil's learning. All urban DEIS primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools are included in the HSCL scheme. Tusla, 'HSCL-Home School Community Liaison', <https://bit.ly/43p4JjI> accessed 19 May 2025.

37 The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a targeted programme of support for primary and post primary children and young people who have been identified as potentially at risk of early school leaving or who are out of school and have not successfully transferred to an alternative learning site (i.e. Youthreach, Community Training Centre etc.) or employment. Interventions are provided in a number of different ways. This includes evidence based and evidence informed interventions to a whole class or school group; 8 week interventions provided to students who are identified as needing a brief intervention and targeted interventions for students needing intense supports. Tusla, 'SCP', <https://bit.ly/43AwCav> accessed 19 May 2025.

38 Tusla, 'Tusla Education Support Services', <<https://bit.ly/3wssOKH>> accessed 3 April 2025.

39 Department of Education, 'Main Features of Budget 2024', Department of Education October 2023, 7

40 Department of Education, 'Main Features of Budget 2025', Department of Education October 2024, 5

41 Department of Education, 'Main Features of Budget 2025', Department of Education October 2024, 5.

42 EWOs are part of the Educational Welfare Service and they work directly with children, young people and their families who are experiencing challenges with school attendance. EWOs are primarily concerned with the welfare of children and young people and aim to intervene early so that ensure that attendance issues are addressed before it becomes a crisis. EWOs engage in home visits and collaborative working with other agencies along with attending educational welfare conference. Listening to and acting on the views of the young person in developing a plan of support is seen as being critical to an successful outcome. See Tusla 'EWS' <https://bit.ly/3ZmNvD2> accessed 19 May 2025. Often the first meeting between an EWO and a family can lead to the identification of solutions to support a child or young person. See Tusla 'How does the Educational Welfare Service work?' <https://bit.ly/4dHAH0I> accessed 19 May 2025. Minister for Education. Helen McEntee TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Education Welfare Services 8 April 2025 [16570/25].

43 Minister for Education. Helen McEntee TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, *Education Welfare Services* 8 April 2025 [16570/25].

44 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025* (Tusla 2025) 19.

45 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025* (Tusla 2025) 19.

previous year.⁴⁶ It is critical that Budget 2026 targets increased investment towards the number of EWOs available so that the Education Welfare Service can respond in a timely manner to the level of referrals it is receiving from schools and so that it can ensure an early intervention response to school attendance issues across the country. It will also allow the Education Welfare Service to play its role alongside school leaders, teachers and wider school support staff to ensure all children and young people in Ireland are attending school consistently and can benefit from their education at the optimum levels possible.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on the Irish State to strengthen measures to ensure all children in disadvantaged groups have equal access to education.⁴⁷ This includes Traveller and Roma children. In recognition of the lower levels of representation in education progression across Traveller and Roma children and young people, there has been a further targeted expansion of the HSCL. While the overall educational attainment level of Irish Travellers increased between 2011 and 2016, with more Traveller young people completing post-primary school than before, many still do not.⁴⁸

Investing in Children recognises the importance of creating inclusive learning environments and strengthening links between parents and schools, especially for those from ethnic minorities.

For instance, despite an increase in the number of Traveller students sitting the Leaving Certificate (31.4 per cent), this is still comparatively low with the total school-going cohort (91.7 per cent).⁴⁹

Investing in Children recognises the importance of creating inclusive learning environments and strengthening links between parents and schools, especially for those from ethnic minorities.⁵⁰ In October 2022, €400,000 was allocated to the Department of Education under the 2022 Dormant Accounts Fund for the funding of ten new HSCL coordinator posts in 14 non-DEIS post-primary schools to support Traveller and Roma children and their families.⁵¹ It is welcome therefore that four additional HSCL posts have been assigned as part of the Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) pilot project⁵² established under the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*.⁵³ These HSCL coordinators will have access to funding to implement and run initiatives to encourage attendance, retention, and progression for Traveller and Roma pupils.⁵⁴

The support that HSCL provides is critical for these families, as research with Traveller and Roma parents has found that they want their children to have a better educational experience than they had.⁵⁵ In the absence of parents' direct experience or 'legacy knowledge' of post-primary school, the research suggests that parents found it difficult to support their children in the transition between primary and post-primary schools.⁵⁶ HSCL posts are also critical for children and young people attending non-DEIS schools.

46 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025* (Tusla 2025) 19.

47 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 37.

48 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Statistical Spotlight #4, Young Travellers in Ireland* (DCYA 2020)32.

49 Government of Ireland, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030* (Government Publications 2024) 13.

50 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

51 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces 2022 Dormant Accounts Funding to provide targeted supports to improve educational outcomes for Traveller and Roma Students' (Press Release 4 October 2022).

52 A key commitment under the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy* (NTRIS) is that access, participation, and outcomes for Travellers and Roma students in education should be improved to achieve outcomes equal to those for the majority population. On foot of these, a number of actions have been undertaken or commenced to better understand and address the barriers that Traveller and Roma children face in education, including a pilot project, Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR). The pilot project has cost circa €1.1 million per year and is co-funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The pilot aimed to support educational participation and engagement and to increase engagement with parents, schools, and the community. Furthermore, the pilot intended to inform the development of policy and innovative solutions to issues identified as barriers to participation and engagement.

53 Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 29 March 2023 [15552/23].

54 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces 2022 Dormant Accounts Funding to provide targeted supports to improve educational outcomes for Traveller and Roma Students' (4 October 2022) < <http://bit.ly/3IsacVD> > accessed 30 January 2023.

55 Maria Quinlan, *Out of the Shadows Traveller and Roma Education: Voices from the Communities* (Government of Ireland 2021) 14.

56 Maria Quinlan, *Out of the Shadows Traveller and Roma Education: Voices from the Communities* (Government of Ireland 2021) 14.

The need for role models to support the integration of children from ethnic minorities into schools is also emphasised in the *Investing in Children* Recommendation.⁵⁷ In January 2025, the Department of Education published the *Evaluation of the STAR Pilot Project Report*, conducted by The Centre for Effective Services. The STAR pilot highlighted the potential advantages of community education link workers coming from the Traveller and/or Roma communities to help tackle educational disadvantage experienced by Traveller and Roma children.⁵⁸ Preliminary evaluation data was acted upon in October 2024 by the Department with the announcement of €1.25 million in funding to establish 12 Community Link Worker roles to support Traveller and Roma children at risk of educational disadvantage.⁵⁹ These Community Link Workers will work across several schools in areas where there are high numbers of Traveller and Roma children and young people.⁶⁰ Their roles will focus on fostering greater engagement with Traveller and Roma families to facilitate successful communication, promote positive relationships, and to support the learning of Traveller and Roma children and young people.⁶¹

A DEIS Plus Scheme

While the gap in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has reduced substantially since the DEIS programme began, for the past decade it has remained at around 7-9 per cent with the latest data showing it was to 8.4 per cent in the 2022.⁶² It is important that the Department of Education and Youth consider the additional elements under the DEIS Programme that are required, particularly in areas with high levels of need.

The work undertaken by the OECD review team as part of the development of the *Review of School Resourcing to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland* included extensive consultation across Government departments,⁶³ with education partners and a range of other stakeholders. The Review found that the Irish education system demonstrates strong performance and equity across primary and post-primary levels and identified a culture and commitment across the education system which aims to support those at risk of educational disadvantage.⁶⁴ However, the Review also highlighted that despite these achievements over the last number of years, differences in outcomes persist for Traveller and Roma students and students from areas of intergenerational poverty in comparison to students outside those contexts.⁶⁵

Children and young people in schools located in communities experiencing persistent, inter-generational poverty often experience trauma and adverse childhood experiences that require supports beyond the existing model of provision under DEIS. Adverse childhood experiences can include exposure to abuse and/or neglect, violence amongst family members or carers, addiction in the households and exposure to violence at the community level.⁶⁶

57 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7

58 Centre for Effective Services (CES), *Evaluation of the STAR Pilot Project Report*, (Centre for Effective Services January 2025).

59 Centre for Effective Services (CES), *Evaluation of the STAR Pilot Project Report*, (Centre for Effective Services January 2025).

60 Centre for Effective Services (CES), *Evaluation of the STAR Pilot Project Report*, (Centre for Effective Services January 2025).

61 Centre for Effective Services (CES), *Evaluation of the STAR Pilot Project Report*, (Centre for Effective Services January 2025).

62 Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science *Education Indicators for Ireland* (Government of Ireland 2024) 27.

63 Department of Education, Department of Further and Higher Education Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Social Protection, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Child Poverty Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach.

64 OECD, *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, (OECD 2024).

65 OECD, *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, (OECD 2024).

66 WHO 'Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ)' <https://bit.ly/4je3gn7> accessed 19 May 2025.

While the presence of poor parental mental health, domestic violence and addiction can occur across the socioeconomic spectrum of families, for those experiencing poverty these issues can be particularly prevalent.⁶⁷ Children's development may be negatively affected by the experience of stresses generated by being abused, neglected and/or exposed to familial circumstances that are concerning.⁶⁸ This can have a negative and defining effect on the developing brain of a child, damaging their emotional, social and cognitive development.⁶⁹

Children can be exposed to adversity at both the family and community level.⁷⁰ School principals located in communities with high levels of exposure to adversity have called for an enhanced DEIS-type model of support that can tackle the impact of these experiences on their students which can result in intense and frequently occurring stress.⁷¹ A survey of 17 DEIS schools in Spring 2024 found that in West Tallaght, Ballymun and Darndale, principals estimated that 48 per cent of children in their schools had experienced a direct trauma.⁷² The survey also showed that the number of children with special educational needs in their schools was four times higher than in non-DEIS schools.⁷³

The principals representing these schools, known as the *DEIS+ Advocacy Group*, have called for additional supports to be available in their schools to respond to the impact caused by these experiences.⁷⁴ The establishment of Multi-disciplinary Teams (MDTs) which could include occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, counsellors and



psychologists, would work every day with children on site in schools to address the impact of childhood poverty and intergenerational trauma.⁷⁵ Other supports identified by this group of principals include increased teacher allocation, funding and building space to provide trauma informed practices.⁷⁶

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- 67 There is limited research on the prevalence of ACEs in Ireland (examples include Sharon Lambert, Graham Gill-Emerson, et.al., *Moving Towards Trauma Informed Care. A model of research and practice*, (Cork Simon Community 2017); Aoife Dermody A., Sharon Lambert et al., (2020) *An Exploration of Early Life Trauma and its Implications for Garda Youth Diversion Projects* (Youthrise and Quality Matters 2020). Internationally some research indicates there is a connection between child poverty and the prevalence of ACEs.
- 68 Trevor Spratt and Mary Kennedy, 'Adverse Childhood Experiences: Developments in trauma and resilience aware services' (2021) *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(3), 999-1017.
- 69 Barnardos (2019) Children's Budget 2020. <<https://bit.ly/36uE9dW>> accessed 4 October 2020.
- 70 Ellis, Wendy R. and William H. Dietz, 'A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience Model' (2017) *Frameworks and Measurement*, 17(7).
- 71 PEIN *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Holding the child's hand in prevention and early intervention for children and families* (PEIN 2019).
- 72 Deis+ Cluster Advocacy Group 'Snapshot Survey reveals 48% of children attending primary schools in most disadvantaged areas of Dublin may have experienced a trauma in their lives' (Press Release 3 June 2024).
- 73 Deis+ Cluster Advocacy Group 'Snapshot Survey reveals 48% of children attending primary schools in most disadvantaged areas of Dublin may have experienced a trauma in their lives' (Press Release 3 June 2024).
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- 76 Deis+ Cluster Advocacy Group 'Snapshot Survey reveals 48% of children attending primary schools in most disadvantaged areas of Dublin may have experienced a trauma in their lives' (Press Release 3 June 2024).

MDTs working in and around schools are a feature of many European school systems and are key to addressing complex needs of children and their families.⁷⁷ MDTs are needed to provide a multi-dimensional response to complex problems. They can ensure coordination of a common strategic response among professionals for addressing the complex needs of children and their families at the highest level of need and risk, i.e., the indicated prevention level.⁷⁸ While the composition of the roles on such a team may vary due to local circumstances, key areas of need that are typically addressed include family support outreach, emotional support services, and school attendance services.⁷⁹

In the Irish context, a more concentrated example of wraparound supports within the school environment is evident in the Dublin North-East Inner City (NEIC) Multi-Disciplinary Team. The NEIC MDT is an interagency collaboration between Health Service Executive (HSE), Primary Care, the Department of Education and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). The NEIC MDT deliver school-based services across psychology, occupational therapy (OT), and speech and language therapy (SLT) that are child-centred and of high quality in 10 primary schools in Dublin's inner city.

The NEIC MDT responds to the needs of children, their families and their schools through targeted training, advice, prevention work, assessment, and therapeutic interventions. The principals in all 10 schools reported that the needs of children were being met with timely access to MDT services. If these children were awaiting services from Primary Care, they would be waiting 12 to 36 months for SLT, OT and psychology services.⁸⁰

In January 2025, the new *Programme for Government Securing Ireland's Future* committed to establishing a new DEIS Plus Scheme. The programme will 'support schools with the highest level of educational disadvantage to improve educational outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy'.⁸¹ While a focus on improving educational outcomes will be important, in order to truly break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, a central focus on a holistic approach is critical. This should consider the needs of children, young people, and their families in supporting their education experiences and ensure they are factored into the design process. Two months after the publication of the *Programme for Government*, the Minister for Education and Youth announced that her Department were developing a plan for a 'DEIS Plus' Programme.⁸² As part of the process, a DEIS Plus Design Advisory Group has been established to contribute to the DEIS Plus action plan consisting of principals, Home School Community Liaison and School Completion Programme coordinators working in areas of high disadvantage.⁸³

77 There are a number of European reports detailing the need for a focus on multi-disciplinary teams see for example, NESET research for the Commission (Downes, 2011a; Edwards and Downes, 2013). Eurydice (2014, p. 12) (Downes, 2011; Edwards and Downes, 2013). The ET2020 School Policy Working Group document (2015, p. 12) the Commission's (2013a, p. 13) Thematic Working Group (TWG) report Nunan, S. & Downes, P., *Introduction to Joint Conference*, INTO (Irish National Teachers Organisation) and Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College: *Review of DEIS: Poverty and Social Inclusion in Education*, December 5th, 2015, <<https://bit.ly/3Wm4J2X>> accessed on 20 May 2025.

78 Downes, P., 'The neglected shadow: European perspectives on emotional supports for early school leaving prevention', *International Journal of Emotional Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2011, pp. 3–36. Edwards, A.; Downes, P., *Alliances for Inclusion: Developing Cross-sector Synergies and Inter-Professional Collaboration in and around Education*, EU Commission NESET (Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training) Report, 2013.

79 Downes, P.; Nairz-Wirth, E.; Rusinaitė, V., *Structural Indicators for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools*, NESET II report, (Publications Office of the European Union 2017) 51–52.

80 Government of Ireland North East Inner City Multi-Disciplinary Team 2022 – 2023 <https://bit.ly/4j998hd> accessed 20 May 2025.

81 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 68.

82 Minister for Education. Helen McEntee TD, Educational Disadvantage Status, Written Answers, 19 March 2025 [10862/25].

83 Minister for Education. Helen McEntee TD, Disadvantaged Status, Written Answers, 8 April 2025 [14635/25].

In responding to the challenges that the *DEIS+ Advocacy Group*⁸⁴ highlight, it is important that the new DEIS Plus scheme provides tailored supports which take account of the needs of each child within their specific community context. The programme of supports developed under DEIS Plus requires a degree of agility which responds, not only to the needs of specific communities but to the resources available and emerging local needs. For instance, in communities with good access to psychological supports it may be more appropriate to resource MDTs with family support. Budget 2026 gives the Government the first opportunity to invest in this programme of support. As a first step, the Department should work to identify a small number of sites to rollout an initial phase of the DEIS Plus programme.

Supporting non-DEIS Schools

There is a need to update the research on the proportion of disadvantaged students attending non-DEIS schools in 2025.⁸⁵ However, given the increased diversity across Ireland's schools and the positive outcomes for children and young people where DEIS-related supports are in place, it is welcome that the Department of Education and Youth now considers the allocation of funding for additional resources to non-DEIS schools, to enable them to provide tailored supports that meet the needs of the children and young people in their specific context.

OECD research published in July 2024 supports this approach under school-level intervention, noting that non-DEIS schools may not have the adequate supports to support children and young people experiencing disadvantage.⁸⁶ The findings also identify that both DEIS and non-DEIS schools promote engagement with parents and the wider community.

However, schools without access to the HSCL scheme may not have resources and capacity to support this engagement.⁸⁷ While the Department of Education and Youth considers the OECD report and the current review it is undertaking with regard to the various supports addressing education disadvantage,⁸⁸ it could expand the HSCL scheme to non-DEIS schools on a phased basis. This could include appointing a HSCL Coordinator to a cluster of non-DEIS schools.

Addressing the financial barriers to education

Investing in Children calls on barriers to education to be addressed, including those related to financial costs in compulsory education.⁸⁹ In June 2021, building on the *Investing in Children Recommendation*⁹⁰, the European Child Guarantee was adopted by the European Union (EU). It aims to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion by supporting the 27 EU Member States to make efforts to guarantee access to quality key services for children in need.⁹¹ To achieve this commitment, each State is required to identify and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in education along with ensuring provision of educational materials, including books and uniforms.⁹²

The UNCRC calls on States to take steps to achieve the right to education on the 'basis of equal opportunity' and to 'take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need'.⁹³ In 2023, the UN Committee called on the Irish State to strengthen measures to ensure all children in disadvantaged groups have equal access to education. This included ensuring 'support to cover hidden costs of education'.⁹⁴

84 The DEIS+ Advocacy group comprises of principals from schools working in areas with high levels of disadvantage.

85 Previous research published in 2015 indicated that a large proportion (up to 50 per cent) of disadvantaged students attend non-DEIS schools see Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Gillian Kingston, *Learning from the evaluation of DEIS* (ESRI 2015) 79.

86 OECD, *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, (OECD 2024).

87 OECD, *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, (OECD 2024).

88 Minister for Education, Helen McEntee TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, 27 Feb 2025 [8506/25].

89 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

90 European Commission issued its recommendation "Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage" in 2013. This Recommendation outlined a three pillar approach to tackling child poverty: access to adequate resources; access to affordable, quality services and children's right to participate.

91 European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee* (Brussels 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final) 1.

92 European Commission, *Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee* (Brussels 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final) 1.

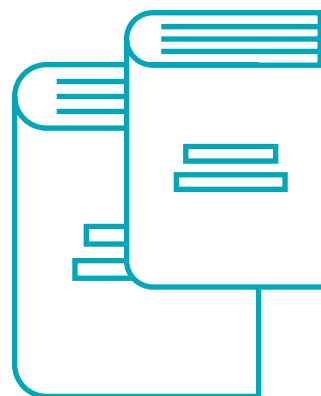
93 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 28(1).

94 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, paras 4 and 37.

Free School Books

As far back as 2013, the then Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection called for a 'five-year template for the delivery of an entirely free school book system, based on the UK model in place since the 1940s,⁹⁵ and to discontinue the use of workbooks in all schools.'⁹⁶ In Budget 2023, funding for free school books eliminated school book costs for the families of all children in primary schools. It benefitted approximately 558,000 students in 3,230 schools, including 130 Special Schools.⁹⁷ Calls for support to the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) were down by 20 per cent in the first year of the scheme at primary school level, demonstrating the immediate and tangible difference it made to families across the country.⁹⁸

Budget 2024 saw a further €68 million committed to extend free books to Junior Cycle, with the aim of benefitting more than 212,000 students across 670 post-primary schools across the country.⁹⁹ The extension of free school books to all remaining post-primary school students in Budget 2025 demonstrated a commitment from Government to tackle child poverty and involved an additional €51 million in funding. This is expected to reduce the cost of education for a further 200,000 students.¹⁰⁰ With this additional investment, the scheme will now support 940,000 pupils and students in primary, special and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme at a cost of over €164 million.¹⁰¹ The sustained commitment to expand free school books over multiple budget cycles is a positive example of what can be achieved in tackling child poverty. Most importantly, this measure puts money back in the pockets of families in or at risk of poverty.



With additional investment in Budget 2025, the Free School Book Scheme will now support 940,000 students in primary, special and post-primary schools.

95 Education Act 1944.

96 Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection, *Report on Tackling Back to School Costs* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2013) 20.

97 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces details of a new scheme to eliminate the cost of schoolbooks in primary schools and special schools', Press Release 22 March 2023.

98 Society of St Vincent de Paul, 'SVP Records Fall in Back-to-School Calls', Press Release 31 August 2023.

99 Department of Education, 'Ministers for Education launch new scheme providing free schoolbooks to over 212,000 Junior Cycle students', Press Release, (Department of Education 2024) <<https://bit.ly/4aCxLAu>> accessed 16 April 2025.

100 Department of Education, 'Ministers Foley, Naughton and Byrne announce details of almost €12 billion education funding in Budget 2025' Press Release, (Department of Education 2024) <<https://bit.ly/40SLrnu>> accessed 16 April 2025.

101 Department of Education, 'Ministers Foley, Naughton and Byrne announce details of almost €12 billion education funding in Budget 2025' Press Release, (Department of Education 2024) <<https://bit.ly/40SLrnu>> accessed 16 April 2025.

Voluntary Contributions

Parents are finding themselves under considerable financial pressure to meet back-to-school costs and have expressed frustration and exasperation with being compelled to pay high uniform costs, large sums for digital tools, and increased voluntary contribution fees, which are not really ‘voluntary’.¹⁰² SVP commissioned a report in 2023 to explore concerns that there may be deficits between the grants provided to post-primary schools and their day-to-day operating costs, leading to a reliance on voluntary contributions and charges to fund vital school resources and activities.¹⁰³ Responses to the parent survey in the SVP research clearly showed that these contributions are generally not communicated as being optional, that they place a significant amount of stress on some families, and that many of the respondents made sacrifices in other areas in order to pay the voluntary contribution asked by the school.¹⁰⁴

In September 2024, a slight decrease in the average amount requested as a voluntary contribution was noted for parents of primary and post-primary school students, which may be due to the increase in the Capitation Grant provided for in Budget 2024.¹⁰⁵ Budget 2025 included a €30 million package to provide a ‘permanent increase’ to this Capitation Grant. This package allows for a 12 per cent increase on current rates,¹⁰⁶ and is expected to benefit 940,000 families of primary and post-primary students by reducing schools’ need to request voluntary contributions.¹⁰⁷

While the increase in the Capitation Grant and the cost-of-living supports for schools are to be welcomed, these must be sustained in line with the actual running costs year-on-year to ensure that the burden of these does not fall to parents through requests for ‘voluntary contributions’.

Policies to reduce early school leaving

Although patterns of early school leaving continue to differ across EU national contexts and systems of education, research consistently shows that a disproportionate number of young people who leave school early are from lower socio-economic groups.¹⁰⁸ Both national and international studies show that there are common challenges and experiences for early school leavers, such as experiencing behavioural problems, ongoing social, emotional or health issues, special educational needs, poverty, ill-health, trauma, and, struggles to participate and progress within the education system.¹⁰⁹

Over half of early school leavers will continue their education in facilities such as a voluntary education settings or Youthreach, where they can receive necessary supports and continue a more participant-centred form of education.¹¹⁰ Alternative education has developed in many jurisdictions as a response to State-provided mainstream education.¹¹¹ International experience indicates that alternative education providers are informal, have smaller classes with a student-centred curriculum, and a focus on experiential learning to support the personal, professional, and emotional development of each student.¹¹²

102 Barnardos, *Back to School Survey 2024* (Barnardos 2024).

103 Grant Thornton, *The role of voluntary contributions in post-primary schools in Ireland* (Grant Thornton St. Vincent de Paul 2023) 4.

104 Grant Thornton, *The role of voluntary contributions in post-primary schools in Ireland* (Grant Thornton St. Vincent de Paul 2023) 4.

105 Barnardos, *Back to School Survey 2024* (Barnardos 2024).

106 Minister for Education, Helen McEntee T.D., *School Funding*, Written Answers, 8 April 2025 [17195/25].

107 Department of the Taoiseach, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2025 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) 16.

108 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O’Sullivan, Selina McCoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness “*Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme*” (2019) Research Series Number 82.

109 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O’Sullivan, Selina McCoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness “*Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme*” (2019) Research Series Number 82.

110 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O’Sullivan, Selina McCoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness “*Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme*” (2019) Research Series Number 82.

111 Kovačič, et al *Identifying Innovative Models for Supporting Vulnerable Learners achieve Educational Progression; Early findings from an Evaluation of Social Innovation Fund Ireland’s Education Fund* (UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUIG 2019) 59.

112 T Kovačič, et al *Identifying Innovative Models for Supporting Vulnerable Learners achieve Educational Progression; Early findings from an Evaluation of Social Innovation Fund Ireland’s Education Fund* (UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUIG 2019) 59.

In Ireland, young people who leave school before the age of 16 have limited¹¹³ State-funded opportunities for continuing their education. Except for Youthreach,¹¹⁴ a State-provided programme which offers young people (aged 15-to-21) who are no longer engaged in mainstream education a viable progression route on to further education, training, and/or employment, the area of alternative education is not explicitly defined or mentioned in the Irish education system.¹¹⁵

In October 2022, the Department of Education published its *Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision*.¹¹⁶ The *Review* found that despite Ireland having a high retention rate to Leaving Certificate, there is a small group of students who find it difficult to engage in mainstream education.¹¹⁷ Factors that may contribute to this include the young person's own needs and personal situation and/or their relationship with their school and their learning. The *Review* notes that countries with higher retention rates than Ireland place more of an emphasis on vocational education pathways.¹¹⁸

An Implementation Group was established to oversee the fulfilment of the recommendations in the *Review*. The Group engaged widely with organisations and stakeholders, including young people with lived experience of the complexity of the issues involved. Members of the Group visited all the Youth Encounter Projects¹¹⁹ and a number of alternative providers around the country.

The Department also commissioned a consultation with children and young people, with 52 young people participating.¹²⁰

It is important that in the implementation of the *Review*, young people over the age of 16 are not excluded from alternative education settings. Many young people attending alternative education settings are currently over the age of 16 and are supported to reach a Leaving Certificate qualification. Article 29 of the UNCRC clarifies that the right to education encompasses more than academic achievement and sets out a number of aims including the 'development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'.¹²¹ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's guidance in relation to addressing early school leaving states that 'to develop the fullest potential of adolescents, consideration must be given to the design of learning environments which capitalise on their capacity for learning, motivation to work with peers, and focus on experiential learning, exploration, and limit testing'.¹²²

Some alternative education providers are oversubscribed. One provider, iScoil, has identified that despite its growth in student places, with more than 500 young people having accessed iScoil in the 2024/2025 academic year, more than 100 eligible home-based referrals from Tusla Education Support Service had been turned down. This is double the number from the 2023/2024 academic year.¹²³ As part of the work of the Implementation Group, there is a

113 Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs) provide non-residential educational facilities for children who have either become involved in minor delinquency, or are at risk of becoming involved. A pupil may be referred to one of these schools by a number of agencies or by the court system. Youth Encounter Projects provide these children with a lower pupil teacher ratio and a personalised education plan. Department of Education, High Support Special Schools, Youth Encounter Projects (YEP) and Children Detention Schools < <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/743aab-high-support-special-schools-youth-encounter-projects-yep-and-childr/> > accessed 28 June 2022.

114 The Youthreach programme provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Youthreach < <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/> > accessed 28 June 2022.

115 T Kovačič, C Forkan, P Dolan, L Rodriguez, *Enabling An Inclusive And Equitable Quality Education For All, Through The Implementation Of A New, Evidence-Based Model On Educational Progression And Transformation, Findings From An Evaluation Of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund* June, 2021 (UNESCO NUIG 2021) < <https://bit.ly/3wDL53v> > accessed 12 November 2021, 2.

116 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision*, Version 2 – October 2022.

117 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision*, Version 2 – October 2022, 10.

118 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision*, Version 2 – October 2022, 10.

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120 Department of Education, *Briefing note on the Implementation of the Recommendations From the Review of out of School Education Provision* (n.d.).

121 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 29(1)(a).

122 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 20 on the Rights of the Child During Adolescence' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/20 para 77.

123 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from iScoil, 30 April 2025.

need to ensure that all children and young people can access an alternative education placement where it is in their best interests, and there needs to be a focus on ensuring that waiting lists are not long and young people do not have to be turned away. It is essential that alternative forms of education provision are adequately funded and made available throughout the country to ensure every young person has the opportunity to continue with an education that can help them realise their full potential.

Equality and Diversity

One of the principles of *Investing in Children* is to ensure that Member States focus on children with an increased risk of experiencing intersectional disadvantage such as those from an ethnic minority.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the Recommendation emphasises the importance of inclusive high-quality education.¹²⁵ The Concluding Observations of Ireland's last review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights highlighted the persistence of significant inequalities in educational attainment, particularly for children belonging to ethnic minorities and those from low-income families, both of which have the effect of limiting social mobility.¹²⁶

In Ireland, Traveller and Roma children have the lowest education retention rates of any ethnicity, with 58.9 per cent of Roma children and 26.5 per cent of Traveller children remaining in full-time education.¹²⁷ The Junior Certificate retention rates for Traveller children and young people have continued to rise gradually but retention rates for completing the Leaving Certificate have decreased, a similar trend to the majority population.¹²⁸ In 2017, there were 766 Traveller first-year students who entered post-primary, an increase of 116 pupils since the 2016 entry cohort. Of these, 600 completed the Junior Certificate (78.3 per cent) with 203 students continuing to complete the Leaving Certificate (26.5 per cent).¹²⁹

There was a total of 151 Roma first-year students entering post-primary schools in 2017, an increase of 34 students since the 2016 entry cohort. Of these, 131 completed the Junior Certificate (86.8 per cent), with 89 students continuing to complete the Leaving Certificate (89.9 per cent).¹³⁰ However, in contrast to Traveller students, the retention rates for Roma students decreased from 88 per cent for the 2016 cohort to 86.8 per cent for the 2017 Junior Certificate cohort, and further decreased from 65 per cent to 58.9 per cent for those continuing to Leaving Certificate.¹³¹

There have been several key developments across both the Department of Education and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth that respond to the need to provide tailored supports to Traveller and Roma children to reach their full potential in education.

In July 2024, the then Minister for Education, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science published the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES)*, demonstrating the cross-government and collaborative approach taken in the development of the *Strategy*. The *TRES* presents a significant framework for addressing the lack of cross-governmental collaboration and represents a commitment to address educational inequalities experienced by Traveller and Roma children with a strong focus on working in collaboration with these communities and their representative organisations. The Traveller and Roma Education Forum, which held its first meeting in November 2024, will facilitate continued collaboration with Traveller and Roma organisations.¹³² The Forum will also support the development and implementation of two additional *Plans for Implementation and Action (2026-2028 and 2028-2030)*.¹³³

124 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 4.

125 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

126 UNICESCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 52.

127 Department of Education, *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, Entry Cohort 2017* (Department of Education 2024) 12.

128 Department of Education, *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, Entry Cohort 2017* (DE 2024) 13.

129 Department of Education, *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, Entry Cohort 2017* (DE 2024) 13.

130 Department of Education, *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, Entry Cohort 2017* (DE 2024) 14.

131 Department of Education, *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second Level Schools, Entry Cohort 2017* (DE 2024) 14.

132 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 20 December 2024.

133 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 20 December 2024.

Recommendations

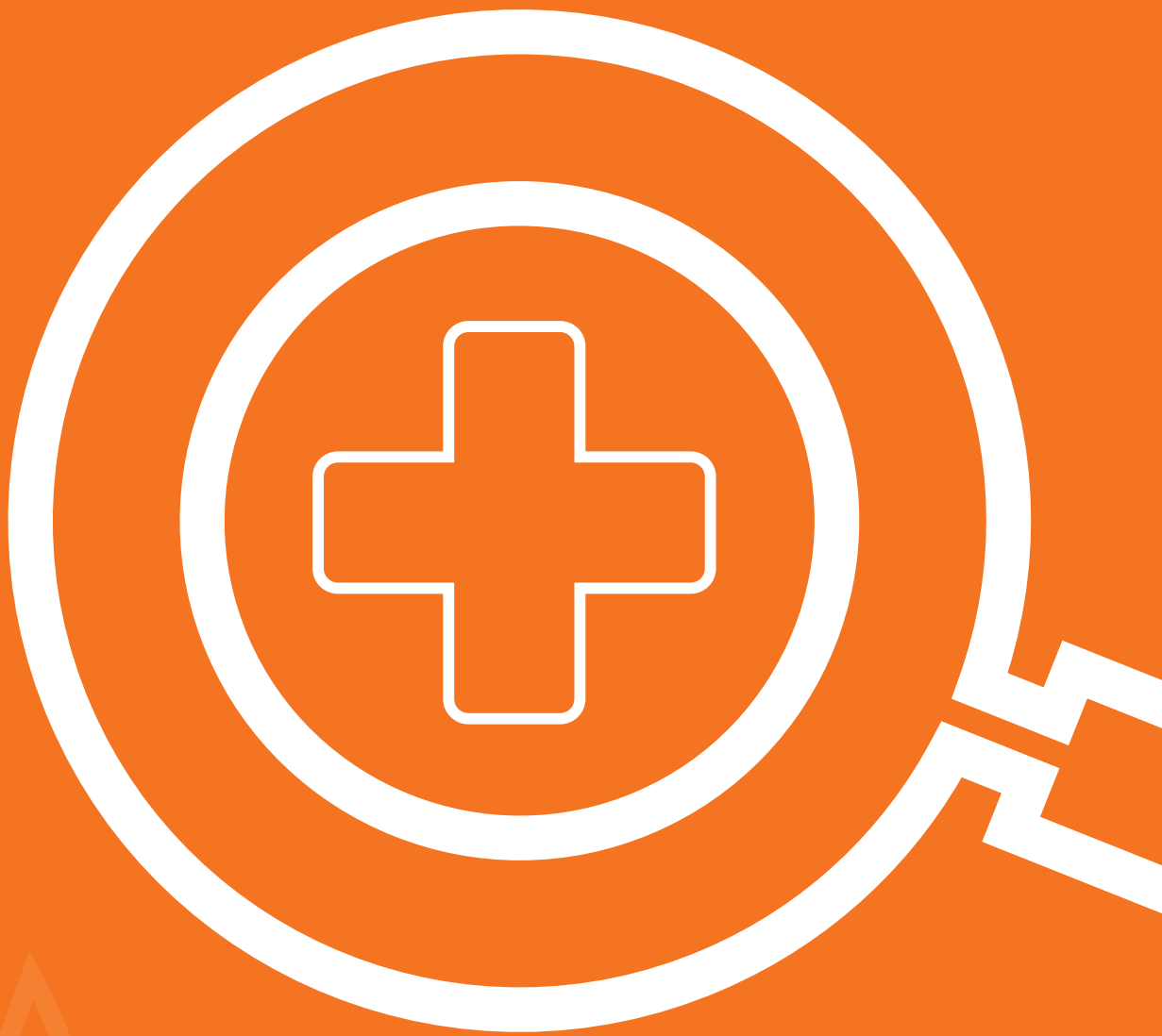
Budget 2026

- Commit to the roll out of a DEIS Plus Programme in a number of pilot sites. The pilot could include context-specific multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) and direct one-to-one therapeutic support for children and young people. Funding to ensure evaluation is in-built in the pilot roll out should also be included.
- Ensure that the DEIS Plus Action Plan is resourced appropriately and is inclusive of direct one-to-one therapeutic supports for children and young people and MDTs.
- Ensure that resources are made available to continue the positive impact achieved and to consider the extension of the existing STAR pilot sites beyond June 2025 while the mainstreaming of initiatives and practice occurs.
- Increase the number of Educational Welfare Officers by 150 Whole-Time Equivalents.
- Introduce a fund of €20 million for non-DEIS schools so they can respond to, and support, the range of diverse needs of children and families that impact their educational experience, participation and achievement.
- Increase school capitation rates to align with school running costs year on year to ensure schools are no longer reliant on contributions from parents to meet day-to-day running costs

Medium-term

- Increase funding for out-of-school education provision to ensure a child-centred approach to education by providing alternatives best suited to the individual child up to completion of post-primary education.
- Expand and resource appropriately the DEIS Plus provision nationally, ensuring it is inclusive of direct one-to-one therapeutic supports for children and young people and MDTs and that the composition of the MDTs are context specific.
- Commission a research study to clearly identify the diversity across the school system to inform how best to structure the supports targeting education disadvantage experienced in non-DEIS schools.
- Ensure that the implementation of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (2024-2030) continues on schedule in line with the targets set out in the Plan for Implementation and Action 2024–2026.
- The Department of Education and Youth should examine whether additional STAR sites nationally are required to consolidate and extend the positive outcomes already achieved.

Health



ACCESS TO QUALITY HEALTH SERVICES

The EU Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children* calls on Member States to ensure that all children can access ‘their universal right to health care’ including interventions concerned with ‘disease prevention’ and ‘health promotion’ and ‘access to quality health services’.¹ It recommends Member States should tackle barriers to healthcare for families and children in poverty such as those related to cost and information.² Prevention strategies for early childhood should be inclusive of needs around nutrition, health and social measures.³ Children with disabilities or mental health difficulties should be given special attention along with undocumented children, teen parents and families with substance abuse issues.⁴

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.⁵ Ireland was last examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee made recommendations around the issue of accessibility and affordability of health care services including the expansion of free GP care and the barriers created by a two-tier system.⁶

In March 2024, the Concluding Observations of Ireland’s review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) drew attention to the disparities in access to health care services for different socio-economic groups and called on Ireland to take further action by expanding the scope and coverage, and improving the quality, of services provided under *Sláintecare*.⁷

In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office.⁸ It includes a focus on consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services. The latter includes supporting the commitment contained in *First 5 - A Whole-of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*⁹ to develop a dedicated child health workforce as well as ensuring that cost is not a barrier to accessing essential services in the community such as free General Practitioner (GP) care.¹⁰ In January 2025, the Programme Office published a progress report on its first 18 months of work.¹¹

The *Progress Report* notes that enhancing service integration is both one of the six key priority areas for monitoring across the system and one of the Programme Office’s systemic strategic initiatives.¹²

1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

5 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 24.

6 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 30.

7 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ‘Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Ireland’ (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 45.

8 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025* (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).

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

10 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025* (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).

11 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 18.

12 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 32.

The importance of well-integrated services for children is emphasised by highlighting that evidence clearly identifies it as playing a key role in increasing the quality of life for the child and providing better experiences of services for their families.¹³ Furthermore, the Office emphasises that those who benefit most from integrated services include vulnerable children, particularly if they attend integrated services at an early age.¹⁴



94%
**of children under 8 have a
 Medical Card or GP Visit Card**

By 1 October 2024, an additional 83,500 more children (under 18 years of age) had a GP visit card following the establishment of a new GP agreement in August 2023.¹⁵ The *Progress Report* notes that approximately 94 per cent of children under 8 years of age have either a Medical Card or GP Visit Card.¹⁶

Funding has been provided to the Deep End Ireland GP group which work in areas of deprivation, as well as funding to strengthen primary care and general practice teams in areas of deprivation.¹⁷

Longitudinal data indicates that exposure to economic vulnerability, a measure of poverty that combines low income, deprivation and an inability to make ends meet, has an impact on children's physical and mental health outcomes.¹⁸ Children who experience economic vulnerability are more likely to experience obesity or overweight, and they have a greater likelihood of having a chronic illness or disability.¹⁹ Measurement of self-concept – which includes attributes such as happiness and freedom from anxiety – found that those with long exposure to economic vulnerability have a poorer self-concept.²⁰

Childhood experiences of poverty can also have a lasting effect on health and wellbeing.²¹ A survey of adults aged 25-59 reported that one quarter (25.2 per cent) of those who grew up with bad financial circumstances had low overall life satisfaction.²² This is compared to one in ten adults who grew up in either moderate (10.0 per cent) or good (9.3 per cent) financial circumstances.²³ Furthermore, those growing up with bad financial circumstances were almost twice as likely to report their health as being bad or very bad (6.6 per cent) versus those growing up in good financial circumstances (3.4 per cent).²⁴ Given these findings it is critical that Irish health policy provides for specific targeted interventions to support children who experience disadvantage.

13 Satherley, R.M., Lingam, R., Green, J. et al. (2021) 'Integrated health services for children: A qualitative study of family perspectives', *BMC Health Services Research*, 21 (167).

14 Smith, T., Sylva, K., Mathers, S. et al. (2004) *National evaluation of the Wraparound Care Pilot Project*. UK Government: Department for Education and Skills.

15 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 34.

16 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 34.

17 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 34.

18 Bernard Maitre, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey*, (ESRI 2021), ix.

19 Bernard Maitre, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey*, (ESRI 2021), 53.

20 Bernard Maitre, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey*, (ESRI 2021), 59.

21 CSO *SILC Module on the Impact of Childhood Poverty Experiences on Adult Life 2023* (CSO 2024).

22 CSO *SILC Module on the Impact of Childhood Poverty Experiences on Adult Life 2023* (CSO 2024).

23 CSO *SILC Module on the Impact of Childhood Poverty Experiences on Adult Life 2023* (CSO 2024).

24 CSO *SILC Module on the Impact of Childhood Poverty Experiences on Adult Life 2023* (CSO 2024).

Addressing the costs of healthcare

Investing in Children calls on Member States to remove obstacles to healthcare including those related to cost. This aligns with Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which places particular emphasis on the development of primary healthcare, including access to General Practitioner (GP) care.²⁵

In 2017, the expansion of Irish primary care services, including the introduction of universal free GP care was recommended under *Sláintecare*.²⁶ Under legislation introduced in 2020, Health (General Practitioner and Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020, access to GP care will be extended for children under 13 years of age.²⁷ Funding was allocated in Budget 2022, and recommitted in Budget 2023,²⁸ to cover the first of three phases of expansion.²⁹ This initial phase focuses on providing free GP care to all children under 8 years of age. From 11 August 2023, the GP visit card was introduced for six and seven year olds building on the existing free care for under 6s.³⁰ The timing for subsequent phases of expansion is yet to be announced.

While the commitment to provide universal GP care for all children on a phased basis is welcome, a full Medical Card is essential for those in low-income households. This ensures access to more extensive primary care services such as optical and aural services, prescriptions, and out-patient health services and medical appliances.³¹ Medical Card holders may also be exempt from paying school transport charges and exam fees.³²

As the full Medical Card is a targeted support, recipients generally must satisfy a means test.³³ Families whose income is derived solely from social welfare will normally qualify for the Medical Card. Other groups such as children in foster care and those living in Direct Provision qualify for the card without a means test.³⁴ However, those on low incomes from a combination of work and social welfare may not meet the income criteria. This is due to the inadequacy of the income thresholds for the Medical Card. The current Medical Card income threshold for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week.³⁵ This has remained unchanged since 2005,³⁶ while the poverty line for this household in 2024 was calculated by Social Justice Ireland to have been €751.66.³⁷ Therefore, access to the Medical Card is not being maintained for those families most in need with any increase in the National Minimum Wage or Social Welfare rates not reflected in a revision of the Medical Card thresholds.

State funding allocated to GP services in Ireland is based on an agreement between the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive and the medical union the Irish Medical Organisation. The latest agreement was reached in 2023.³⁸ A capitation fee is paid in respect of patients in receipt of a Medical Card, however, while the rate paid varies based on patient age and gender, it does not take account of the patient's needs.³⁹ Therefore, funding is flatly distributed and GPs in more affluent areas receive the same allocation as those working in areas of deprivation. This is despite research and evidence showing a link between multimorbidity (two or more longer-term health conditions) and social deprivation.⁴⁰

25 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 24 (b).

26 *Sláintecare* is the agreed vision and strategic plan published by the Committee on the Future of Healthcare. The Committee was set up in 2016 to establish cross-party political agreement on the future direction of the health service in Ireland which resulted in the development of a ten year plan for reform.

27 Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020.

28 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2023: Expenditure Report*, (Department of Finance 2022).

29 Department of Health, 'Budget 2022: Minister Donnelly announces €21 billion, the biggest ever investment in Ireland's health and social care services' (Press Release 14 October 2021).

30 Department of Health, 'Minister for Health encourages families to register for free GP care for children aged 6 and 7' (Press Release, 11 August 2023).

31 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

32 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

33 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

34 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

35 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

36 Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed *Working for Work A Handbook Exploring Options for Unemployed People* (INOU 2005).

37 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2024* (Social Justice Ireland 2024) 2.

38 Department of Health, HSE and Irish Medical Organisation, *GP Agreement - Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO* <<https://bit.ly/4jOEwCX>> accessed 2 May 2025.

39 Department of Health, HSE and Irish Medical Organisation, *GP Agreement - Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO* <<https://bit.ly/4jOEwCX>> accessed 2 May 2025 6.

40 World Health Organization, *Multimorbidity: Technical Series on Safer Primary Care*. (World Health Organization 2016).

A group of GPs working in the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland came together in 2012 and formed Deep End Ireland.⁴¹ Deep End Ireland has called for increased resources for GPs working in areas of disadvantage to address 'the inverse care law'.⁴² Coined by Julian Tudor Hart in an article in *The Lancet* in 1971,⁴³ the inverse law states that 'people who most need good quality health care are often the least likely to receive it'.⁴⁴ GPs who are part of Deep End Ireland have highlighted the increased complexity of their work in disadvantaged communities, yet the payment they receive to run their practices and employ their staff is the same as GPs who may not face the similar challenges. For example, engaging with patients who are experiencing homelessness or who require interpretation services can mean GPs spend more time with these patients.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the fact that multimorbidity can occur in patients living in deprived areas 10-15 years earlier,⁴⁶ means that these GPs often need to provide more intensive care to patients in their 50s and 60 before the increased funding rate is applied at 70 years of age.⁴⁷ As there are fewer GPs working in areas of high deprivation, Deep End Ireland advocate for the adoption of a similar approach to the DEIS school model to attract more GPs to work in these communities.⁴⁸ This could increase doctor patient ratios, allow longer appointment times and increase the viability of General Practice in these areas.⁴⁹

In the 2019 GP Contract, agreed between the HSE, Department of Health and the Irish Medical Organisation an allocation of €2m was provided to 'support and maintain GP services for communities with a high degree of social deprivation'.⁵⁰ An annual grant of between €7,500 and €12,500 is provided for GPs working in disadvantaged areas based on the

proportion of their patients living in areas categorised as disadvantaged by the Pobal deprivation maps.⁵¹ The grant is to be used to provide additional services. The latest available data indicates that €3.1m in funding was made available under this scheme in 2023.⁵²

Annual Funding provided under the Social Deprivation Practice Grant Support

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Social Deprivation Grant	€2,905,000	€79,500	€2,542,500	€3,105,000

Source: HSE Primary Care Reimbursement Service Statistical Analysis of Claims and Payments 2023; 2022; 2021 and 2020 (HSE various years).

Research with 25 practices awarded this funding found that many (17 out of the 25 respondents) used the additional funding for more doctor hours, to enable longer consultations with more complex patients with higher health needs.⁵³ The funding was also used for increased nursing hours, counselling, addiction counselling and interpreter services.⁵⁴ While this was a small scale research study, GPs who were consulted commented that the funding allowed GPs to provide longer consultations and the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive to health issues for vulnerable populations.⁵⁵ Further research on the impact of the grant should be undertaken in order to identify the potential that increased investment in this area may have.

41 Deep End Ireland, 'About' <https://bit.ly/4k7HJNP> accessed 2 May 2025.

42 Deep End Ireland, 'About' <https://bit.ly/4k7HJNP> accessed 2 May 2025.

43 Hart JT. The inverse care law. *Lancet*. 1971;1(7696):405-12.

44 Deep End Ireland, 'About' <https://bit.ly/4k7HJNP> accessed 2 May 2025.

45 Deep End Ireland 'GP Retention Symposium' <https://bit.ly/4iK67Uk> accessed 2 May 2025.

46 World Health Organization, *Multimorbidity: Technical Series on Safer Primary Care*. (World Health Organization 2016).

47 Deep End Ireland 'GP Retention Symposium' <https://bit.ly/4iK67Uk> accessed 2 May 2025.

48 Deep End Ireland 'GP Retention Symposium' <https://bit.ly/4iK67Uk> accessed 2 May 2025.

49 Deep End Ireland 'GP Retention Symposium' <https://bit.ly/4iK67Uk> accessed 2 May 2025.

50 Department of Health, HSE and Irish Medical Organisation, *Terms of Agreement between the Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO regarding GP Contractual Reform and Service Development* <https://bit.ly/3F0LQMx> accessed 2 May 2025.

51 O'Shea, M. et al 'An evaluation of the social deprivation practice grant in Irish general practice' *British Journal of General Practice* Vol. 8 (2) (2024).

52 HSE Primary Care Reimbursement Service Statistical Analysis of Claims and Payments (HSE 2024).

53 O'Shea, M. et al 'An evaluation of the social deprivation practice grant in Irish general practice' *British Journal of General Practice* Vol. 8 (2) (2024).

54 O'Shea, M. et al 'An evaluation of the social deprivation practice grant in Irish general practice' *British Journal of General Practice* Vol. 8 (2) (2024).

55 O'Shea, M. et al 'An evaluation of the social deprivation practice grant in Irish general practice' *British Journal of General Practice* Vol. 8 (2) (2024).

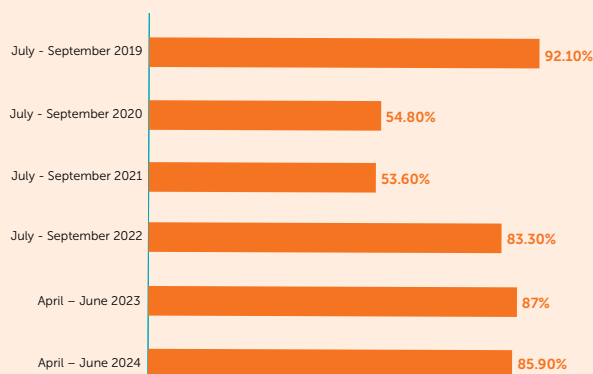
Preventative supports in early childhood

The Public Health Nursing service provides one-to-one support for parents of all babies and is seen as having a key role in ensuring that babies and young children have access to primary, preventative and specialist healthcare.⁵⁶ *Investing in Children* calls for investment in prevention for children's early years which includes health and social measures.⁵⁷ Public Health Nurses are an important link to early childhood education and care services, particularly prevention and early intervention services.

Public health nursing is under pressure with the number of Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) posts have yet to return to their pre-pandemic levels. The latest figures indicate that there continues to be a lower number in the workforce with 1,537 WTE pre-pandemic in December 2019 and just 1,511 WTE in December 2024.⁵⁸ A breakdown of the latter figure by Community Health Organisations (CHO) level shows that while overall there were an extra 19 WTEs compared to December 2023, in CHO7 there were eight fewer Public Health Nurses between these two periods.⁵⁹ A lower number of public health nurses means that some areas need to put a system in place to prioritise patients with the greatest needs.⁶⁰

During the Covid-19 pandemic there was a reduced level of contact between PHNs and new-born babies and their parents meaning that just 54.8 per cent received their developmental screening within 10 months between July and September 2020⁶¹ and this fell to 53.6 per cent in the same period in 2021.⁶² Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, the rate was 92 per cent.⁶³ In the past three years there are indications that developmental screening checks have returned to the level of activity in 2019.

Percentage of babies receiving developmental checks



Source: HSE Performance Reports (various years). Note: In 2019 and 2020 the figures capture the percentage of babies receiving their developmental checks within 10 months. Figures for 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024 capture the percentage receiving this check within 12 months.

The latest available data relates to April to June 2024 when 86 per cent received their developmental assessment within 12 months,⁶⁴ a similar rate to 12 months previous at 87 per cent⁶⁵ and an increase on the rate of 83.3 per cent in 2022.⁶⁶ While the national rates are showing improvement they are still below the HSE's target of 95 per cent.⁶⁷ However, when the rates are examined at CHO level there evidence of geographic disparity. In 2024 just one CHO area reaching the target of 95 per cent (CHO8) while the lowest performing area only achieved 65.3 per cent (CHO7).⁶⁸ In the reporting data for the same period in 2023, CHO7 was also the lowest performing area but the percentage of children in this area receiving their developmental checks by the age of 12 months was much higher at 81.6 per cent.⁶⁹

56 Government of Ireland *First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their families 2019-2028* (Stationery Office 2018).

57 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

58 Health Service Executive, Written Answers, *Health Services Staff*, 23 January 2025 [46737/24].

59 Health Service Executive, Written Answers, *Health Services Staff*, 23 January 2025 [46737/24].

60 Amy Donohoe, 'Developmental checks for newborns delayed in Dublin Mid-west due to nurse shortage' *Irish Independent* (Dublin 10 February 2025).

61 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July - September 2020* (HSE 2020) 21.

62 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July - September 2020* (HSE 2020) 25.

63 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July - September 2020* (HSE 2020) 21.

64 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April - June 2024* (HSE 2024) 30.

65 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April - June 2023* (HSE 2024) 40.

66 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July - September 2022* (HSE 2022) 22.

67 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April - June 2023* (HSE 2023) 40.

68 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April - June 2024* (HSE 2024) 29.

69 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April - June 2023* (HSE 2023) 40.

Public Health Nurses may lack the time and supports necessary to move away from primarily treating ill health and towards health promotion and early intervention in children's early years.⁷⁰ The 2017 *Houses of the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report* recommends investing in child health and well-being services by putting in place Public Health Nurses that are dedicated to child health work. *Sláintecare* also recommends the hiring of 900 community registered nurses to free up Public Health Nurses with specialist child training to carry out their child health work.⁷¹

First 5: The Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028, contains a related commitment to:

'[in line with the principles set out in *Sláintecare*], develop a dedicated child health workforce, adopting a population-based approach, focussed initially in areas of high population density and disadvantage, recognising that this will require additional resources.'⁷²

This commitment is reinforced in the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office at the Department of the Taoiseach.⁷³ The Programme Office's *Progress Report* notes that

a steering group has been established and this is exploring a range of existing practice and models. A Project Officer was due to be appointed to support this work in January 2025.⁷⁴ It is envisaged that recommendations from the Steering Group will be made to the Ministers for Health and Children.⁷⁵

A systematic review of international models of public health highlights the important role that public health nurses play in providing child specific health support to address early childhood development milestones and early intervention.⁷⁶ The review looked at models in four countries – Norway, Italy, United States and the United Kingdom.⁷⁷ Some of the impacts captured in the literature include the development of good interpersonal relationships between families and PHNs in Norway; a demonstrated reduction in child abuse and neglect in the United States, and evidence that intensive home visiting in the United Kingdom has support children's language development.⁷⁸

In the absence of the establishment of dedicated PHN service for children and families in Ireland, there are primary healthcare initiatives targeting the needs of children and their families who may be experiencing disadvantage. The work of Kidscope highlights the potential of a dedicated Public Health Nurse Service for children in terms of intervening early and improving child outcomes.⁷⁹ Kidscope is a consultant-led, multi-stakeholder paediatric clinic established in 2010 and operates in the Northwest of Cork city. A PHN plays a key role in engaging in the development, delivery and clinical review and sustainability of this initiative.⁸⁰ Their role includes acting as the main referral agency to the wider health services provided

70 Children's Rights Alliance, *The next programme for Government: Every Child Every Chance* (Children's Rights Alliance 2020).

71 Committee on the Future of Healthcare *Sláintecare Report* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2017) 57.

72 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018) 160.

73 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).

74 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 33.

75 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 33.

76 Jeffers, B. Buckley M. and Mulcahy, G. *An exploration of the development of a dedicated public health nurse service for children* (Unpublished report for the Children's Rights Alliance).

77 Jeffers, B. Buckley M. and Mulcahy, G. *An exploration of the development of a dedicated public health nurse service for children* (Unpublished report for the Children's Rights Alliance).

78 Jeffers, B. Buckley M. and Mulcahy, G. *An exploration of the development of a dedicated public health nurse service for children* (Unpublished report for the Children's Rights Alliance).

79 Buckley, L., Gibson, L., Harford, K., Cornally, N., and Curtin, M. (2023) "Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland: How Public Health Nurses Are Contributing Through Engagement in an Interagency Community Pediatric Clinic," *Open Nursing*, Volume 9: 1–10.

80 Buckley, L., Gibson, L., Harford, K., Cornally, N., and Curtin, M. (2023) "Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland: How Public Health Nurses Are Contributing Through Engagement in an Interagency Community Pediatric Clinic," *Open Nursing*, Volume 9: 1–10.

by Kidscope.⁸¹ This is particularly critical in terms of early intervention as the Public Health Nurse uses their routine check-up as a means of referring children with developmental concerns to Kidscope's wider health services.⁸² They also play an important role when the child is attending appointments by supporting the family with further information and support.⁸³ Public Health Nurses working within this model of interagency health service provision gained a more specialist early years focus which moves away from the generalist approach currently underpinning the service.⁸⁴

Promotion of Breastfeeding

A part of *Investing in Children's* call for prioritisation of prevention measures in early childhood is a focus on nutrition.⁸⁵ The Committee on the Rights of the Child affirmed that exclusive breastfeeding of a child up to 6 months and continued along with solids until 2 years of age should be protected and promoted, as breastfeeding provides the best source of nutritious food to the infant while also providing the best defence against malnutrition and diseases.⁸⁶

Article 24(2)(e) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States to ensure society, in particular, parents are 'informed, have access to education and are supported in [...] the advantages of breastfeeding'. The HSE's *Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland – HSE Action Plan 2016-2021* sets out the priority areas to be addressed to enhance breastfeeding supports and to enable more mothers in Ireland to breastfeed.⁸⁷

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of some actions, the action plan was initially extended until the end of 2022,⁸⁸ and now until the end of 2025.⁸⁹ In November 2024, an update on the implementation of the plan was published and it highlighted that in 2023 64 per cent of new mothers initiate breastfeeding after birth.⁹⁰ Furthermore, since 2015 there has been an increase in rates of breastfeeding with an 18.6 per cent increase in the number of babies being breastfed at three months.⁹¹ In 2017 there were 15.42 WTE infant feeding/lactation posts. By 2023 this had increased to 59.1 WTE and Budget 2025 provided an extra €0.9 million in New Development Funding for breastfeeding supports including the recruitment of an additional five lactation consultants. An evaluation of the plan is currently being undertaken by the HSE and this will inform future work to promote and support and increase breastfeeding rates.⁹²

A report published by the HSE in 2017 found that socioeconomic status is a factor in breastfeeding.⁹³ Younger mothers and those in lower socioeconomic groups were less likely to be breastfeeding on discharge from hospital, while older mothers from higher socioeconomic groups were more likely to still be breastfeeding.⁹⁴

81 Buckley, L., Gibson, L., Harford, K., Cornally, N., and Curtin, M. (2023) "Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland: How Public Health Nurses Are Contributing Through Engagement in an Interagency Community Pediatric Clinic," *Open Nursing*, Volume 9: 1–10.

82 Buckley, L., Gibson, L., Harford, K., Cornally, N., and Curtin, M. (2023) "Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland: How Public Health Nurses Are Contributing Through Engagement in an Interagency Community Pediatric Clinic," *Open Nursing*, Volume 9: 1–10.

83 Buckley, L., Gibson, L., Harford, K., Cornally, N., and Curtin, M. (2023) "Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland: How Public Health Nurses Are Contributing Through Engagement in an Interagency Community Pediatric Clinic," *Open Nursing*, Volume 9: 1–10.

84 Buckley, L., Gibson, L., Harford, K., Cornally, N., and Curtin, M. (2023) "Sustainable Development Goals in Ireland: How Public Health Nurses Are Contributing Through Engagement in an Interagency Community Pediatric Clinic," *Open Nursing*, Volume 9: 1–10.

85 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

86 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 24 (b).

87 HSE, *Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland – HSE Action Plan 2016-2021* (HSE 2016).

88 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Frank Feighan TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Promotion 15 September 2021 [43546/21].

89 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Colm Burke TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Promotion 24 September 2024 [37825/ 24].

90 HSE, *Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland – Health Service Executive Action Plan 2016-2021* (HSE 2024).

91 HSE, *Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland – Health Service Executive Action Plan 2016-2021* (HSE 2024).

92 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Colm Burke TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Promotion 24 September 2024 [37825/ 24].

93 HSE, *Breastfeeding on the island of Ireland*, (HSE 2017) 4.

94 HSE, *Breastfeeding on the island of Ireland*, (HSE 2017) 4.

Services for children with a disability

Special attention should be given to children with a disability according to *Investing in Children*.⁹⁵ In December 2023, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published the *Action Plan for Disability Services*.⁹⁶

The *Action Plan* was developed arising from the publication of a report which quantifies and costs the future need for disability services.⁹⁷ Over the lifetime of the plan, a key priority is children's disability services and the need for an extra 600 WTE staff in order to ensure the timely delivery of services to children with a disability.⁹⁸ The scope of the *Action Plan* is set in the context of a number of reform programmes, collectively called Transforming Lives.⁹⁹ This programme of reform 'has worked to refocus disability services around individuals' choices and preferences, and to support people with disabilities to live ordinary lives of their choosing in ordinary places, reflecting Article 19 of the (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) UNCRPD' and it includes *Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People*.¹⁰⁰

Over a decade ago the process of re-configuring the delivery of disability services began. The final Disability Network Team was reconfigured in December 2021.¹⁰¹ While the reconfiguration of services is complete, parents report difficulties with staff turnover and gaps in terms of professionals on the team.¹⁰²

In October 2023, the HSE published a *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People*.¹⁰³ The *Roadmap* sets out 60 actions across five key areas including dedicated and specific actions on workforce focused on retention, development and recruitment.¹⁰⁴ This includes setting up governance structures to monitor and report on progress on the roadmap; specific actions to improve access to Child Disability Network Team (CDNT) services; engagement with professionals in education and support in special schools; and actions related to communications with children and their families. Progress on the achievement will be published each quarter on the HSE's website.¹⁰⁵

The challenges with staff turnover and vacant positions is borne out in the 2024 CDNT Workforce Report published by the HSE in January 2025.¹⁰⁶ The report captures the results of a workforce survey conducted on 16th October 2024 across all 93 CDNTs.¹⁰⁷ The report found that there has been a 6 per cent (140.93 WTE) annual increase in funded posts in 2024 and a 17 per cent increase in filled posts.¹⁰⁸ While there has been progress in filling vacant posts, overall there were still 529.77 WTE unfilled posts in October 2024.¹⁰⁹

95 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

96 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026* (DCEDIY 2023).

97 Department of Health, *Disability Capacity Review to 2032 - A Review of Social Care Demand and Capacity Requirements to 2032* (Department of Health 2021).

98 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026* (DCEDIY 2023) 17.

99 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026* (DCEDIY 2023) 17.

100 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026* (DCEDIY 2023) 14.

101 Inclusion Ireland, *Progressing disability services for children and young people - Parent experience survey report* (Inclusion Ireland February 2022).

102 Inclusion Ireland, *Progressing disability services for children and young people - Parent experience survey report* (Inclusion Ireland February 2022).

103 HSE, *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People* (HSE 2023).

104 HSE, *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People* (HSE 2023).

105 HSE, *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People* (HSE 2023) 6.

106 HSE, *Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) 2024 CDNT Workforce Report* (HSE 2025).

107 HSE, *Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) 2024 CDNT Workforce Report* (HSE 2025) 4.

108 HSE, *Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) 2024 CDNT Workforce Report* (HSE 2025) 10.

109 HSE, *Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) 2024 CDNT Workforce Report* (HSE 2025) 10.

There is an overall national vacancy rate of 22.1 per cent but with a variance across the nine CHO areas from a high of 37 per cent in CHO 5 (86.54 WTE vacancies) to a low of 10 per cent in CHO2 (26.43 WTE vacancies).¹¹⁰ Therefore, despite an increase in the number of posts allocated to CDNTs the challenge with vacancies persists.

Given the challenges with staffing it is not surprising that over almost 13,000 children were waiting for an initial contact from a CDNT in December 2024. Almost 70 per cent of these children were waiting for more than 12 months.¹¹¹ While this is a large number of children awaiting services, it represents an improvement on the figures for 2023 and 2022. There were 18,000 children waiting for an initial contact from a CDNT with over 50 per cent waiting for over 12 months in December 2022.¹¹² In July 2023 15,000 children were waiting on an initial contact with 63 per cent of these were waiting for over 12 months.¹¹³

According to data from the HSE, in November 2024 there were 18,542 children on the waiting lists for an initial assessment from speech and language therapy, with 4,755 waiting for over a year. A further 6,775 children were waiting for initial speech and language therapy with 2,027 waiting for more than 12 months and an additional 9,740 were waiting for further therapy with 2,503 of these waiting for longer than 12 months.¹¹⁴ There was over 23,142 children waiting on psychology therapy, and 21,510 waiting on occupational therapy.¹¹⁵ Of those children waiting for psychology services, over 11,148 are waiting longer than a year.¹¹⁶ Almost 10,000 children were waiting over a year for occupational therapy.¹¹⁷

While families with higher financial resources may have the option of accessing services through private therapists or services, children living in low income families are faced with languishing on waiting lists. It is critical that momentum is maintained on funding additional CDNT posts alongside actions to reduce the number of vacancies.

	Total number on waiting list	More than 12 months
Psychology	23,142	11,148
Occupational Therapy	21,510	9,900
Physiotherapy	10,195	2,550
Speech and Language Therapy		
Initial Assessment	18,542	4,755
Initial Therapy	6,775	2,027
Further Therapy	9,740	2,503
Source: Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 28 January 2025 [46431/24] https://bit.ly/3YWDn3F accessed 3 May 2025.		

110 HSE, *Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) 2024 CDNT Workforce Report* (HSE 2025) 34.

111 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 19 February 2025 [4071/25] and [4725/25], <https://bit.ly/44iD5ry> accessed 2 May 2025.

112 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 17 February 2023 [5784/23], <https://bit.ly/4aWmH0i> accessed 3 May 2024.

113 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 14 September 2023 [5784/23] <https://bit.ly/3UL3kbb> accessed 3 May 2025.

114 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 28 January 2025 [46431/24] <https://bit.ly/3YWDn3F> accessed 3 May 2025.

115 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 28 January 2025 [46431/24] <https://bit.ly/3YWDn3F> accessed 3 May 2025.

116 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 28 January 2025 [46431/24] <https://bit.ly/3YWDn3F> accessed 3 May 2025.

117 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 28 January 2025 [46431/24] <https://bit.ly/3YWDn3F> accessed 3 May 2025.

Mental health

Investing in Children calls for improved responsiveness of health systems for disadvantaged children and ensure all children have a right to healthcare with particular attention to those children mental health difficulties.¹¹⁸ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.¹¹⁹ In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child urged the Irish State to increase its resources in the area of mental health as well as ensuring that the number of mental health professionals meet the needs of children.¹²⁰

While mental health problems are not selective, certain groups of children are at greater risk of poor mental health, including children who have experienced abuse or neglect,¹²¹ including domestic abuse,¹²² children who have experienced discrimination, including homophobia or transphobia,¹²³ and children with chronic physical health conditions.¹²⁴ In the UK, longitudinal data from the Millenium Cohort Study shows that transition into income poverty in early childhood increases the risk of mental health problems for both children and mothers.¹²⁵ Analysis of the Growing up in Ireland survey data found that children who had exposure to economic vulnerability were more likely to have a low or very low self-concept score. The calculation of this score is based on domains including ones concerned with freedom from anxiety and happiness and

satisfaction.¹²⁶ At a community level the association between poverty and mental health are highlighted in *Over the Fence Perspectives on and experiences of child poverty in Tallaght*.¹²⁷ In particular the research found a connection between mental health difficulties and other aspects of poverty.¹²⁸ Challenges related to housing and accommodation are described as being 'likely causes of mental health difficulties in both children and parents'.¹²⁹ Furthermore, drug use was seen to be a response to mental health challenges experienced by young people.¹³⁰

For many children living in poverty, their restricted resources mean that they cannot access services privately and are reliant on public services. The increased need being placed on an overstretched Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), meant that there were 3,830 children on a waiting list for CAMHS in 2024.¹³¹ Research in the United Kingdom exploring young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services found that all participants expressed in some form an inability to function sufficiently and the emergence of negative beliefs, emotions and thoughts while waiting to access mental health services.¹³²

Ensuring that all children under 18 years have equitable and timely access to age-appropriate, quality mental health treatment and services is key to avoiding such negative outcomes.

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- 118 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 119 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 24.
- 120 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 32.
- 121 Norman and Byambaa et al, *The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, PLoS Medicine, 2012; Schaefer and Moffitt et al, *Adolescent victimization and early-adult psychopathology: Approaching causal inference using a longitudinal twin study to rule out non-causal explanations*, (2018) Clinical Psychological Science.
- 122 Roberts and Campbell et al, *The role of parenting stress in young Children's mental health functioning after exposure to family violence* (2013) Journal of Traumatic Stress, 26(5).
- 123 Tina Dürrbaum, Frank A. Sattler, *Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: A meta-analysis* (2020) Journal of LGBT Youth 17:3; Liu & Mustanski, *Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* (2012) American Journal of Preventative Medicine, 42(3).
- 124 Vanessa E. Cobham, et al., *Systematic Review: Anxiety in Children and Adolescents With Chronic Medical Conditions*, (2020) Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 59(5).
- 125 Wickham, Whitehead, Taylor Robinson, Barr *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: A longitudinal analysis of the UK millennium cohort study* (2017) The Lancet Public Health, 2 (3).
- 126 Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth *The Dynamics of Child Poverty: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021) 59.
- 127 Childhood Development Initiative *Over the Fence: Perspectives on and experiences of child poverty in Tallaght* (CDI 2021).
- 128 Childhood Development Initiative *Over the Fence: Perspectives on and experiences of child poverty in Tallaght* (CDI 2021).
- 129 Childhood Development Initiative *Over the Fence: Perspectives on and experiences of child poverty in Tallaght* (CDI 2021).
- 130 Childhood Development Initiative *Over the Fence: Perspectives on and experiences of child poverty in Tallaght* (CDI 2021).
- 131 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 13 January 2025.
- 132 Punton G, Dodd AL, McNeill A 'You're on the waiting list': An interpretive phenomenological analysis of young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services in the UK' PLoS ONE 17(3): e0265542 (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265542>> accessed 02 August 2022.

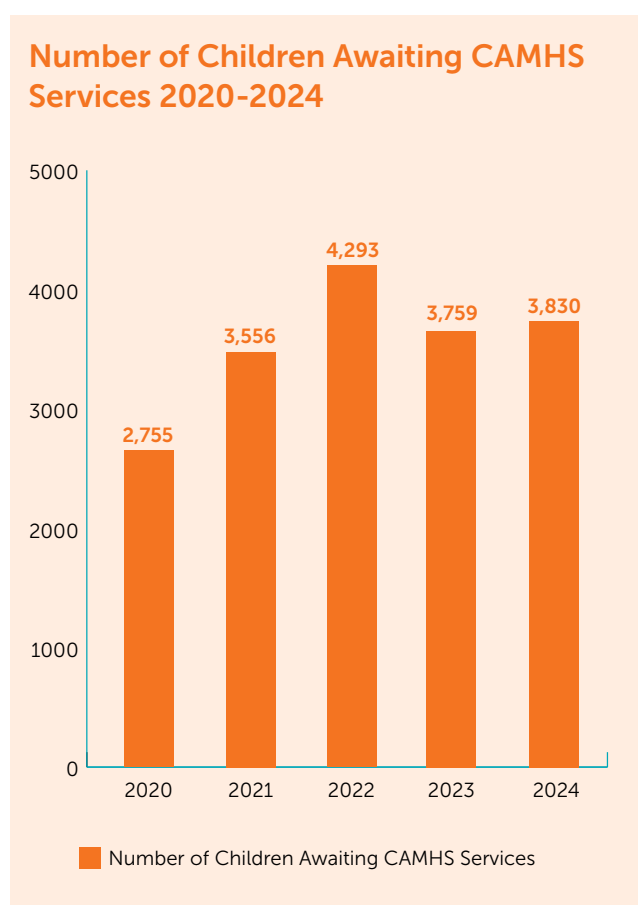


Fig 2. Statistics are taken from Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 13 January 2025.

The total allocation in Budget 2025 for mental health services is over €1.48 billion¹³³ which provides an additional €16 million in funding for a number of initiatives, including for additional CAMHS services and for new beds in the National Forensic Mental Health Service.¹³⁴ Given the greater risk that children in poverty have of experiencing poor mental health,¹³⁵ combined with the financial barriers to accessing services privately, it is critical that investment and actions to build high quality public services are prioritised.

133 Department of Health, 'Ministers for Health announce record €25.8 billion budget for the delivery of health services in 2025' Press Release (Department of Health 2024) <<https://bit.ly/4h7stPL>> Accessed 23 January 2025.

134 Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery, and Reform, *Budget 2025: Expenditure Report* (Government of Ireland 2024) 106.

135 Wickham, Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, Barr, *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: A longitudinal analysis of the UK millennium cohort study* (2017) *The Lancet Public Health*, 2 (3).

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum these should be set above the poverty thresholds.
- Expand access to the GP Visit Card to children under the age of 9.
- Increase investment in the social deprivation grant awarded to GPs working in areas of social disadvantage by €1 million. As part of the increased funding commission a comprehensive research study on the impact of the grant funding to date and future expenditure needed to have a real impact on reducing health inequalities.
- Invest in creating a dedicated public health nurse service for children and develop a strategy for 'home visits' to ensure every child has access to the prevention and early intervention supports they deserve in their own community.
- Continue to expand the allocation of posts to Child Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) by funding an additional 200 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) posts in Budget 2026.

Short-term

- Set out a timeline for the rollout of the GP Visit Card for all children under the age of 13.

Medium-term

- Prioritise the development of a seven-days Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) service nationwide.
- In the medium term realise the commitment to extend the GP Visit Card to under 12s.
- Prioritise the development of a new Breastfeeding Strategy and Action Plan and consider the inclusion of specific actions around robust data collections and the promotion of Breastfeeding amongst groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Long-term Sustainable Solutions

- Expand GP Visit Card to all children under the age of 18.
- Fully implement the commitments contained in Sláintecare.

Housing and Homelessness



HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Focusing on access to affordable quality services, the *Investing in Children* Recommendation states that children should have 'a safe, adequate housing and living environment' to live and grow-up in.¹ The Recommendation acknowledges that children's living environments are closely connected to their development and learning needs,² and therefore there are a number of actions that States should prioritise in relation to housing and accommodation. *Investing in Children* calls for a focus on affordable, quality housing along with addressing issues related to 'environmental hazards, overcrowding and energy poverty'.³ Families with children should be prevented from experiencing homelessness through the avoidance of evictions. For those families experiencing homelessness, long-term solutions are needed alongside the provision of temporary shelter that meets the immediate needs of children and families.⁴ Exposure to deteriorating living and social environments should be reduced to ensure children do not fall victim to violence and abuse.⁵

***Investing in Children* calls for a focus on affordable, quality housing along with addressing issues related to 'environmental hazards, overcrowding and energy poverty'.**

In Ireland, over the course of the last Government term, child and family homelessness increased by 70 per cent and 87 per cent respectively.⁶ In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office,⁷ identifying family homelessness as one of the six priority areas.⁸ Amongst the key issues that the Programme Office committed to focus on are:

- actions to prevent and reduce the impact of homelessness for children;
- the identification of the causes of, and an initiation of preventative strategies on, family homelessness;
- the role of family support services in helping families experiencing homelessness to transition to stable accommodation and promoting innovative solutions to tackle family homelessness.⁹

A *Progress Report* on the first 18 months of the work plan was published in January 2025.¹⁰ As part of the Programme Office's work to monitor progress in this area, and to enhance the prevention and mitigation of the impact of family homelessness, two cross-government workshops were held during the summer of 2024.¹¹ The workshops considered the challenges and opportunities in addressing family homelessness, and explored responses to realise the ambition to end family homelessness.¹²

- 1 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 2 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 3 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 4 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 5 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 6 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homelessness Reports* (DHLG various years).
- 7 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).
- 8 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).
- 9 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023) 16.
- 10 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025).
- 11 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 28.
- 12 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 28.

Affordability

Investing in Children calls for Member States to take actions to address affordability in relation to accommodation.¹³ Under the Housing Act 1988, local authorities have responsibility to provide housing for individuals and households who are unable to afford to do so for themselves.¹⁴ Households who are on their local authority's housing list can qualify for help with their rent through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).¹⁵ In November 2024, of all households identified as on the housing list and in need of housing supports, 32 per cent (19,088) included children.¹⁶ This was a decrease of 1,844 households based on the 2023 figures.¹⁷

The issue of affordability is borne out in the Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey which rates middle-income housing affordability by dividing the median house prices by median household income.¹⁸ The Survey examines 94 major markets in eight countries, including the Dublin market in Ireland. In 2023, Ireland was categorised as 'Seriously Unaffordable'.¹⁹ Over the past ten years, house prices have increased by 50 per cent in Dublin and closer to 100 per cent in other parts of Ireland.²⁰ The latest Daft.ie Rental Report highlights the challenges with affordability for private renters, with the average rent being €2,023 per month nationally.²¹ The average rent in Dublin is much higher, ranging from €2,371 in Dublin North County to €2,794 in Dublin South County.²²

Housing costs often comprise the largest proportion of expenditure in household budgets.²³ The percentage of income that goes on housing can impact on a household's consumption of other goods and services, and, subsequently, limits their economic growth.²⁴ Households who have particular challenges with affordability include those renting privately and those on low incomes.²⁵ Low-income households



Low income households pay between two-fifths and over half of their income on housing costs, in comparison to just one-fifth for the general population.

pay between two-fifths and over half of their income on housing, in comparison to just one-fifth for the general population.²⁶

The impact that housing costs are having on low-income households is evident in the results of the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). The data from SILC shows that many households are being pulled into poverty due to the burden of

13 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

14 Citizens Information 'Housing and other supports for homeless people' <<https://bit.ly/3xZIMcg>> accessed 3 May 2025.

15 Citizens Information 'Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)' <<https://bit.ly/2L3Qxqj>> accessed 3 May 2025.

16 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024– Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.

17 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024– Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.

18 Wendall Cox, *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2024).

19 Wendall Cox, *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2024) 8.

20 Daft.ie, *The Daft.ie House Price Report An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential sales market 2025 Q1* (Daft.ie 2025) 3.

21 Daft.ie, *The Daft.ie Rental Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2025 Q1* (Daft.ie 2025) 8.

22 Daft.ie *The Daft.ie Rental Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2025 Q1* (Daft.ie 2025) 7.

23 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157.

24 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157.

25 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157.

26 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157.

housing costs. For instance, while the overall at risk of poverty rate (or the proportion of the population living on an income 60 per cent below the median) was 11.7 per cent in SILC 2024, this rose to 17.9 per cent after housing costs.²⁷ Increases in the at risk of poverty rate are evident across a range of household characteristics and are most pronounced for one parent families, those renting and those in receipt of social housing support.²⁸

The provision of HAP has increasingly become a primary means to support low-income households address affordability in the private rental sector.²⁹ In certain other circumstances, such as families who have been victims of domestic violence, Rent Supplement is available as a short-term support.³⁰ However, rent limits for both Rent Supplement and HAP have not kept pace with market value, and the standard limits for each have not been reviewed since 2016 and 2017, respectively.³¹

Previously, local authorities had the discretion to increase standard rent limits (available under HAP) by 20 per cent to secure accommodation. From July 2022, this was increased to 35 per cent.³² The increase was introduced following an examination of the level of discretion needed to allow local authorities to maintain adequate levels of HAP support.³³

However, this is discretionary practice and the HAP limits have not increased since 2017 despite substantial increases in market rents during this period.³⁴ The inadequacy of the Rent Supplement and HAP rates to meet the market price of rent is borne out by the lack of available properties within their set thresholds. Prior to the increase to the discretionary flexibility to 35 per cent, there were just four properties available within the standard HAP limits for both families with one child and families with two children.³⁵

At risk of poverty after rent and mortgage interest versus at risk of poverty rate SILC 2024		
	At risk of poverty rate	At risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest
State	11.7%	17.9%
0-17	15.3%	23.8%
1 adult with children aged under 18	24.2%	50.4%
2 adults with 1-3 children aged under 18	12.6%	20.3%
Owner-occupied	7.3%	7.9%
Rented: from Local Authority	29.5%	43.4%
Rented: other forms of social housing support	21.5%	57.3%
Rented: without housing supports	18.7%	35.5%
Source: Central Statistics Office, <i>Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024</i> (CSO, 2025).		

27 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO, 2025).

28 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO, 2025).

29 Michael Doolan et al, *Low Income Renters and Housing Supports* (ESRI 2022).

30 Citizens Information 'Rent Supplement' <<https://bit.ly/31PHGv>> accessed 29 June 2022.

31 Department of Social Protection, 'Rent Supplement Limits' <<https://bit.ly/3NEjSFj>> accessed 4 February 2022; S.I. No. 56/2017 – Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017.

32 Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2022, S.I. No. 342 of 2022.

33 Communication received from the Department Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 8 December 2022.

34 Daft.ie, *The Daft.ie Rental Price Report - An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2023 Q3*, 8 <https://bit.ly/3UpPxR8> accessed 29 January 2024.

35 Simon Communities of Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market* (Simon Communities 2022).

HAP limits have not increased since 2017 despite substantial increases in market rents during this period.

In September 2022, there were no properties available to rent within this limit for any household type.³⁶ However, there were 35 available within the new discretionary rates.³⁷ Availability of affordable accommodation is still an issue three years later in March 2025, with only 41 properties available to rent within HAP discretionary limits.³⁸ Overall, there is a major dearth of availability of HAP properties which made up just 4 per cent of the availability in the private rental market in March 2025.³⁹



Only 41 properties available to rent within HAP discretionary limits in March 2025.

Local authorities may permit a tenant to pay a 'top-up' to their landlord, a payment which is in addition to their differential rent.⁴⁰ The payment of a 'top-up' is permitted if the local authority deems the payment affordable for the household and as long

as they are not spending more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.⁴¹ Vulnerable families are often left with no option but to pay an unofficial 'top-up' directly to their landlord in addition to their differential rent contribution to the local authorities.⁴² Charities working with vulnerable families have previously highlighted increased risk of poverty and homelessness as a prominent impact resulting from paying 'top ups' on their rent.⁴³ This exposes families to a greater risk of poverty as further evidenced in the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). Households renting with such forms of social housing support have an at risk of poverty rate of 21.5 per cent but this rises to 57.3 per cent after rent or mortgage interest.⁴⁴ The corresponding figures for those in owner occupied housing are much lower at 7.3 per cent and 7.9 per cent respectively.⁴⁵

Ensuring access to quality housing

According to *Investing in Children*, affordability actions should sit alongside measures that enable families to live in quality accommodation and that they are not exposed to environmental hazards. In-depth research on adequate housing in Ireland examined a collective measure of housing quality based on the age profile of the housing stock in Ireland along with a number of individual indicators relating to housing quality, including overcrowding and the ability to heat the home.⁴⁶ A further individual measure established a housing quality index taking account of issues such as dampness, dark rooms, lack of central heating, and poor insulation.⁴⁷

In general, a large proportion of the housing stock in Ireland was built post 1980.⁴⁸ However, for the 40 per cent of dwellings built before this time, occupiers may incur extra costs such as needing to replace windows

36 Simon Communities of Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market* (Simon Communities 2022).

37 Simon Communities of Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market* (Simon Communities 2022).

38 Simon Communities of Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market – March 2025* (Simon Communities 2025).

39 Simon Communities of Ireland, *Locked Out of the Market – March 2025* (Simon Communities 2025).

40 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16.

41 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16.

42 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16.

43 Society of St Vincent de Paul, 'SVP Observations on the Homelessness-related aspects of the Housing Act', (SVP 2023).

44 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO, 2025).

45 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024* (CSO, 2025).

46 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

47 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 125.

48 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 125-126.

or on adequately heating their home.⁴⁹ Analysis of SILC data in 2018 indicated that almost one quarter of homes built before 1940 'had two or more quality problems compared to 5 to 6 per cent of those built in 1991'.⁵⁰

Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 set out the minimum standards that must be met for rental properties.⁵¹ The standards relate to things like structural conditions, food preparation, availability of adequate heating, lighting, ventilation, and fire safety. Inspections are carried out by local authorities to assess compliance under these regulations. There has been a welcome increase in the level of inspections that local authorities have carried out in the last number of years. In 2019, there were 40,308 inspections undertaken and in 2024, this had increased to 80,151.⁵² However, 60 per cent of dwellings inspected failed to meet the regulatory requirements on their first inspection.⁵³ While prohibition notices (i.e. a dwelling cannot be re-let until all matters are remediated) are comparatively low, at 210 notices in 2024, there has been a trend of accommodation not meeting the requirements of the regulations.⁵⁴ Since 2012, at least 50 per cent of dwellings inspected have failed to meet the requirements.⁵⁵

Overcrowding

Investing in Children calls for States to address situations of overcrowding as part of measures to ensure that children have a safe housing and living environment'.⁵⁶ Eurostat captures data on the proportion of the population living in overcrowded housing.⁵⁷ It defines a household as being overcrowded if, for example, each single person over

the age of 18 does not have their own room or if individuals between the age 12 and 17 of the same gender do not have their own room or if a pair of children under the age of 12 do not have their own room.⁵⁸ This definition of overcrowding is not dissimilar to that contained in the Housing Act 1966. The Act refers to overcrowding as including situations whereby any two persons over ten years of age of opposite sexes who must sleep in the same room.⁵⁹

Comparatively Ireland has a much lower overall rate of overcrowding at 5.0 per cent in 2023 versus an average of 16.9 per cent in the Europe Union.⁶⁰ However, further analysis shows that children (i.e. those under the age of 18) in households on incomes below 60 per cent of the median equivalised income have a much higher overcrowding rate of 22.7 per cent in Ireland.⁶¹ This means that almost one in four children in income poverty are living in overcrowded households. While this is substantially lower than the EU average of 43.4 per cent, the data shows a pronounced rise in the proportion of children in income poverty living in overcrowded accommodation in the last number of years.⁶² Effectively the rate of overcrowding experienced by children has doubled between 2021 when it was 11.9 per cent and 2024.⁶³

Further evidence in relation to overcrowding is noted in the social housing needs assessment which highlights that 36.6 per cent of those on the housing list were living with their parents, relatives, and/or friends.⁶⁴ There is limited insight into the effect that living in overcrowded accommodation is having on children. An ESRI report on housing inadequacy and its impact on parental and child wellbeing published in 2024 includes reference to overcrowding. However, it

49 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 127.

50 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 126.

51 S.I. No. 137/2019 - Housing (Standards For Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

52 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2024' <https://bit.ly/3ZxngtK> accessed 26 May 2025.

53 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2024' <https://bit.ly/3ZxngtK> accessed 26 May 2025.

54 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2024' <https://bit.ly/3ZxngtK> accessed 26 May 2025.

55 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2024' <https://bit.ly/3ZxngtK> accessed 26 May 2025.

56 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

57 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 4 June 2024.

58 Eurostat 'Glossary: Overcrowding rate' <https://bit.ly/4kSpVGJ> accessed 4 June 2024.

59 Housing Act 1966, Part IV (63).

60 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 4 June 2024.

61 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 4 June 2024.

62 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 4 June 2024.

63 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 4 June 2024.

64 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024* (Government of Ireland 2025).

does not disaggregate out the impact of this specific aspect of housing inadequacy but rather includes it as part of a collective measure of housing inadequacy. Overall this research points to how inadequate housing is linked to poorer outcomes for parental and child wellbeing along with reports of 'greater conflict and less closeness'.⁶⁵ In terms of impact on education, analysis of data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey has found lower reading scores are prevalent amongst those who live in social housing or in multi-generational households (i.e. living with grandparents).⁶⁶ However, the overall impact on children as a result of living in overcrowded accommodation is only emerging. With growing numbers exposed to such living conditions there is a need to conduct further research exploring the impact on children and their families. This could include developing a means to capture data through Tusla's notification system of children referred to them who are living in such circumstances.

For Irish Traveller households, overcrowding is a significant issue, with 40 per cent living in overcrowded accommodation.

In 2021, approximately 1,700 Traveller families were living in inadequate, unsafe, and impermanent conditions.⁶⁷ The poor quality of Traveller housing is particularly apparent in Local Authority halting sites where 952 families were living in 2019 (the latest available data).⁶⁸ Of this number, 350 families had particularly low-quality accommodation with only an outside cold tap, no electricity and shared access with other families to a port-a-loo or outside toilet.⁶⁹

In addition, 311 families were living on unauthorised sites, and 218 of these families had no access to any services at all.⁷⁰

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, included specific recommendations for Ireland to address the housing needs of children from ethnic minority backgrounds. The Committee called for a clear timeline for a Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, which should include measures for the realisation of rights for these groups, including adequate housing.⁷¹ The Concluding Observations on Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted the absence of 'culturally appropriate housing for Travellers and Roma'.⁷²

There have been some positive developments, with the allocated funding provided for Traveller-specific accommodation in 2020 drawn down for the first time since 2014.⁷³ Since then, the budget allocations have also continued to rise, with €23 million in funding allocated in Budget 2025.⁷⁴ In the five-year period from 2020 to 2024, over €100 million in capital funding has been drawn down by local authorities for Traveller-specific accommodation.⁷⁵

It is important to view this in the context of the *Expert Review of Traveller Accommodation*, which recommends a review to consider restoring funding to levels prior to 2008, when the yearly Traveller accommodation budget was €40 million.⁷⁶

While it is positive to see follow-through on the issues raised through the Ombudsman for Children's investigation and the full draw down of Traveller Accommodation funding at a local authority level, progress in this area is lagging behind other areas

65 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth *Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing* (ESRI 2024) vi.

66 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023) 54.

67 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RCh/IRL/18.

68 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RCh/IRL/18.

69 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RCh/IRL/18.

70 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RCh/IRL/18.

71 UNHCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 42.

72 UNHCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 40.

73 UNHCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 40. Kitty Holland, 'Almost €15m spent on Traveller housing, the largest annual spend in decades' *The Irish Times*, 23 December 2020.

74 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage budget package of almost €8bn announced', Press Release, 1 October 2024.

75 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 3 February 2025.

76 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Irish Traveller Movement on 12 November 2022.

of social housing. In May 2024, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) published accounts of seven local authority Equality Action Plans dealing with the provision of Traveller accommodation and services. IHREC noted that the publication of these plans highlights the significant barriers that members of the Traveller community face in accessing accommodation, including, poor consultation processes; lack of meaningful engagement; inaccessibility of services, including homeless services; lack of understanding on the use of the ethnic self-identifier in social housing application forms and; blockages in the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation.⁷⁷ Alongside these challenges, individual plans identified good practice such as supporting events celebrating Traveller culture; pro-active engagement with stakeholders on the preparation of the plan and; initiation of actions such as an equine project in response to the practical implication of Traveller culture.⁷⁸

Roma families face similar barriers, and their particular housing needs must receive careful consideration as well. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, there had been reports that it was increasingly difficult to accommodate homeless Roma families in emergency accommodation if they were not already registered in the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS). This has only exacerbated with time.⁷⁹ Furthermore, one of the qualifying criteria for the allocation of social housing is employment,⁸⁰ but given that national needs assessments suggest that just 17 per cent of Roma are employed,⁸¹ most Roma will be ineligible for social housing support. Census 2022 highlighted that 652 Roma, or 4 per cent of the entire Roma population in Ireland, identified as homeless.⁸²

Energy Poverty

The inability to heat one's home is another measure of quality, and is often referred to as energy poverty; a concept which encompasses 'household income, energy costs and the energy efficiency of a home'.⁸³ Overall, a small percentage of households report being unable to heat their home, however, the issue of fuel poverty is very pronounced amongst one parent households compared to all other household types.⁸⁴ For instance, the latest deprivation data from SILC 2024 reveals that one parent families are more likely to struggle to keep their home adequately warm (13 per cent) than two parent households (5.2 per cent).⁸⁵ Housing tenure is also an important factor with owner occupiers less likely to struggle to keep their homes warm (2.9 per cent) compared to those in the rent, or rent-free, sector (9.4 per cent).⁸⁶

Bad housing conditions are associated with more instances of wheezing and poorer health amongst children, while those living in disorderly neighbourhoods have more frequent visits to the hospital.⁸⁷ The consequences of living in energy poverty impacts on children's health with an increased likelihood that they will have asthma, and two or more courses of antibiotics in a 12-month period.⁸⁸

77 IHREC 'Commission publish Equality Action Plans from seven local authorities on Traveller accommodation' [Press Release, 26 June 2024].

78 IHREC 'Commission publish Equality Action Plans from seven local authorities on Traveller accommodation' [Press Release, 26 June 2024].

79 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from Pavee Point on 16 October 2020.

80 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Circular Housing 41/2012 - Access to Social Housing Supports for non-Irish nationals' <<https://bit.ly/3oLnUSj>> accessed 4 February 2022.

81 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

82 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Statistical Spotlight #14 Roma in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2025) 24.

83 Society of St Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> 2.

84 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

85 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024*, (CSO 2025).

86 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024*, (CSO 2025).

87 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023) 62.

88 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

Children experiencing energy poverty are predominantly living in the social housing and private rented sectors, with over three-quarters of those impacted living in these tenures.⁸⁹ Furthermore, energy poverty has been linked to a higher level of poor parental mental health, particularly amongst mothers.⁹⁰

In responding to the issue of energy poverty, the government has published an *Energy Poverty Action Plan*.⁹¹ The Plan, led by the Department of Environment, Climate, and Communications, includes cross-government actions by other Departments, such as the Departments of Housing, and Social Protection, and agencies, such as the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, and the Health Service Executive.⁹² The response focuses on both 'near-term' and 'medium-term', with the former focusing on supporting people to address their energy needs over the immediate winter months.⁹³ The Plan's actions recognise the importance of addressing and alleviating the impact of energy costs. This is achieved through the identification of near-term actions, such as targeted and universal income supports. Alongside this, the Plan identifies a need to enhance consumer protection and implement medium-term actions that strengthen the safety net for people at risk of energy poverty.⁹⁴ Alongside this, there is a focus on measures which aim to improve energy efficiency, the initiation of research to capture the extent of energy poverty more accurately, and public information campaigns.⁹⁵

The inadequacy of social welfare payments to cover energy costs, as detailed in **Section 1: Adequate Income**, must be addressed in order to protect families from energy poverty.⁹⁶ However, there is limited coverage of energy efficiency schemes for non-owner occupiers.⁹⁷ For example, the majority of

those who qualified for the Warmer Home Scheme were recipients of Fuel Allowance and predominantly older people in owner-occupied housing. Many households with children experiencing energy poverty are living in social housing or the private rented sector. Similar issues were identified with the Warmth and Well-Being Scheme which targeted households with individuals with respiratory problems. While 900 homes were supported through this scheme, it included just 30 households with children.⁹⁸ Targeted interventions for families living in the private rented sector are needed to ensure energy poverty is addressed in a sustainable way.

Many households with children experiencing energy poverty are living in social housing or the private rented sector.

Prevention of Evictions

Private rental tenancies come under the provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004. The Act sets out a number of grounds for ending a tenancy, such as the use of the property for personal or family use, or if the landlord wishes to sell the property.⁹⁹ Temporary measures introduced over the past four years have, on two occasions, sought to stem the number of evictions. First, in June 2020, measures introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic saw a significant decrease in the number of children living in emergency accommodation by the end of 2020, and into 2021.¹⁰⁰ Second, at the end of October 2022, the Government introduced legislation that would allow

89 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

90 Greta Mohan, "The impact of household energy poverty on the mental health of parents of young children." *Journal of Public Health* 44, no. 1 (2022): 121-128.

91 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022).

92 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022) 3.

93 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022) 3.

94 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022) 3.

95 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022) 5.

96 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

97 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

98 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

99 Residential Tenancies Board 'Grounds to end a tenancy' <<https://bit.ly/3NySt74>> accessed 1 May 2024.

100 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Homelessness Data' <<https://bit.ly/3op7UCh>> accessed 1 May 2024. For a visual representation see Focus Ireland, 'Latest Figures on Homelessness in Ireland (Family)' <<https://bit.ly/36cayOL>> accessed 1 May 2024.

for a temporary ban on 'no fault evictions'. Under the Residential Tenancies (Deferment of Termination Dates of Certain Tenancies) Act 2022, 'no fault' tenancy terminations would be deferred until after the 31 March 2023.¹⁰¹ This moratorium on evictions came to an end on the 7 March 2023.¹⁰² An examination of the Department of Housing's homeless data highlights that over the six-month period of the ban, family homelessness remained fairly steady and increased by just 2 per cent.¹⁰³ In the six months following the lifting of the moratorium on evictions, the number of families in emergency accommodation rose at a quicker pace of almost 10 per cent.¹⁰⁴

While there is currently no eviction moratorium, there appears to be increased attention and resourcing of homeless prevention work. In 2024, 638 more families were prevented from entering emergency accommodation than the previous year. However, an increased number of presentations to emergency accommodation in the first instance (762 families) means the total number of families entering homelessness was higher in 2024 (1,764 families)¹⁰⁵ than in 2023 (1,640 families).¹⁰⁶ Despite the positive impact of prevention work, the scale of presentations to homeless services means that it is not having enough effect.

No. of families prevented from entering homeless accommodation in 2023 and 2024			
	2023	2024	Difference
Presented to emergency accommodation	3,264	4,026	+762
Prevented from entering homeless services	1,624	2,262	+638
Percentage of families prevented from entering emergency accommodation	50%	56%	+6%
Net number of families experiencing homelessness	1,640	1,764	+124
Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023; Quarter 4 2024 (DHLGH 2024 and 2025).			

101 Residential Tenancies (Deferment of Termination Dates of Certain Tenancies) Act 2022.

102 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister O'Brien announces additional measures to increase supply of social homes as winter eviction ban is phased out', 7 March 2023.

103 Simon Communities of Ireland Locked Out of the Market Study in September 2023 The Gap between HAP Limits and Market Rents (Simon Communities 2023).

104 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Homelessness Data' <<https://bit.ly/3op7UCh>> accessed 3 January 2024.

105 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024 (DHLGH 2025).

106 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023 (DHLGH 2024).

One preventative measure that has yielded positive impact is the Tenant in Situ Scheme. Following the lifting of the eviction ban in March 2023, the Government announced increased measures to acquire properties to prevent homelessness.¹⁰⁷ The Tenant in Situ Scheme allows a local authority to purchase a property where a tenant faces eviction due to the landlord selling the property. There would be a particular focus on properties where landlords are exiting the market and the tenant is in receipt of social housing supports (such as HAP).¹⁰⁸ The scheme has been an effective measure in preventing homelessness in 2023 and 2024.¹⁰⁹

In 2024, there was provision for 1,500 homes to be acquired under the scheme and there were 1,830 acquisitions in 2023.¹¹⁰ In March 2025, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage announced that the Government had approved an additional €265 million in funding for acquisitions.¹¹¹ Amongst the priority areas are exits from homelessness and the Tenant in Situ Scheme, along with an emphasis on supporting acquisitions for families and children.¹¹² In total the Government is making €325 million available to local authorities in 2025 for local authorities to purchase second-hand properties. This will include a focus on the tenant in situ scheme in instances where tenants are in receipt of HAP or RAS and have received a notice of termination. At the end of April 2025 €65 million or 20 per cent of the €325 million had been drawn down.¹¹³

Providing Temporary Shelter

Investing in Children calls on Member States to provide temporary shelter as well as long-term housing solutions.¹¹⁴ *Housing for All* contains a commitment to prevent entry into homelessness and to help those who are homeless to exit into sustained tenancies.¹¹⁵ Global evidence reviews have found that homelessness is associated with multiple negative physical, mental, and behavioural health outcomes, with the duration of homelessness compounding and elevating the risk of adverse outcomes.¹¹⁶ Children who experience homelessness are also more likely to have developmental and learning delays, as well as poorer academic attainment.¹¹⁷ Another review highlights that family homelessness impacts children's development, deprives them of appropriate places to play, reduces educational attainment and has a negative effect on mental health.¹¹⁸

Emergency Accommodation

The number of children living in emergency accommodation is at the highest level since records began over ten years ago. Since the publication of the first edition of the Child Poverty Monitor there has been an additional 1,747 children living in emergency homeless accommodation between May 2022 and April 2025.¹¹⁹ The number of children in emergency accommodation has increased over the past twelve months from 4,206 in April 2024¹²⁰ to 4,775 in April 2025.¹²¹ This is an extra 569 children.

107 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Government Counter Motion on the Private Members Business: Motion re Eviction Ban', (Press Release 21 March 2023).

108 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Government Counter Motion on the Private Members Business: Motion re Eviction Ban', (Press Release 21 March 2023).

109 Communications received from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 14 January 2025.

110 Communications received from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 14 January 2025.

111 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister Browne announces extra €265 million in funding for housing acquisitions' (Press Release 4 March 2025).

112 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister Browne announces extra €265 million in funding for housing acquisitions' (Press Release 4 March 2025).

113 Minister of State Colm Brophy TD, Topical Issue Debate, Housing Schemes, 22 May 2025.

114 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).

115 Government of Ireland, *Housing for All A new Housing Plan for Ireland*, (Government of Ireland 2021).

116 Laura E Gultekin et al, 'Health risks and outcomes of homelessness in school-age children and youth: a scoping review of the literature' (2020) *Journal of School Nursing* 36(1) 10– 18.

117 Saskia D'Sa et al, 'The psychological impact of childhood homelessness—a literature review' (2020) *Irish Journal of Medical Science*.

118 Muran S. and Brady, E. 'How does family homelessness impact on children's development? A critical review of the literature' (2023) *Child and Family Social Work* 360–371.

119 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, May 2022* (DHLGH 2022); Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2025* (DHLGH 2025).

120 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2024* (DHLGH 2024).

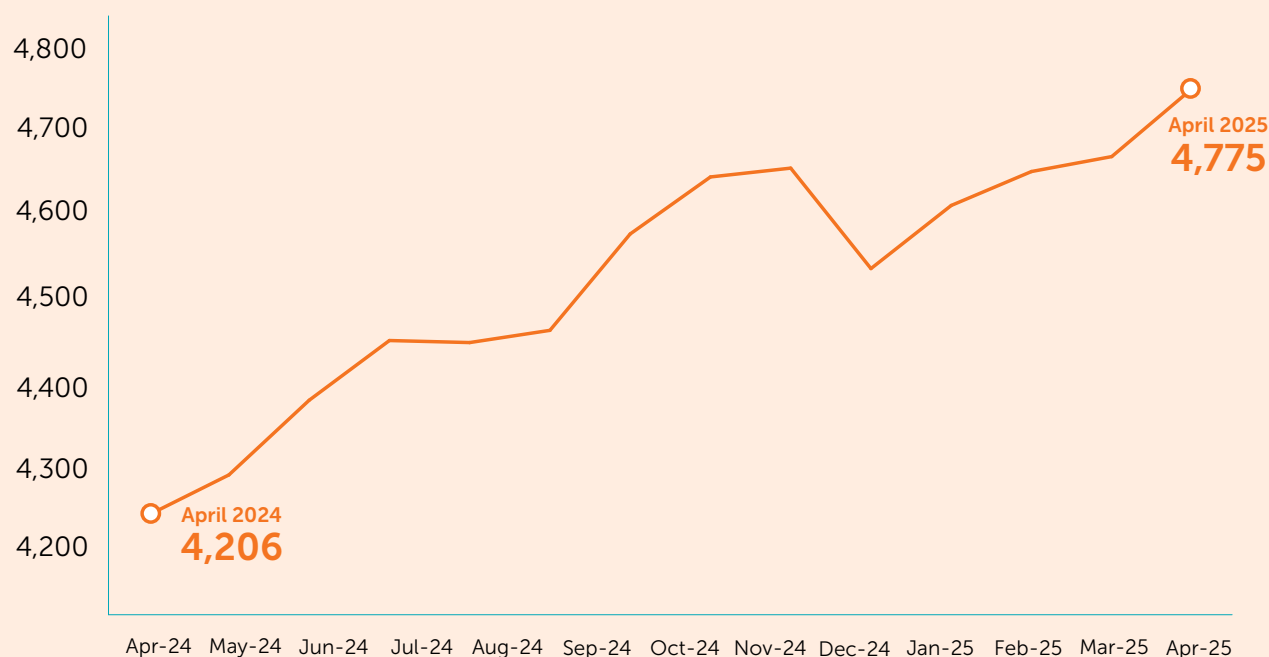
121 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2025* (DHLGH 2025).

Since the publication of the first edition of the Child Poverty Monitor there has been an additional 1,747 children living in emergency homeless accommodation.

The number of young people living in emergency accommodation has also risen. There were 1,242 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 living in emergency accommodation in May 2022,¹²² this had increased to 1,849 in April 2025.¹²³ This is an increase of 607 young people.

The *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports* published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provide insights about the number of families presenting to emergency accommodation cumulatively, and for each quarter, as well as the number of these families prevented from entering such accommodation. In 2024, 4,026 families presented to homeless services nationally, with 2,262 (56 per cent) prevented from entering emergency accommodation.¹²⁴ In 2023, 3,264 families had presented for emergency accommodation, and 1,624 (50 per cent) were prevented from experiencing homelessness.¹²⁵

Monthly increase of children living in emergency accommodation April 2024 to April 2025



There was an increase of 569 children experiencing homelessness in the past 12 months.

¹²² Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report May 2022* (DHLGH 2022).

¹²³ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report April 2025* (DHLGH 2025).

¹²⁴ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

¹²⁵ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

One parent families make up a disproportionate number of homeless families. In April 2025, almost 60 per cent of families experiencing homelessness were one parent families.¹²⁶ Lone parents have a lower rate of homeownership, and a higher rate of occupancy in both the private rental and local authority sectors.¹²⁷ These families are also likely to have more affordability issues and experience housing deprivation, such as an inability to heat their home.¹²⁸



60%

of families experiencing homelessness in 2025 were one parent families

The sustained contraction in the private rental market has had a huge impact on families exiting homeless accommodation over the last number of years.

Organisations working with families experiencing homelessness have identified a need for targeted interventions for children and young people living in emergency accommodation.¹²⁹ Notably, two Joint Committees in the Houses of the Oireachtas have also called for increased supports for children living in such circumstances, including the appointment of child support workers.¹³⁰ These interventions could provide tailored support to help children and their families deal with the trauma of homelessness and/or the challenges that they faced before becoming homeless, or in some instances both of these contexts.¹³¹ Such interventions can help children and young people to address some of the negative impacts of homelessness along with helping to reduce the pressure and stress on parents.¹³²

It is critical that there are pathways to sustainable and long-term housing for those exiting homelessness. In 2023, the Committee on the Rights of the Child urged Ireland to 'address the root causes of homelessness among children'.¹³³ The Committee called for the phasing out of emergency accommodation and an increase in the supply of long-term social housing.¹³⁴ The Concluding Observations on Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, published in March 2024, draws a further spotlight on Ireland's failures in relation to addressing homelessness. The Committee raised concerns about the 'persistence of homelessness' and the lack of measures to protect tenants in poverty.¹³⁵ In 2024, just one-quarter of exits from emergency accommodation were to the private rental market.¹³⁶

126 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2025* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2025).

127 H Russell et al, *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

128 H Russell et al, *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

129 Barnardos, Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of homelessness on children (Barnardos 2019) <https://bit.ly/49bKvm1> accessed 29 January 2024; Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 29 January 2024.

130 Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 'Report on the Impact of Homelessness on Children' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019) and Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Family and Child Homelessness' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019).

131 Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 29 January 2024.

132 Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 29 January 2024.

133 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

134 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

135 UNCESCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 40.

136 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports 2024* (DHLGH 2024 and 2025).

This is compared to 32 per cent in 2023¹³⁷ and 39 per cent in 2022.¹³⁸ The fall off in the availability of private rented tenancies for those exiting emergency accommodation is observed in real terms with 341 exits to this type of tenancy in 2022,¹³⁹ 296 in 2023,¹⁴⁰ and 276 in 2024.¹⁴¹

Conversely, the proportion of exits to local authority lettings, Approved Housing Bodies (AHB) and long-term supported accommodation has increased, which may show an opening up of these tenure types for families exiting from emergency accommodation. In 2022, there were 311 exits to local authority lettings¹⁴² and 371 in 2023.¹⁴³ In 2024, this had increased to 496,¹⁴⁴ an indication that the Government is putting increased resources behind this type of tenure. A similar pattern is observed in relation to exits to AHB lettings and long-term supported accommodation.¹⁴⁵ In 2022, there were 228 families exiting to these tenures,¹⁴⁶ which increased to 260 in 2023¹⁴⁷ and to 441 in 2024.¹⁴⁸ Increased exits to both local authority and AHB lettings is a positive development as this tenure is more sustainable with a lower risk of returning to homeless accommodation.

While an increase in the number of exits to social housing is a welcome and alternative option, there is a need for a significant ramping up of the numbers of families provided with this option as a pathway out of emergency accommodation. *Housing for All* calls for an average of 10,000 social housing homes to be built each year.¹⁴⁹

Exits from Emergency Accommodation in 2022, 2023 and 2024 by tenure type			
	2024	2023	2022
Local authority lettings	496	371	311
AHB lettings and Long-term supported accommodation	441	260	228
Private rented (including HAP & RAS)	276	296	341
Yearly Total Exits	1,213	927	880
Percentage of exits from each tenure			
Local authority lettings	41%	40%	35%
AHB & LT Supported Acc. lettings	36%	28%	26%
Private rented (incl. Hap and RAS)	23%	32%	39%
Table: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports (various years).			

137 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

138 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (DHLGH 2023).

139 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (DHLGH 2023).

140 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

141 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

142 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (DHLGH 2023).

143 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

144 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

145 While exits to AHB lettings and long-term supported accommodation are recorded separately since Quarter 2 2023, prior to this these categories were combined. The two categories are combined here for comparison sake.

146 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (DHLGH 2023).

147 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

148 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

149 Government of Ireland, *Housing for All A new Housing Plan for Ireland*, (Government of Ireland 2021).

Despite the increased number of families prevented from homelessness, as well as the number of exits from emergency accommodation, at the end of 2024, there were 906 families living in emergency accommodation for more than 12 months.¹⁵⁰ That is 63 more families than at the end of 2023.¹⁵¹ However, it is worth noting that the year-on-year increase from 2022 to 2023 was higher, at 339 families.¹⁵² Larger families are at particular risk of languishing in emergency accommodation for longer periods due to the dearth of accommodation available to meet their needs.¹⁵³

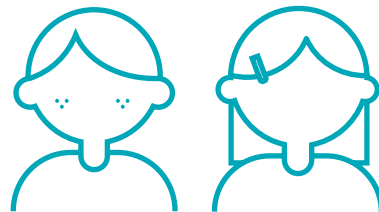
Sustainable and durable progress is needed on homelessness prevention. This requires development of adequate housing supply, affordable rents backed by strong legal protections for tenants, and ancillary rapid-rehousing services for those families who have already become homeless.¹⁵⁴ Unless there is a cohesive policy at a strategic level that recognises and mitigates the multi-faceted drivers of family homelessness, many children will continue to experience insecure or inadequate housing, with wide-ranging adverse impacts on their health and development.¹⁵⁵

The official statistics published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage only give a limited view of the prevalence of homelessness in Ireland.¹⁵⁶ Families who have had to leave their home and are 'couch surfing' or relying on friends or family for emergency assistance are not captured in the monthly statistics. Some insights on the numbers staying with families is provided in the statutory assessment undertaken each year to determine the number of households who qualify for social housing. According to the *Social Housing Assessment*, there were 59,941 households on the social housing waiting list in November 2024. This was an increase of 1,117 (+1.9 per cent) on the 2023 figure.¹⁵⁷

The official statistics do not account for families that are homeless but are accommodated in own-door accommodation or transitional housing. Nor do they include children and families in domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers living in emergency accommodation, or people who have been granted asylum or some other form of protection but cannot find accommodation outside the Direct Provision system. While these figures are collected and monitored by other agencies, they are not included in the monthly reported data published by the Department, and people in these types of accommodation are not categorised as 'homeless'

Families seeking international protection

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires States to assist all children seeking refugee status and ensure they can access the full range of convention rights, including rights to health, housing, education, and an adequate standard of living.¹⁵⁸ Reception conditions for those awaiting status determination must provide adequate space and privacy for children and their families.¹⁵⁹



Of the 9,389 children in the International Protection system, 7,226 are living in emergency accommodation.

150 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

151 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

152 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (2023 DHLGH).

153 Laurie O'Donnell Aisling Slein and Daniel Hoey, *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024).

154 Niall Pleace, *Preventing Homelessness: A Review of the International Evidence* (Simon Communities of Ireland 2019) 7.

155 Amy Clair, 'Housing: an Under-Explored Influence on Children's Well-Being and Becoming' (2019) *Child Indicators Research* 12:609–626.

156 Colette Bennett 'Rebuilding Ireland for Everyone: A review of the government's housing strategy for young and old' in Brigid Reynolds and Sean Healy (eds) *The Challenges of Success: Addressing population growth in Ireland* (Social Justice Ireland 2019).

157 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024* (Government of Ireland 2025).

158 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/ RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 22.

159 Committee on the Rights of the Child and Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers Joint General Comment No. 4 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return CMW/C/GC/4-CRC/C/GC/23 para 3 and para 13.

In April 2025, there were 9,389 children being accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS).¹⁶⁰ Of this number, 2,099 children were living in permanent IPAS accommodation centres and 7,226 were in emergency accommodation.¹⁶¹ In 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child made specific recommendations with respect to ensuring that “all refugee accommodation centres” were subject to independent inspection.¹⁶² Since December 2023, the Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA) has the authority to carry out inspections of permanent IPAS centres and this came into operation in January 2024.¹⁶³ The centres are inspected against the *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process*.¹⁶⁴



By January 2025, HIQA had inspected 50 IPAS accommodation centres, the majority of which accommodate children and young people.¹⁶⁵ Some centres had no non-compliances against the *National Standards*, including the Didean Centre in Portlaoise,¹⁶⁶ the Eglinton Centre in Galway,¹⁶⁷ and Birchwood House in Waterford.¹⁶⁸ These, and other examples of good practice,¹⁶⁹ need to be replicated going forward.

However, the Inspection Reports also showed that in many accommodation centres there are still substantial areas of non-compliance with the *National Standards*. The inspections found that there were serious issues of overcrowding and lack of space for families, including examples of parents having to share beds with their teenage children, and the closure of afterschool activity rooms,¹⁷⁰ which restricted opportunities for children to play and develop.¹⁷¹ Risks to the health, safety, and wellbeing of residents including children were also reported by HIQA. These included the widespread presence of pests in some centres,¹⁷² as well as damp and mould.¹⁷³ Providers have submitted compliance plans in order to improve the services they offer and to become compliant with the *National Standards*, the implementation of which will be closely monitored by HIQA.¹⁷⁴ While these steps are to be welcomed, serious consideration needs to be given by the Government to put in place sanctions for centres that continue to be non-compliant with the *National Standards*.

160 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 13 April 2025 (DCEDIY April 2025) < <https://bit.ly/4djgu0C> > accessed 12 May 2025.

161 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 13 April 2025 (DCEDIY April 2025) 64 children were also being accommodated in the National Reception Centre.

162 UNCRC ‘Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Ireland’ 29 January 2016 UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 66.

163 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 S.I. No. 649 of 2023.

164 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (DOJE 2019).

165 HIQA, Inspection Reports <<https://bit.ly/42a3tCH>> accessed 10 January 2025.

166 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 25 and 26 September 2024 (2025).

167 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 22 – 23 April 2024 (2024).

168 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 30 April – 1 May 2024 (2024).

169 The Inspection Reports overall highlighted areas of good practice including the facilitation of the educational development of children by providing transport to schools, pre-schools, and creche facilities. There were also good examples of the provision of transport to access healthcare, community supports and leisure activities, and in some cases, the facilitation of community supports at the centres themselves. The Inspection Reports also noted that there were some centres where families were all accommodated together away from other residents, and some where residents were provided with kitchens to cook for themselves.

170 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 17 – 18 July 2024 (2024) 16,17.

171 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 31 January – 01 February 2024 (2024) 21.

172 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 23 – 24 January 2024 (2024) 19 and

HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 26 – 27 August 2024 (2024) 18.

173 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 26 – 27 August 2024 (2024) 18.

174 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 25 and 26 September 2024.

Emergency Accommodation Centres accommodate the vast majority of children in the International Protection system but are not subject to the *National Standards*. Critically, HIQA does not have the authority to carry out inspections on these centres. In April 2021, an investigation by the Ombudsman for Children's Office found that child protection obligations are "less robust" in Temporary Emergency Accommodation Centres than in other International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS).¹⁷⁵ The Ombudsman's Office renewed these concerns in October 2023 with the release of a *Special Report on the Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision*.¹⁷⁶ In relation to accommodation, the Ombudsman was not satisfied with the Government's response to its recommendation that 'IPAS cease the use of commercial hotels and plan for accommodation capacity pressures'.¹⁷⁷ Emergency Accommodation Centres are generally an unsuitable form of accommodation for those seeking international protection. This is particularly true for children, especially given the length of time children remain in them. The Government must commit to the permanent phasing-out of Emergency Accommodation Centres, supported by increased resources and system capacity and in the interim, develop a set of guidelines and standards for emergency centres.

In February 2021, the Government published *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service*.¹⁷⁸ The *White Paper* set out the Government's approach to fulfilling its commitment in the *Programme for Government* to end Direct Provision and to replace it with a new international protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach. The underlying assumption in the *White Paper* was based on 3,500 new arrivals each year.¹⁷⁹ Given the large disparity in numbers, a review of the implementation approach for the *White Paper* was initiated that includes inputs from the White Paper Programme Board and the External Advisory Group.¹⁸⁰

As a result of this review, in March 2024, the Department published a *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants (Accommodation Strategy)*.¹⁸¹ The *Accommodation Strategy* seeks to address the current accommodation shortfall and maintain the fundamental principles of the *White Paper* while reforming the system over time to ensure the State will always be able to meet its international commitments.¹⁸² It is projected that the system will need to have capacity for up to 35,000 by the end of 2028.¹⁸³

175 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision – An Investigation by the Ombudsman for Children's Office* (OCO 2021) 13.

176 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Special Report: Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision* (October 2023).

177 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Special Report: Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision* (October 2023) 3.

178 Government of Ireland, *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Government Publications 2021).

179 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

180 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

181 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

182 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

183 This is assuming that an average of 13,000-16,000 persons arrive between 2024 and 2028 and that persons with status move from their accommodation after a specified time (currently one year after grant of status). Ibid 4.

The 2024 *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy* allows for the continued use of Emergency Accommodation Centres without adherence to the *National Standards* with no powers for HIQA to carry out inspections. It is essential that the Government puts in place standards for accommodation along with an independent inspectorate to ensure compliance. The *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy* also does not commit to providing adequate numbers of own-door accommodation sufficient to meet the needs of all children and young people in the system. Instead, it proposes to reduce in-community or own-door accommodation to accommodate up to 1,000 vulnerable persons. This figure is too low given that the population of people seeking protection includes a significant number of vulnerable persons. Children are recognised as vulnerable by the Government¹⁸⁴ and yet it will not be possible to provide own-door accommodation to all children and families as envisaged in the *White Paper* with the proposed allocation. Own-door accommodation is crucial for children and families as it respects and promotes family life and ensures they have the appropriate space and surroundings to develop and grow. Multiple reports have demonstrated the detrimental impact of lengthy institutionalised living on the welfare of children and young people.¹⁸⁵ In light of this, the Government must re-examine the targets for in-community or own-door accommodation.

184 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Vulnerability Assessment Pilot Programme Policy* (2022) accessed 10 January 2025.

185 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision – An Investigation by the Ombudsman for Children's Office* (OCO 2021) 34.

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Ensure that every child living in homeless accommodation has a support worker to help them to navigate the challenges they face in this situation.
- Invest in homeless prevention services to support families from becoming homeless. Aligned to this, consider introducing legislative measures that increase tenancy rights and introduce measures to secure long terms tenancies.

Short-term

- In order to understand the impact that living in overcrowded accommodation is having on children and families, Tusla should begin capturing this data their notification system.
- Commission research on the impact of overcrowding on children and families in order to develop a stronger evidence base on this aspect of inadequate housing to inform policies to help mitigate its impact.

Medium-term

- Commit to introducing standards and inspections for Emergency Accommodation Centres.
- Establish an informal working group in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality focused on child protection and welfare where organisations working with families in IPAS accommodation can bring issues and concerns to their attention.
- Consider expanding the powers of Tusla's Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit to include compellability to ensure enforcement of standards and implementation of child safeguarding statements.

Long-term

- Prioritise building social housing and meeting the target of building an average of 10,000 homes each year as outlined in *Housing for All*.
- Expedite establishment of the National Traveller Accommodation Authority recommended by the Expert Group on Traveller Accommodation.

Family Support and Alternative Care



FAMILY SUPPORT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE

The European Commission Recommendation, *Investing in Children*, calls on Member States to provide enhanced family support.¹ The *Recommendation* emphasises that parenting support should be destigmatised and that 'early intervention and prevention are essential for developing more effective and efficient policies, as public expenditure addressing the consequences of child poverty and social exclusion tends to be greater than that needed for intervening at an early age'.² The *Recommendation* calls for a focus on quality, community-based care and foster care when children are not in the care of their parents.

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges that support for parents in the early years of a child's life is particularly important.³ This is further emphasised in the General Comment on children's rights in early childhood which recognises that prevention and intervention strategies during early childhood have the potential to impact positively on young children's current well-being and prospects.⁴

The Council of Europe⁵ published a recommendation regarding the fulfilment of children's rights in the planning, delivery and evaluation of social services. It states that social services delivery for the protection of vulnerable children should 'adhere to the following principles:

- (a) prevention and early intervention;
- (b) child-focused partnership with parents;
- (c) careful assessment of the child's needs with regard to protective factors ... as well as risk factors in the child's environment ...'.⁶

A key commitment under *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* is the development of a national model of parenting support services to shape their further development.⁷ In April 2022, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* was published with a strong emphasis on a cross-government approach to improving the supports and services available to parents.⁸ The document recognises that these interventions are part of a wider range of services including family support, health and disabilities services.⁹ The vision of the parenting model is that 'all parents are confident and capable in their parenting role helping to achieve the best outcomes for children and families'.¹⁰ The document outlines that this will be achieved through greater awareness and access to parenting support services, developing more inclusive services, and ensuring that they are needs-led and evidence-informed.¹¹

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- 1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 3 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3, (UNCRC) Art 18.
 - 4 UNCRC, 'General Comment No. 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev. 1 para 8.
 - 5 Council of Europe, Council of Europe Recommendation on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families (Council of Europe 2011) 9. The Council of Europe is a human rights institution. It includes 47 member states, 28 of which are in the EU. It promotes human rights through international conventions, monitoring member states' implementation progress and making recommendations through independent expert monitoring bodies. It oversees the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Court of Human Rights is a key institution.
 - 6 Council of Europe, Council of Europe Recommendation on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families (Council of Europe 2011) 9.
 - 7 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018).
 - 8 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).
 - 9 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).
 - 10 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022) 16.
 - 11 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).

In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan for the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office for the period July 2023 to December 2025.¹² The fifth priority in the plan seeks to consolidate and integrate public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services.¹³ To achieve this, the Office will add value to existing work on the integration of services including focusing on scaling existing good practice examples, promoting the value of home visiting, supporting the First 5 ambition to develop a national model of parenting support, and the enhancement of family support services provided by statutory and non-statutory organisations.¹⁴

The Programme Office published a progress report on its first 18 months of work in January 2025.¹⁵ Based on the Programme Office's consultations and informal feedback, more integrated services remains an ongoing and critical issue across the landscape of services which children access, but there are also a wide variety of good practice models which are in place locally, regionally and nationally.¹⁶ The Programme Office aims to support service integration for children and families and to accelerate the emergence of a culture and practice of service integration.¹⁷ It has identified five focus areas of work including supporting the development of four pilot child poverty local action plans; and supporting the development of a dedicated child health workforce, including promoting the value of home visiting; realising the ambition of Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services.¹⁸

The Office's First Progress Report outlines a number of positive developments over 2023 and 2024 including a mapping exercise of Tusla and DCEDIY's parenting support services and the setting up of 'Parent Hubs' to provide supports to parents. They also outline multiple recruitment measures improving the capacity of the family support service available to children and parents nationwide including Family Support Practitioner for each Tusla area, Family Link Workers for the Tusla Traveller Support Programme and 30 Tusla parenting support advisors.¹⁹

Increasing the Provision of Family Support

The type and intensity of support outside the home that is required is dependent on the needs of each individual child and their family. The Hardiker model is one way of understanding the different levels of need children have and is used as a way of planning the delivery of services.²⁰ While all families may need a basic level of support (Hardiker Level 1), those with more complex needs (Hardiker Levels 2-4) will require more tailored and intensive services.²¹ Sufficiently resourced services, across the spectrum of need, ensure that all children experiencing disadvantage and adversity have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

12 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).

13 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 16-17.

14 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 16-17.

15 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 32-34.

16 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 32-34.

17 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 32-34.

18 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 32-34.

19 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025), 34.

20 Stella Owens, *An introductory guide to the key terms and interagency initiatives in use in the Children's Services Committees in Ireland*, (Centre for Effective Services 2019) <<https://bit.ly/3hVvfvC>> accessed 26 May 2021.

21 Pauline Hardiker, Kenneth Exton and Mary Barker, *Policies and Practices in Preventive Child Care* (Aldershot 1991).

The adoption of a progressive universalist approach to service delivery ensures that all parents will receive some level of support, with those needing greater support being able to readily access it.²² State-delivered or state-funded services are particularly important for those without the means to access support through their own resources. While the presence of poor parental mental health, domestic violence and addiction can occur across the socioeconomic spectrum of families, these issues are particularly prevalent for those experiencing poverty.²³

Children and young people can be exposed to adversity at both the family and community level.²⁴ For instance, the involvement of children in serious crime has been found to be an issue in communities across Ireland, with disadvantaged areas and communities with high levels of anti-social behaviour common factors associated with prevalence.²⁵ It is possible to intervene and improve the opportunities for children experiencing poverty-related adversity by providing early childhood interventions to children and to their parents.²⁶ 'Family Support' is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of family-focused services and programmes. It is concerned with anticipating, recognising, and responding to the needs of families, especially during a time of difficulty²⁷ and was defined in a departmental paper in 2004 as:

'both a style of work and a set of activities which reinforce positive informal social networks through integrated programmes. These programmes combine statutory, voluntary and community and private services and are generally provided to families in their own homes and communities. The primary focus is on early intervention aiming to promote and protect the health, well-being and rights of all children, young people and their families, paying particular attention to those who are vulnerable or at risk'.²⁸

Over the course of the last two decades since this definition was developed, there has been significant growth in the provision of family support across the country and a lack of clarity as to what public funding is provided to these services.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published a spending review in 2023 that noted the difficulty isolating the costs and activities relating to Family Support services from the overall budget for Tusla – the Child and Family Agency.²⁹ While the review demonstrates positive annual increases in funding for family support services, it calculated that this spend comprised just 13-14 per cent of the overall Tusla budget from 2018 – 2021.³⁰ The review emphasised the need for further clarity on the investment made to these vital support services each year. This is particularly important in the context of the surge in demand for Tusla's services year-on-year³¹ and the reported demand by leading family support providers on their services and supports.³²

22 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022) 32.

23 There is limited research on the prevalence of ACEs in Ireland (examples include Sharon Lambert, Graham Gill-Emerson, et al., *Moving Towards Trauma Informed Care. A model of research and practice*, (Cork Simon Community 2017); Aoife Dermody A., Sharon Lambert et al., (2020) *An Exploration of Early Life Trauma and its Implications for Garda Youth Diversion Projects* (Youthrise and Quality Matters 2020). Internationally some research indicates there is a connection between child poverty and the prevalence of ACEs see D. Walsh, G. McCartney, M. Smith, G. Armour 'Relationship between childhood socioeconomic position and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): A systematic review' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 73 (12) (2019), pp. 1087-1093.

24 Ellis, Wendy R. and William H. Dietz, 'A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience Model' (2017) *Frameworks and Measurement*, 17(7).

25 Catherine Naughton, and Sean Redmond, *National Prevalence Study Do the findings from the Greentown study of children's involvement in criminal networks (2015) extend beyond Greentown?* (DCYA, DoJ, Irish Youth Justice Service and University of Limerick 2017) <<https://bit.ly/340hZOj>> accessed 20 May 2021.

26 Katherine A. Beckmann, 'Mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences through Investments in Early Childhood Programs', (September – October 2017), *Academic Paediatrics*, 17(7), Supplement, S28–S29.

27 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (DCYA 2014).

28 Pinkerton et al, *Family Support in Ireland. A paper for the Department of Health & Children* (The Stationery Office 2004), 16.

29 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

30 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

31 *Tusla Annual Report* (Tusla various years).

32 *Daughters of Charity Annual Report 2023* (Daughters of Charity 2024), Extern, *Annual Report 2023 - 2024*.

The impact of the pandemic is evident in the rapidly evolving adverse social inequalities and challenging circumstances reported by family support services on the frontline.³³ The sudden withdrawal of services exacerbated existing inequalities for example, disability and therapeutic services emphasising the adverse impact on children with pre-existing diagnoses³⁴ or domestic violence refugees noted an increase in the number and intensity of calls for support.³⁵ Post-pandemic, other services are seeing over 50 per cent increases in the number of families attending for support³⁶ with high levels of needs of families and increase in demand for assessments for children aged 0 to 9 years.³⁷ These services are not only reporting increases in demand, presentations, assessments and referrals but also reporting high levels of concern of the impact this prolonged wait or battle for supports is having on children and families from both developmental and early intervention perspectives as well as a child protection perspective.³⁸

50% increase in the number of families attending Family Support Services post-pandemic.

The increased demand in family support and State support services has been proactively and persistently raised by Tusla itself. Budget 2025 included €140 million to Tusla to support increases to the foster care allowances, additional residential units, separated children seeking international protection placement, childminding registration, the expansion of Family Resource Centres and the new pay awards/S.56 WRC payments.³⁹ However, it is notable that rather than invest to increase the capacity and availability of

services, the *Budget 2025 Expenditure Report* states that Tusla is to 'continue to provide existing levels of care and support to children and families'.⁴⁰ Given the strain on the capacity of core child protection, alternative care and family support services, increased investment is essential in these frontline services in order to adequately deliver the provision of quality support services to families. Budget 2026 should also include additional, ringfenced funding that would enable these services to increase their capacity and reach to meet the increased demand they are seeing at community level.

Home Visiting Programmes

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028, recognises the importance of the home environment and parenting supports in ensuring that all children have positive early experiences and get the best start in life.⁴¹ Providing families with early intervention and supports helps parent-child bonding, infant well-being, and positive developmental outcomes.⁴² Early childhood home visiting helps children and families by connecting parents with a Home Visitor who guides them through the early stages of raising a family.⁴³

There are a number of different evidence-based early childhood home visiting programmes in operation in Ireland including:

- Community Mothers
- Infant Mental Health
- Lifestart
- ParentChild+
- Preparing for Life⁴⁴

33 Extern, *Annual Report 2023 - 2024*.

34 Sandra Roe and Annabel Egan, Resource Centres supporting children and families after Covid-19 (FRC National Forum 2024).

35 Safe Ireland *Tracking the Shadow Pandemic A report on women and children seeking support from Domestic Violence Services during the first 6 months of Covid-19* (Safe Ireland 2020).

36 Daughters of Charity *Annual Report 2023* (Daughters of Charity 2024).

37 Daughters of Charity *Annual Report 2023* (Daughters of Charity 2024). There was an increase by 30% of cases remaining open to social work on completion of assessment highlighting ongoing safety concerns for families.

38 Daughters of Charity *Annual Report 2023* (Daughters of Charity 2024).

39 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance 05 June 2025.

40 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2025: Expenditure Report*, (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform), 57.

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

42 Government of Ireland, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* (2022-2027) 10.

43 National College of Ireland 'Home Visiting Alliance' < <http://bit.ly/3N4rHqi> > accessed 1 June 2023.

44 National College of Ireland 'Home Visiting Alliance' < <http://bit.ly/3N4rHqi> > accessed 1 June 2023.

There have been many calls for a review of the home visiting programmes and the introduction of a standardised model of delivery.⁴⁵ In October 2022, the then-Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman T.D., announced the commencement of a review of home visiting services for families with babies and young children in Ireland.⁴⁶ A number of reports were published by the UNITES (Universal, Inclusive, & Targeted, Early Supports for Families) Project in late 2024 evaluating the services.

Home Visiting: National Mapping and Review of Home Visiting Provision in Ireland, or Report Number One, found that there were many positive outcomes as a result of home visiting programmes for both parents and children. For parents, it was found that there was a reduction in their stress levels, an increase in their knowledge of child development, improved parenting practices, and improved parent-child relationships. For children, evidence showed that there were benefits relating to cognitive and language development, improved diet and nutrition for the whole family and an improvement in behaviour and social skills in one programme.⁴⁷ The companion report, *Home Visiting: Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future, or Report Two*, noted that one of the most commonly mentioned benefits of the home visiting programme was the focus on ‘child development and infant mental health’.

Many programmes described their holistic approach to child development and parental empowerment.⁴⁸ Another common theme was the building of relationships between families and home visitors, which the report found to be the ‘single most important role’ of the programme. One mother described her home visitor as ‘a big sister or kind of a mother to me’, highlighting the important social support the home visitors provide.⁴⁹

The reports also highlight a number of gaps within home visiting services. These include inadequate funding,⁵⁰ which affects staff salaries and potentially the sustainability of programmes,⁵¹ and fragmented funding through multiple mechanisms, which acts as a barrier to capacity building and long-term strategic planning.⁵² In general, both reports conclude that there is an overall ‘lack of cohesion’ in this sector.⁵³

These gaps are reflected in the 2023 *Feasibility Study* produced by The Home Visiting Alliance entitled *Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland*. The Study found that current funding models are insufficient and are not reflective of the actual costs. Moreover, there is no sustainable funding for national programme support structures on which the sustainability and development of home visiting programmes depends.⁵⁴ Finally, there are no collection mechanisms for data, on national or local levels,⁵⁵ which reflects on the observation in *Report Number One* that there is a need for more evidence-based data to learn and address what works well in different circumstances.⁵⁶

45 Susan Broklesby, *A National review of the Community Mothers Programme* (KHF and CFI 2019).

46 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Minister O’Gorman announces the first national study of home visiting services for families with babies and young children (Press Release, 10 October 2022).

47 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: National Mapping and Review of Home Visiting Provision in Ireland (Report 1)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 45.

48 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future (Report 2)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 20.

49 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future (Report 2)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 19.

50 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: National Mapping and Review of Home Visiting Provision in Ireland (Report 1)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 52.

51 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future (Report 2)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 38.

52 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future (Report 2)* (Government of Ireland 2024), 51.

53 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: National Mapping and Review of Home Visiting Provision in Ireland (Report 1)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 52.

54 Susan Brockerly *Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland* (Home Visiting Alliance 2023) 5-7.

55 Susan Brockerly *Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland* (Home Visiting Alliance 2023) 5-7.

56 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Home Visiting: National Mapping and Review of Home Visiting Provision in Ireland (Report 1)* (Government of Ireland 2024) 52.

Arising from the recommendations of the *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes*, a Children's Fund was established by the Government to support children currently experiencing disadvantage.⁵⁷ Through this initiative €5.15 million over a three-year period has been granted to support home visiting.⁵⁸ Over a five-year period, there will be €10 million of ring-fenced Tusla funding available to support home visiting between 2024 and 2028.⁵⁹ In 2024, €1 million was allocated to the expansion of home visiting programmes including the establishment of the National Home Visiting Programme within Tusla on a five-year pilot basis, led by a National Home Visiting Coordinator.⁶⁰ This investment in the initiative will help to ensure that more parents can access support in their children's early years.

A recent report, *The Economic Case for Home Visiting in Ireland*, advocates for investment in home visiting.⁶¹ The report set out to evaluate the economic effectiveness of ten home visiting programmes across New Zealand and America, and to explore Ireland's potential economic returns on investment in these programmes.⁶² On average, it was found that it costs €6,376 per family annually to deliver a home visiting programme. Of the ten programmes examined in the report, eight were found to produce positive monetary benefits per family ranging between €1,311 and €18,485.⁶³

In a cost-benefit examination of the ten programmes, the average return on every \$1 invested was \$1.60. This gives the programmes a Benefit-to-Cost Ratio (BCRs) of 1.6:1. For projects to be funded in Ireland, the Irish Public Spending Codes state that a project must have a BCR of 1:1. Of the ten home visiting programmes examined, those with the highest BCRs tended to be programmes that commenced at the prenatal stage, were delivered on a monthly basis, and ran for the first three years of a child's life.⁶⁴ Further to this, the most cost-effective programmes targeted families experiencing residential instability, families on a lower income, families with lower levels of education, and one-parent families.⁶⁵

Home visiting programmes are highly beneficial for families in the first years of starting a family. Moreover, home visiting programmes have been shown to be of financial and economic benefit to families, taxpayers, the General Exchequer, and most Government Departments. As demonstrated by the review, there is much work to be done, including cross-Government collaboration,⁶⁶ to create a well-funded, long-term, strategic home visiting sector. In its *First Progress Report*, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office note that funding has been approved by Government for the Tusla National Home Visiting Programme. This was established in 2024 for a period of five years and will work towards the expansion of the programme on a national level.⁶⁷

57 Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* <https://bit.ly/3w7lvrl> accessed 24 April 2024.

58 Children's Fund Expert Panel, *Final Expert Panel Proposal June 2023*, <https://bit.ly/3xQmoWh> accessed 24 April 2024.

59 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Mother and Baby Homes, 10 July 2024 [30434-30435/24].

60 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Mother and Baby Homes, 10 July 2024 [30434-30435/24].

61 Orla Doyle *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2024).

62 Orla Doyle *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

63 Orla Doyle *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

64 Orla Doyle *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2024) 3.

65 Orla Doyle *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2024) 3.

66 Orla Doyle *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2024) 4.

67 Government of Ireland First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office (Government of Ireland 2025), 33.

Alternative Care

As well as focusing on prevention, *Investing in Children* calls on Member States to deliver alternative care settings that meet the needs of children and young people and ensure that their voice is given due consideration.⁶⁸ Children without parental care also need to access quality services, including those related to education and employment, and be provided with these services in their transition to adulthood.⁶⁹ The recommendation notes that measures should be put in place to ensure that children are prevented from being placed in institutions but in such circumstances where this occurs regular reviews should be undertaken.

In Ireland, children are taken into care under the Child Care Act 1991 and Tusla (Child and Family Agency) is the state agency with responsibility to 'promote the welfare of children [...] who are not receiving adequate care and protection' (section 3(1)).⁷⁰ Under section 4 of the 1991 Act, Tusla has the duty to take a child into its care 'where it appears that the child who resides or is found in its areas requires care or protection that they are unlikely to receive unless taken into care'. Once a child has been taken into care, Tusla is obliged to 'maintain the child in its care so long as his welfare appears [...] to require it and while he remains a child'.⁷¹ Under section 4(4), Tusla must endeavour to reunite a child taken into its care with their parents where this appears to be in the child's best interests.⁷²

Despite the increase in the population of children and young people over the last ten years, the numbers of children in the care system has fallen slightly.⁷³ Ten years ago the numbers of children in the care system were over 6,000, but the latest data from Tusla states that there are currently 5,783 children in care in March 2025.⁷⁴ Of this number, the vast majority of children (87 per cent) are in foster care – either general foster care (3,543 children) or relative foster care (1,498 children). Nine per cent of children in care are in residential care and three per cent are in 'other' care placements.⁷⁵

It is not clear why the numbers of children in the care system are falling, while at the same time, Tusla's referrals have doubled in a ten-year period. In 2024, there was a 5 per cent increase in the number of referrals for Tusla's child protection and welfare services compared to 2023, with referrals increasing by 11 per cent from 2022 to 2023.⁷⁶ A steady increase in referrals has been observed in the past five calendar years, with a cumulative increase of 70 per cent in referrals since 2019.⁷⁷ However, despite such a significant increase in referrals, the Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) Staff complement of Tusla has only increased by 29 per cent due to the lack of social workers.

68 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 9.

69 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 9.

70 Childcare Act 1991 S3 (1).

71 Childcare Act 1991 S4.

72 Childcare Act 1991 S4 (4).

73 The fall in the number of children and young people in the care system is against a backdrop in an overall increase in the population of children and young people. The CSO records an increase in the population aged 0 to 19 years from 1.262 million in Census 2011 to 1.349 million in Census 2022.

74 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025*, (Tusla 2025).

75 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025*, (Tusla 2025).

76 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024*, (Tusla 2024).

77 In the four-year period 2015 to 2018 the increase in referrals was 26 per cent (rising from 43,596 referrals in 2015 to 55,136 in 2018). See Tusla Annual Reports, 2015; 2016; 2017 and 2018.

Year	Referrals to Tusla Child Protection and Welfare ⁷⁸	WTE Staff across Tusla ⁷⁹
2024	96,364	5,318
2023	91,924	5,019
2022	82,855	4,676
2021	73,069	4,579
2020	69,712	4,598
2019	56,561	4,122

Source: Data from Tusla Annual Reports 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022 and 2023 and Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024*, (Tusla 2024). Data from Tusla Quarterly Integrated Performance and Activity Report, Q4 2019; Q4 2020; Q4 2021; Q4 2022; Q4 2023 and Q4 2024.

The increasing number of referrals to Tusla could be reflective of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, where school closures cut off access to key protective factors for the wellbeing of vulnerable young people.⁸⁰ Concerns about children at risk were also likely to have been unreported, a fact evident in the fall off in referrals to Tusla during the initial school closure in March 2020.⁸¹ The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) has stated that it is difficult to determine what the key causal factors are in terms of the rise in referrals.⁸²

There are continued challenges in the recruitment and retention of social workers meaning that currently 670 children in care (or 12 per cent) do not have a designated social worker.⁸³ Furthermore, 17 per cent of all children in care do not have a care plan.⁸⁴ However Tusla's latest Annual Report notes there were 213 foster carers approved in 2023, an increase from 182 in 2022,⁸⁵ which points to initial positive results from their recruitment campaign for foster carers.⁸⁶ Despite this, HIQA have stated that one of the greatest challenges facing Tusla foster care services in 2024 is the shortage of available foster families as the demand for foster carers in Ireland far outnumbers the available placements for children requiring a foster family.⁸⁷



Children in care do not have a designated social worker.

78 Data from Tusla Annual Reports 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022 and 2023 and Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024*, (Tusla 2024).

79 Data from Tusla Quarterly Integrated Performance and Activity Report, Q4 2019; Q4 2020; Q4 2021; Q4 2022; Q4 2023 and Q4 2024.

80 National Educational Psychological Service, *The Wellbeing and Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: Factors for Consideration for the Leaving Certificate Examination in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Advice from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)* (Department of Education and Skills & NEPS 2020).

81 The Child Care Law Reporting Project, *Observations on Concerns for Vulnerable Children Arising from the Covid-19 Pandemic* <<https://bit.ly/3qjBv1J>> accessed 12 February 2021. In one stark example, a child was hospitalised with infections caused by a head lice infestation as the staff did not have any contact with the child when classes went online and were not able to intervene at an early stage like they had in the past. See the Child Care Law Reporting Project, *Case Reports 2020 Volume 2* <<https://www.childlawproject.ie/publications/>> accessed 12 February 2021; Shauna Bowers, 'Covid-19 resulted in decrease of child welfare referrals to Tusla' *The Irish Times* (Dublin 5 August 2020).

82 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 26.

83 Tusla *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025* (Tusla 2025) 15. Since January 2025 Tusla have changed the way they report. They now state where a child is allocated a social worker and where they are allocated to another professional. Other professionals include professionally qualified social care leaders, social care workers, family support workers, therapists etc. In this instance 12 per cent of children are allocated to other professionals.

84 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2025* (Tusla 2025) 16.

85 Tusla, *Annual Report 2023* (Tusla 2024) 8.

86 Tusla, *Annual Report 2023* (Tusla 2024) 8.

87 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 64.

Additional challenges for the agency have put the existing stretched resources under further pressure. The number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) seeking international protection, who are supported by Tusla's Separated Children seeking International Protection (SCSIP) service continued to rise in 2024. Tusla received referrals of 619 UASC seeking international protection in 2024, resulting in 570 being accommodated by, or taken into the care of, Tusla.⁸⁸ This has risen from 530 referrals in 2023, which resulted in 432 admissions for accommodation and placements.⁸⁹ At the end of November 2024, 431 UASC seeking international protection were in the care of Tusla.⁹⁰

Tusla's services are inspected by HIQA. In a 2024 overview report of their experiences of inspecting children's services provided by or funded by Tusla, HIQA found that they have seen sustained improvement in governance of children's residential centres from 2019-2023, following many years of poor findings and varied practice seen across the country.⁹¹ Children have consistently reported to inspectors that they are well cared for and their rights were respected and promoted within these centres.⁹² In relation to special care units,⁹³ HIQA found that the vast majority of young people receive good quality care that addresses their specific needs and regularly report good relationships with staff in all units and express that they feel supported in areas that are important to them.⁹⁴

In the same report, HIQA found that despite substantial efforts to address non-compliances and major investments in services, Tusla has been unable to recruit and retain a sufficient number of social workers, social care workers, or support staff to sustainably operate its Child Protection and Welfare (CPW) services.⁹⁵ As a result, thousands of referrals to CPW services, including hundreds of high-priority referrals, regularly do not have a named social worker assigned to them. In 2023 there was 4,276 cases unallocated to a social worker.⁹⁶ HIQA found that the unmanageable caseloads for social workers in some CPW teams is compromising their ability to ensure children's safety is maintained and that risks to their safety are effectively managed.⁹⁷ Systemic issues associated with the number of children in foster care who did not have an allocated social worker was also raised as a concern.⁹⁸ In 2024, HIQA, for the first time, classified the shortage of available foster carers, which has been an ongoing challenge for Tusla, as a priority concern and key feature on registers of risks for fostering services nationally.⁹⁹

The report also highlighted that Tusla does not have an adequate number of alternative care (children's residential centre or special care unit) placements to meet the demand for these services which has resulted in in some children in care being accommodated in inappropriate and unregulated Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs), some for lengthy periods.¹⁰⁰

88 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 2 January 2025.

89 Tusla, 2023 Annual Report and Financial Statements (Tusla 2023) 10.

90 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 2 January 2025.

91 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 76.

92 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 79.

93 Special care units are high security facilities where children are placed by a High Court order in response to the risk they may pose to themselves and or others.

94 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 86.

95 Tusla *Annual Report 2023* (Tusla 2024) 23.

96 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 41.

97 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 40.

98 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 61.

99 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 64.

100 HIQA *10 Years of Regulating and Monitoring Children's Social Care Services 2014-2024* (HIQA 2024) 13.

In January 2025, HIQA published an overview report on the governance of CPW and foster care services, which focused on ten Tusla services areas that all had more than 25 per cent of children unallocated to a social worker in CPW and foster care services.¹⁰¹ The majority of children and parents receiving social work interventions spoke positively of their experiences.¹⁰² Inspectors found that generally, when children were allocated a social worker, the quality of services provided to them or for their benefit was good.¹⁰³

While the report found that the service was able to respond effectively to children at immediate and the majority of children who are high priority receiving a service, children who were prioritised as medium or low priority experienced delays and did not receive a timely or appropriate response.¹⁰⁴ It also found that some children were placed on waiting lists without adequate safety being established from the point of referral to initial assessment. In some service areas, there was failure to consider cumulative harm and neglect (the outcome of multiple episodes of abuse or neglect experienced by a child), and these cases were not always considered or assessed in respect of multiple previous referrals received by Tusla.¹⁰⁵ HIQA stated that some children, including those placed on the child protection notification system, who required a safety plan had no or inadequate safety plans in place.¹⁰⁶

There were examples of inspectors escalating cases of children who made allegations of abuse or where there were concerns in relation to their welfare, weeks and months prior to the inspection who had not been met with or an adequate safety plan put in place by the time of the inspections.¹⁰⁷ The use of unregulated SEAs¹⁰⁸ by Tusla were also found to be an issue, particularly the lack of provision for especially vulnerable children who remained at high risk of harm and continued to reside in unregulated settings.¹⁰⁹ Overall, HIQA found that increased demand for services and resourcing challenges, especially the scarcity of social workers, is significantly contributing to Tusla's ability to provide a timely and safe service.

In January 2025, HIQA also published an inspection report on Tusla's national out of hours service (OHS).¹¹⁰ While HIQA found that children most at risk received an appropriate response, it found there were some overall governance, management and oversight failings in the service.¹¹¹ It found the OHS was working outside the confines of the national Standard Operating Procedure. This is a particular concern given that the service was using hotels in Dublin for SEAs, which had not been risk assessed, nor reviewed to ensure that they provided a safe place for children.¹¹² For emergency family care arrangements, there were cases where there was no evidence of social workers having ensured that safeguarding checks were undertaken to confirm the identity of the adults caring for the child.¹¹³

101 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 19.

102 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 29 and 30.

103 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 68.

104 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 69.

105 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025).

106 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 80.

107 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 30.

108 Tusla's definition of a Special Emergency Arrangement (SEA) refers to emergency settings where a child/young person is accommodated in a non-statutory and/or unregulated placement, for example, a Hotel, B&B, Holiday centre, Activity centre, Tusla property or privately leased property.

109 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 81, 82.

110 Tusla's National Out of Hours Social Work Service (OHS) aims to ensure the safety and welfare of children not receiving adequate care and protection in out of hours circumstances. The OHS provides emergency placements for children as required and operates 365 days a year from 6pm to 7am daily and from 9am to 5pm at weekends and bank holidays.

111 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025).

112 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 18.

113 HIQA, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (HIQA 2025) 27.

Special Care Services

While the vast majority of children and young people in the care of the state are in either general or family foster care, a small minority need support to address very challenging and complex needs. To address this, Special Care provides 'short term, stabilising and safe care in a secured therapeutic environment'.¹¹⁴ Children and young people needing access to special care often have had a high number of previous placements many of which may have broken down.¹¹⁵ The intended purpose of Special Care is to provide the child or young person with the opportunity to stabilise through a short individualised intervention and they would then move to a less secure placement.¹¹⁶ Placement in Special Care can only be made by an Order of the High Court.¹¹⁷

In May 2025, Tusla commissioned an external review examining special care services.¹¹⁸ The review was conducted against a backdrop of severe challenges, including critical bed shortages and staffing difficulties.¹¹⁹ It found that only 14 of the 26 special care beds are operational.¹²⁰ The review identified that special care is becoming a 'de facto' placement option, with some children detained for up to two years.¹²¹ It found that this shift is largely due to insufficient onward placements and lack of community-based resources for discharge-ready children.¹²² The review also points to gaps in the care journey for children and young people. Children with complex needs, require high support in community settings or step-down facilities after special care, rather than remaining in special care for a protracted length of time.

This is very concerning given that special care involves the deprivation of liberty of the child/young person and its intended use is as a measure last resort.

The *Review* recommends that a single Centre of Excellence is created to replace the current three-site model which would enable a more unified service delivery and utilise resources more effectively.¹²³

The *Review* advocates for stronger statutory frameworks for interagency cooperation and a process to facilitate collaboration at local level.¹²⁴ This particularly relates to the multiple services, including mental health, disability and addiction support, that children in special care require.¹²⁵ Referral pathways and inter-agency working are essential to ensure that every child receives the appropriate level of care they need, as and when they need it. The importance of such has been brought to light most recently in the inquest into the death of Daniel McAnaspie. In the final 14 months of his life Daniel had twenty different placements as well as extensive periods where he was without an appropriate school place to meet his educational needs.¹²⁶

In line with the *Investing in Children Recommendation*, the *Special Care Review* recommends that Tusla commission a consultation with children and care leavers with experience of special care services to inform a detailed implementation plan for reform of special care services.¹²⁷ This is important to help build a better support framework for young people currently in state care. The *Programme for Government* includes a range of commitments on alternative care. These include ensuring Tusla's structures are robust, responsive and capable of safeguarding every child in need and supporting Tusla in recruiting and retaining vital frontline staff and foster carers including by increasing the foster care allowance and an increase in the initial placement payment.¹²⁸ Importantly, the Government commits to developing 'a national plan

114 Tusla 'Special Care' <https://bit.ly/4kA7V3K> accessed 29 May 2025.

115 Tusla 'Special Care' <https://bit.ly/4kA7V3K> accessed 29 May 2025.

116 Tusla 'Special Care' <https://bit.ly/4kA7V3K> accessed 29 May 2025.

117 Tusla 'Special Care' <https://bit.ly/4kA7V3K> accessed 29 May 2025.

118 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025).

119 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025) 1.

120 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025).

121 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025).

122 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025).

123 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025).

124 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025) 2.

125 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025).

126 M O'Driscoll 'Teenager had over 20 care placements before death, inquest told' RTE.ie, 14 May 2025.

127 Tusla, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care* (Tusla 2025) 10.

128 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 64, 65.

on alternative care to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future'.¹²⁹ This will need to be backed up by cross-departmental and inter-agency implementation as well as adequate funding.

It is clear from the *Special Care Review* that even the children in special care placements are not getting sufficient therapeutic intervention. Special care and high support units in the community should have access to the senior specialist staff who can ensure the best therapeutic and health supports are provided. Children in the child protection and alternative care system are some of the most vulnerable children in the State. It is important to note that Tusla are prioritising those at immediate risk and children given high priority are receiving a service. In addition, there have been positive reports on the quality of service provided to children that have been allocated a social worker. However, without adequate and appropriate responses to urgent care needs, children and young people are left to fall through the cracks. In a case like Daniel McAnaspie's, despite concerns raised across multiple professional levels and numerous attempts and appeals by social workers and key support staff, the request for a special care place was refused on three occasions.¹³⁰ Determination for special care should be one based on need but if refused, there should be an independent appeal process to reconsider the determination.

It is critical that development of a new national plan on alternative care, as committed to, is a major priority for the Government. It needs to take account of the fact that the child protection and welfare system, and Tusla's specialised services, are in urgent need of financial investment and address the lack of foster carers, social workers as well as the lack of appropriate placements including in special care. This needs to be followed by ringfenced funding for child protection, welfare and family support.

129 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

130 K Holland, 'Teenager Daniel McAnaspie had begged social workers to 'have him locked up', inquest hears' *The Irish Times*, 12 May 2025 <<https://bit.ly/43yUBag>> accessed 09 June 2025.

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Increase Tusla's overall budget by €50 million to provide investment in the core family support, early intervention, child protection and alternative care services to meet increasing demand.
- Increase the staffing allocation of Tusla for up to 200 Whole Time Equivalent social workers and social care workers.
- Increase the Foster Care Allowance and provide an increase in the initial placement payment.

Short-term

- Implement the Programme for Government commitment to 'develop a national plan on alternative care to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future'.
- Implement the recommendations of Tusla's External Review on Special Care.
- Introduce a phased plan with sufficient funding to achieve universal access to home visiting for all first-time parents by 2026. As a first step, parents in identified marginalised groups should be prioritised for access to a home visiting programme.
- Undertake research to identify the drivers for the decrease in the number of children in the care system.
- Establish an inter-departmental committee to drive cross-government action on Child Protection and Alternative Care.
- Expediate engagement and collaborative action with the community and voluntary sector to increase capacity of services.

Medium-term

- Commit to a 1 per cent year on year increase in Tusla's funding and ringfence this for increased capacity for Family Support services in order to continue to reach more children and their families.
- Establish a dedicated Centre of Excellence and high support units in the community that could unify service delivery and utilise resources more effectively.
- Drawing on the inquest into Daniel McAnaspie's death commit to undertaking the following actions:

Recommendations

- Carry out a review of its funding to child protection and welfare services delivered by Tusla to ensure that the agency has sufficient resourcing to keep children safe and that the agency review its approach to providing care services.
- Establish an inquisitorial panel of suitably qualified professionals to consider the appropriate level of special care bed capacity that is required at the time of this inquest.
- Ensure that the voice of the child is front and centre of decisions around placement and that particular heed be taken of children who themselves request to be placed in secure care for their own safety.
- Establish an independent appeal process in circumstances where a determination for special care is refused by Tusla.

Participation, Play, Culture and Recreation



PARTICIPATION, PLAY, CULTURE AND RECREATION

The third pillar of the EU Recommendation *Investing in Children* concentrates on children's right to participate.¹ This pillar focuses on two distinct aspects of participation; the first centres on children's participation in play, including recreation and sport, and cultural activities;² while the second focuses on children's participation in decision-making.³

Investing in Children calls on Member States to specifically address barriers to participation in culture, such as cost and access, and emphasises the importance of participation outside of school.⁴ The provision of safe spaces in local communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, is also critical.⁵ The Recommendation states that children should be included in decision-making about how services are run, as well as being consulted on relevant policy planning. On participation structures, the Recommendation states that the inclusion of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is of particular importance.⁶

Children and young people have the right to 'rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).⁷ Article 12 of the UNCRC obliges States to 'assure to the child, who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child', and that the views of the child will be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.⁸

Ireland was last examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee called on Ireland to strengthen initiatives that support and promote these rights.⁹ The Committee proposed that such activities should be available to girls, children with disabilities, asylum-seeking and migrant children and children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁰ It is also recommended that children be fully involved in the planning, designing and monitoring of policies and programmes relevant to this.¹¹

Participation in culture, arts, and sport was identified as one of six priority areas by the Department of the Taoiseach in its initial work plan for the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, which runs until the end of 2025.¹² The plan acknowledges the importance of play for children's development and well-being and the crucial role of sport and culture as part of this.¹³ The plan also refers to existing commitments in this area in both the *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027* and the *Sports Ireland Participation Plan 2021-2024*.¹⁴ Specific areas of focus for the Programme Office will be:

- monitoring implementation of existing commitments;
- exploring the potential of youth work to encourage young people in deprived communities to engage in activities of interest to them;

1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final) 3-4.

2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final) 3-4.

3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final) 3-4.

4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final) 3-4.

5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final) 3-4.

6 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final) 3-4.

7 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art. 31.

8 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art. 12.

9 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(a).

10 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(b).

11 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(c).

12 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).

13 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023) 18.

14 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023) 18.

- the development of play and sport facilities in areas experiencing deprivation; and,
- supporting participation in arts and culture for children and young people who have not received such opportunities to date.¹⁵

This brings a welcome added focus to these areas.

The *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* highlights the need to create opportunities to engage in arts and culture for children who have not been able to access such opportunities before.¹⁶ The *Report* outlines a number of programmes and collaborations being undertaken by Creative Ireland. These include the *Creative Youth Nurture Fund Pilot 2023-2025*, which supports nine creative projects from children and young people, including those with experience of the care system; and the *Creative Youth on a Shared Island* initiative, which supports six creative projects across the island of Ireland from 2024 to 2025.¹⁷ Another initiative to reduce the number of barriers to participation in art and culture is Budget 2025's measure to provide free public transport to 5- to 8-year-olds.¹⁸ This is an important measure for families on a low income as it reduces the cost of days out to recreational and other facilities.

Access to Safe Places to Play

The negative implications of play deprivation may be significant to a child's development, as play impacts their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.¹⁹ Research has found that there may be a correlation between the quality of children's mental health and the decline in the freedom children have to play.²⁰

The UN Committee specifies that children should have access to play outdoors and particularly opportunities to play in natural environments.²¹ A framework for understanding the realisation of children's right to play focuses in particular on issues of accessibility, availability, acceptability and quality.²² In relation to accessibility consideration should be given to levels of access and who has access.²³ While the latter tends to consider issues around disability, it is critical that consideration is also given to other issues such as age, gender, race, poverty and identity.²⁴ Research from *Growing Up in Ireland* has identified that the positive impact of access to outdoor spaces at the community level is greater for children with a lower socioeconomic status.²⁵ Certain groups of children and young people can face a multitude of barriers when it comes to accessing spaces to play. These barriers include, a lack of green space in housing complexes or recreational spaces in homeless accommodation,²⁶ and a lack of accessible playgrounds for children with disabilities.²⁷ Traveller children living on halting sites may not have access to a safe space to play resulting in them playing amongst

15 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023) 18.

16 Government of Ireland, *Child Poverty and Well-Being in Transition: Learning and Adapting to Accelerate Change in Children's Lives - First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) 29.

17 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) 30.

18 Government of Ireland, *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) 31.

19 Play Wales/Chwarae Cymru, *Play Deprivation: The Causes and Consequences for Child Development, and the Potential of Playwork*, (Play Wales/Chwarae Cymru, 2024) 8-12.

20 P Gray, D Lancy, D Bjorklund, *Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence*, (The Journal of Paediatrics, 2023) 1-8.

21 UNCRC, General comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31) (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/17.

22 N Lott *A Framework for Implementing the Right of the Child to Play: Space, Time, Acceptance, Rights-Informed* (UCL Faculty of Law 2024) 3.

23 N Lott *A Framework for Implementing the Right of the Child to Play: Space, Time, Acceptance, Rights-Informed* (UCL Faculty of Law 2024) 3.

24 N Lott *A Framework for Implementing the Right of the Child to Play: Space, Time, Acceptance, Rights-Informed* (UCL Faculty of Law 2024) 3.

25 M Rubio-Cabañez, *Stratifying Cities: The Effect of Outdoor Areas on Children's Well-being* <https://bit.ly/3wwzuaY> accessed 10 May 2024, 20.

26 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *No Place Like Home: Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs* (OCO 2019) 28.

27 Dr Catriona Moloney et al *Mind the Gap* (OCO and NUIG 2021) 52.

rubbish and in puddles,²⁸ whilst children and young people with a parent in prison experience unsuitable visiting conditions which lack any child friendly provision including an absence of toys.²⁹

Child-Friendly Communities

In *First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, the Government committed to developing guidelines for local authorities on the development of child-friendly communities to ensure children have 'safe environments to play, explore and learn'.³⁰ While it is positive that the *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* included child-friendly policies, the focus on children is limited. For instance, the document cautions that 'noise from courtyard play areas can diminish residential amenity, particularly in smaller schemes, and designers must find solutions which balance all the factors involved' rather than see the opportunities that the integration of play spaces can create for communities.³¹

Austria has a long-established tradition of social housing provision, with a high percentage of multi-storey accommodation in urban areas.³² In the City of Vienna toolkit *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development (GM Manual)*, one of the basic principles is how planning can address and accommodate the needs relevant to different life phases.³³ This includes children aged six and under, children aged 6 to 12 years, and young people aged 13 to 17 years.³⁴

It is welcome that the 2024 *Report of The Housing Commission* references the Vienna Model as a best practice and recommends that Ireland learn from this approach.³⁵ Further to this, under the recommendation to 'develop social infrastructure

and amenities in tandem with housing,' the report calls for the inclusion of appropriately integrated play and recreation spaces when providing residential amenities.³⁶ This approach is in contrast to the *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments*, mentioned above which views the noise from play areas diminishing residential amenity.

Local authorities, supported by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, promote play and recreation each year through National Play Day.³⁷ The theme for National Play Day 2025 is the power of play and it speaks to the benefits of play for children's physical, social and emotional development and their cognitive growth.³⁸ From the promotion of the power of play, children will be presented with opportunities to have fun, to explore, be creative, and have wild adventures within their imagination.³⁹

The Capital Grant Scheme for Play and Recreation provides funding of up to €20,000 for playgrounds for children and families across Ireland. Local city and county councils must provide at least 25 per cent of matched funding and are obliged to consult with children and young people in the community before being able to access funds under the scheme. In May 2025, it was announced that €500,000 would be distributed through the scheme, an increased allocation of €50,000 from 2024.⁴⁰ However, this is to cover 28 new playgrounds and play areas and thus individual grants are quite small.⁴¹

Some local councils have developed recreation and play strategies that plan for the continued development of sport, recreation, and play. However, there is a lack of consistency in terms of approach including what departments are involved in responses to play, the inclusion and prominence of play within

28 Ombudsman for Children, No End in Site (OCO 2021).

29 Irish Penal Reform Trust, 'Piecing it Together – Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland' (IPRT 2021) 23, 34 < <https://bit.ly/3pey9hG> > accessed 27 July 2022.

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

31 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* (DHLGH 2022) 36.

32 L Sirr (Ed) *Housing in Ireland: Beyond the Markets*. (Institute of Public Administration 2022) 137.

33 A Klimmer-Pölleritzer, A Nuss, *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development* (City of Vienna 2013) 20-21.

34 A Klimmer-Pölleritzer, A Nuss, *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development* (City of Vienna 2013) 20-21.

35 The Housing Commission, *Report of The Housing Commission* (The Housing Commission 2024) 198.

36 The Housing Commission, *Report of The Housing Commission* (The Housing Commission 2024) 200.

37 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'National Play Day' <https://bit.ly/3GTdETN> accessed 12 May 2025.

38 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'National Play Day' <https://bit.ly/3GTdETN> accessed 12 May 2025.

39 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'National Play Day' <https://bit.ly/3GTdETN> accessed 12 May 2025.

40 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Minister O'Gorman announces funding to Local Authorities for the refurbishment and development of playgrounds and play areas' (Press Release 4 June 2024).

41 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Minister Foley announces €500,000 in funding for playgrounds around the country' (Press Release 12 May 2025).

local development plans and a lack of consistency in terms of whether they are in date or out-dated.⁴² For instance, Laois County Council developed a strategy in the areas of recreation, play and sport. This expired in 2022,⁴³ however, Dublin City Council has a dedicated play strategy that covers up to 2027. This strategy also has a strong focus on youth participation through the Dublin City Comhairle na nOg.⁴⁴ However, a national play plan is needed to ensure that this is consistent throughout the country.

National Play Policy

A commitment to establish a new national policy on play is included in *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028*.⁴⁵ The commitment sets out key milestones including ‘commission[ing] a review of international literature on public play and recreation provision’ and ‘establish[ing] an internal working group’. This is further reinforced in *Young Ireland* which contains an action to ‘assess current play and recreation policy, practice and provision and based on findings recommend future actions’.⁴⁶ This research is to be completed by 2026.⁴⁷

A national play policy could address the unique experiences of children and young people in their local community, wider society and individual circumstances. Ireland’s national play strategy has not been updated in over 20 years.⁴⁸ The UN Committee advocate for the full involvement of children and young people in the design and planning of policies in relation to play, recreational and cultural opportunities. This would ensure that the development and implementation of these policies better meet the needs of this cohort.

Policies and strategies developed in the 2000s identified that housing and communities that are either not child- or youth-friendly or are perceived by children and their parents to have unsafe public spaces, are associated with poverty, non-participation in play, and fewer recreational opportunities.⁴⁹ In the development of new play spaces and recreational facilities, consideration should be given to the need for safe, child-friendly and family-friendly provision and along with taking into account the wider barriers such as cost and transport to ensure equitable access.⁵⁰ A national play policy could include specific cross government actions to address these.

In November 2024, the then-Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) published a series of three documents that will inform the drafting of a new national play policy. The first publication is a scoping review of outdoor play and recreation provision for children and adolescents.⁵¹ This scoping exercise undertook a systematic review of 191 studies published between 2001 and 2023 that fell under an agreed number of search terms and concepts. Amongst the findings identified in this review is the importance of giving recognition to play and recreation in its own right as opposed to understanding it as a means to ‘facilitate learning, physical activity and/or decreasing sedentary lifestyles’.⁵² The participation and involvement of children and young people in the development (including planning and design) of play spaces is critical, and this includes giving due consideration to their views and putting them into action.⁵³ Gaps identified in the literature reviewed includes the needs of adolescents, girls’ engagement in outdoor play, and limited research on the availability of play opportunities in post-primary settings.⁵⁴ Consideration to ensuring play spaces are accessible, a greater focus

42 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A National Review for Ireland* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024) 23.

43 Laois County Council, *The Recreation, Play and Sports Strategy 2018-2022* (Laois County Council 2018).

44 Dublin City Council, *Dublin City Play Strategy 2022-2027* (Dublin City Council 2022).

45 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023), 41.

46 Government of Ireland *Young Ireland* (DCEDIY 2023), 66.

47 Government of Ireland *Young Ireland* (DCEDIY 2023), 66.

48 National Children’s Office *Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play* (Government Publications).

49 National Children’s Office, *Teenspace: National Recreation Policy for Young People* (The Stationery Office 2008) and National Children’s Office, *Ready, Steady! A National Play Strategy* (The Stationery Office 2004).

50 CB Woods, C Powell, JA Saunders, et al., *The Children’s Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2018* (CSPPA 2018)

51 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024).

52 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024) 6.

53 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024) 6.

54 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024) 6.

on the social aspects of play, and the importance of school playgrounds were also highlighted in the review.⁵⁵

The second document looks at a national review of outdoor play and recreation provision in Ireland.⁵⁶ It captures the results of an audit of play and recreation policies and strategies at a local level in Ireland with responses and engagement captured from 30 out of 31 local authorities. The report notes that while all local authorities include play in their development plans, there is no standardised approach to how this is captured or the extent of the focus.⁵⁷ This is an important finding given the absence of a national play policy and is a key reason why a co-ordinated approach is needed so that all children can have equal opportunities to access play. Notably, there were 26 play policies across the local authorities but many of these were out of date. However, for those that were in date, there is good evidence that children and young people were consulted as part of their development.⁵⁸ Mirroring the findings of the scoping review, there is an acknowledgement that less opportunities exist for play for the adolescent group, and there is little identification of the specific needs of adolescent girls.⁵⁹ In response to this gap in provision for adolescents, DCEDIY secured €250,000 in funding from the Dormant Accounts for a project called 'Making Places for and with Teenagers'. This initiative includes a collaboration between local authorities and local Comhairle na nÓgs to identify and develop a proposal to meet the recreational needs of teenagers in their area.⁶⁰

Finally, the third document identifies good practice examples from across Ireland and internationally.⁶¹ The document highlights initiatives being undertaken in local areas that could be adapted in other communities. The international examples provide access to resources that can be used to consider how they may be applied to the Irish context.⁶² The publication of these reports provides an important evidence base to feed into the development of a national play policy.

Addressing Barriers to Participation in Culture

Investing in Children recognises the impact that participation in play, recreation, sport, and cultural activities has for young people's development, health, and wellbeing. Encouraging engagement in cultural activities from a young age increases the likelihood of participation in these activities later in life.⁶³ Further research also demonstrates that childhood participation in cultural activities is beneficial for a child's pro-social and civic behaviours later in life, with those who participate in such activities as children being more likely to volunteer time and donate to charitable causes as adults. This benefits not only the individual, but society as a whole.⁶⁴

Data from *Growing up in Ireland* has previously found that children from low-income families can face barriers, namely financial ones, to participating in activities related to culture.⁶⁵ Taking part in cultural activities like singing, painting, dance, and theatre benefits children academically and helps them to develop better social skills and more positive

55 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024) 6.

56 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024).

57 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024).

58 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024).

59 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents A Scoping Review* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024) 10.

60 The Dormant Accounts Fund *Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan 2025* (Department of Rural and Community Development 2024).

61 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Examples of Good Practice: Play and Recreation Local Authority and International* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024).

62 Carol Barron and Niamh Burke *Examples of Good Practice: Play and Recreation Local Authority and International* (DCEDIY and DCU 2024).

63 B Garrod, D Dowell, *The Role of Childhood Participation in Cultural Activities in the Promotion of Pro-Social Behaviours in Later Life*, (Sustainability MDPI, 2020) doi:10.3390/su12145744, 12.

64 B Garrod, D Dowell, *The Role of Childhood Participation in Cultural Activities in the Promotion of Pro-Social Behaviours in Later Life*, (Sustainability MDPI, 2020) doi:10.3390/su12145744, 12.

65 E Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*, (The Arts Council and ESRI 2016) 100-101.

relationships.⁶⁶ More recent *Growing Up in Ireland* research published in 2022 continues to confirm a strong social gradient regarding participation in cultural activities, such as how children whose parents are graduates are more likely to participate in said experiences.⁶⁷ Children whose parents are employed in professional or managerial roles also have a higher level of participation. Conversely, those living in rented accommodation and children in migrant families had lower recorded participation levels.⁶⁸

Research carried out in 2022 by the Arts Council found that the majority of children engaged with arts and creative activities in schools but for 14.8 per cent, cost was a barrier to participating.⁶⁹ The research indicated that there is a need to identify interventions that support and encourage those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate more.⁷⁰ Providing a subsidy or addressing the financial barrier could enable many children in low-income families to access arts and cultural activities in their community.

In the past five years, there has been progress in acknowledging the right to participate in culture at a policy level. The right for everyone to participate in culture 'irrespective of where they come from, where they live, their religious beliefs or their economic or social backgrounds' is a central value of *Culture 2025*, the first framework policy for the entire culture sector.⁷¹ It also underpins the Arts Council's *Equality Human Rights and Diversity Strategy and Policy*.⁷²

The new *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027*, a cross-government initiative with support from the departments with responsibilities for culture and the arts, children, education and further and higher education, recognises the importance of creativity in contributing to children's wellbeing and personal development.⁷³ The *Plan* emphasises the prioritisation of marginalised children and young people, including

ethnic minorities and those living in poverty, who have low levels of participation in creative and cultural activities through the initiation of equity, diversity, and inclusion work.⁷⁴ Strategic Objective 2 of the strategy specifically focuses on this work and names the Local Creative Youth Partnerships and schools as key actors to facilitate work in this area.⁷⁵ Similarly, Strategic Objective 4 seeks to promote creativity in the education system and school curriculum frameworks.⁷⁶ In 2024, 183 schools commenced the *Creative Schools* initiative, 54 were classified as DEIS schools, and 7 were Youthreach centres.⁷⁷



183 schools commenced the Creative Schools Initiative in 2024

These are positive actions, especially given that evidence indicates that children who are exposed to arts and culture during school time are more likely to engage in cultural activities outside school hours including 'music, dance or drama lessons and to read for pleasure'.⁷⁸ Children living in poverty may be deprived of the benefits of safe and creative playtime and access to age-appropriate extracurricular

66 E Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*, (The Arts Council and ESRI 2016) 100-101.

67 E Smyth, *The Changing World of 9 Year Olds*, (ESRI 2022).

68 E Smyth, *The Changing World of 9 Year Olds*, (ESRI 2022).

69 The Arts Council, *Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, (The Arts Council n.d.).

70 The Arts Council, *Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, (The Arts Council n.d.).

71 Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, *Culture 2025* (DAHRRGA 2016) <<https://bit.ly/2REfOxv>> accessed 8 April 2025.

72 The Arts Council, 'Equality, Human Rights and Diversity' <<https://bit.ly/3wVXEpy>> accessed 8 April 2025.

73 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

74 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

75 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

76 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

77 Minister for Arts, Culture, Communications, Media and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Arts Policy, 19 March 2025 [11480/25].

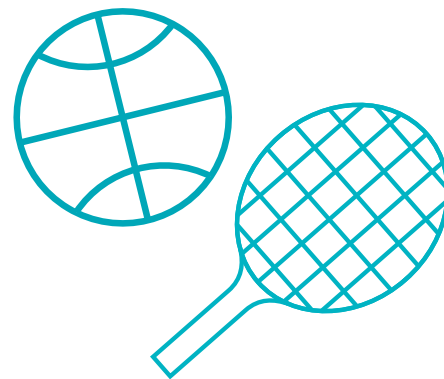
78 E Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study* (ESRI 2016), xi.

activities.⁷⁹ It is important to encourage engagement in cultural activities from a young age to influence participation in these activities later in life.⁸⁰

Access to Sports

In 2022, it was reported that 54.9 per cent of children aged between 10- and 17-years-old were physically active for at least 60 minutes more than four days a week.⁸¹ It was found that rates of physical activity increase for those of a higher socioeconomic background. Less than half (48.1 per cent) of 10- to 17-year-olds from a lower socioeconomic background were physically active for 60 minutes more than four days a week. This is compared to 59.7 per cent of their peers from a higher socioeconomic background.⁸² In particular, children from a migrant background are the least likely to participate in physical activity for at least one hour, more than four days a week (47 per cent).⁸³ In the same year, CSO figures show that 4.7 per cent of households with one or more children under 16 years old were unable to afford a regular leisure activity such as swimming, and 2.6 per cent were unable to afford outdoor leisure equipment, such as a bicycle or roller skates.⁸⁴ The impact of the costs of participating in sports, such as the cost of football boots, clothing and equipment, needs to be examined to determine if it has a negative impact on participation rates in sports for children coming from lower income families.

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office's Budget 2025 Report, *Breaking the Cycle*, notes that children who grow up at risk of poverty do not have the same opportunity to participate in sports.



Children physically active more than four days a week

48.1%

Lower socioeconomic background

59.7%

Higher socioeconomic background

To address this inequality, the Active School Flag programme, which provides schools with guidelines and support to improve physical activity and physical education,⁸⁵ was expanded in Budget 2025 to offer support to more schools.⁸⁶ As of April 2025, there are 603 schools with an Active School Flag.⁸⁷ As a universal measure, this programme will reach children in schools who are growing up at risk of poverty.

79 R Milteer et al., 'The Importance Of Play In Promoting Healthy Child Development And Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus On Children In Poverty' Paediatrics (2012) 129.

80 E Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*, (The Arts Council and ESRI 2016) 98.

81 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, *State of the Nations Children 2024* (DCEDIY 2024) 125.

82 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, *State of the Nations Children 2024* (DCEDIY 2024) 126.

83 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, *State of the Nations Children 2024* (DCEDIY 2024) 125.

84 Central Statistics Office, 'Children and Young Persons Hub, Access to Arts, Culture and Sports', (CSO) <<https://bit.ly/42rarC4>> accessed 8 April 2025.

85 Active School, 'About ASF' (Active School) <<https://bit.ly/4jm4ixN>> accessed 8 April 2025.

86 Government of Ireland, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2025 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being*, (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) 21.

87 Active School, 'About ASF' (Active School) <<https://bit.ly/4jm4ixN>> accessed 8 April 2025.

Budget 2025 also allocated €200,000 to the Her Moves campaign, a project that encourages teenage girls to participate and continue participation in sports and physical activity.⁸⁸ This is an important step to encourage sports participation among girls; in 2022, less than a third (29 per cent) of 17-years-old girls reported being physically active for at least 60 minutes per day, more than four days per week. This is in stark comparison with their male counterparts, of whom over half (54 per cent) were physically active for at least 60 minutes, more than four days a week.⁸⁹

Across Ireland, Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) promote participation in sports in different communities, targeting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular.⁹⁰ LSPs can promote accessible and family-friendly sports events in community sport hubs. Between 2015 and 2023 the number community sport hubs increased to 76 across Ireland.⁹¹

Overall participation in sport decreases once young people enter post-primary school, and this continues throughout their time in second level education.⁹² The GAA has a number of initiatives to encourage participation in sports for children, one of which is the GAA's collaboration with Tusla's School Completion Programme. The GAA provides 500 free places for children at risk of early school leaving through this programme.⁹³ Young people who participate in sport tend to do better in exams, although many young people reduce their participation in sports during exam years.⁹⁴

As part of the *National Sports Policy 2018-2027*, the *Sports Action Plan 2024-2027* was published in 2024. The *Action Plan* put forward a number of measures to increase physical activity levels in schools. Two of these actions are to be led by Sport Ireland, and four will be led by the Department of Education and Youth. Some of these actions include encouraging Local Sport Partnerships to collaborate with schools; consulting schools on how school uniforms can enable physical activity during the school day; and publishing a report with recommendations from the National Forum on Physical Education.⁹⁵

Participation in Decision Making

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) published the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024.⁹⁶ The strategy aims to further include Ireland's youth in the creation of policies that directly impact them. It focuses on eight action areas, including 'develop[ing] participation structures that are inclusive, accessible and safe' for anyone, especially those who may face barriers to participation.⁹⁷ Building on the previous National Participation Strategy, DCEDIY noted that these barriers can include 'lack of housing, lack of services/long waiting lists [and] digital poverty'.⁹⁸

88 Government of Ireland, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2025 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being*, (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) 21.

89 Central Statistics Office, 'Children and Young Persons Hub, Access to Arts, Culture and Sports', (CSO) <<https://bit.ly/42rarC4>> accessed 8 April 2025.

90 Sport Ireland, *Local Sport Partnerships Annual Report 2019* (Sport Ireland 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3bzat0Y>> accessed 8 April 2025.

91 Sport Ireland, *Sports Action Plan 2024-2027* (Sport Ireland 2024) 32, <<https://bit.ly/4cklXT4>> accessed 8 April 2025.

92 CB Woods, KW Ng, U Britton, et al., *The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2022*, (CSPPA 2023) 10.34961/researchrepository-ul.23609157, 24.

93 Department of the Taoiseach, 'Notes on the Fifth Cross-Government Network Meeting - Inspiring imagination, igniting potential: breaking down barriers to participation in arts, culture and, sport' (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) <<https://bit.ly/3DZQjPn>> accessed 8 April 2025.

94 Department of the Taoiseach, 'Notes on the Fifth Cross-Government Network Meeting - Inspiring imagination, igniting potential: breaking down barriers to participation in arts, culture and, sport' (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) <<https://bit.ly/3DZQjPn>> accessed 8 April 2025.

95 Sport Ireland, *Sports Action Plan 2024-2027* (Sport Ireland 2024) 36, <<https://bit.ly/4cklXT4>> accessed 8 April 2025.

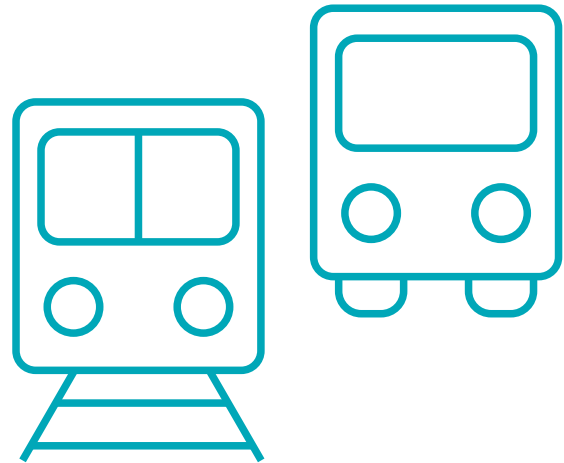
96 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024 (DCEDIY 2024).

97 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024 (DCEDIY 2024) 15.

98 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024 (DCEDIY 2024) 24.

Initiatives which aim to support children and young people's participation in decision-making include the further development of 'Hub na nÓg' (Youth Hub), which provides expertise, guidance and resources, and the National Participation Office, which supports Comhairle na nÓg local youth councils. Comhairle operate for 12-18 years olds in each local authority area in the country.⁹⁹ A representative from each Comhairle is elected to be part of a National Executive that meets once a month for a term of two years and works on a topic given to them at Dáil na nÓg, which meets every two years. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality supports the National Executive of Comhairle na nÓg and ensures they can engage and meet with relevant decision makers, including Ministers.¹⁰⁰ Prior to Budget 2022, the Comhairle put forward a proposal to the then-Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth that public transport should be reduced by 50 per cent for young people aged 16 to 25 years.¹⁰¹ The spirit of the proposal was accepted and a youth travel card for 19- to 23-year-olds was introduced, providing half price fares across the travel network.¹⁰²

In Budget 2024, the young adult Leap Card was extended to 25-year-olds,¹⁰³ and Budget 2025 saw this continued in 2025.¹⁰⁴ The National Youth Assembly was established by the Department as a consultative forum on national topics of interest. This forum provides an important youth perspective on policy implementation¹⁰⁵ and members have the opportunity to make recommendations to Government.¹⁰⁶



The power of children and young people to be engaged and influence the votes of their parents and grandparents was evident in recent local, European, and general elections. It is noteworthy that adults have credited their children and grandchildren with pushing them towards voting in a particular direction.¹⁰⁷ In Ireland, while young people have an awareness of elections and know that they are an important form of representation, there are not enough choices that accurately represent their values and areas of interest.¹⁰⁸ European elections seem to be the most difficult for young people to understand and, because of this, young people tend to focus on their own priorities as opposed to EU policies.¹⁰⁹

99 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive' <<https://bit.ly/3AeSGck>> accessed 8 April 2025.

100 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive' <<https://bit.ly/3AeSGck>> accessed 8 April 2025.

101 Comhairle na nÓg, 'Youth Travel Card: A Milestone Achievement for Comhairle na nÓg' (Comhairle na nÓg 2021) <<https://bit.ly/4lifptz>> accessed 8 April 2025.

102 Department of Transport, 'Budget 2022 to help transform how we travel', Press Release (Department of Transport 2021).

103 Citizens Information, 'Budget 2024' (Citizens Information 2023) <<https://bit.ly/4ckHXhM>> accessed 8 April 2025.

104 Citizens Information, 'Budget 2025' (Citizens Information 2024) <<https://bit.ly/42cRELQ>> accessed 16 April 2025.

105 Other opportunities to engage young people in policies that impact them have included the development of the *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025* published in November 2022. The development of the strategy included consultations with young people who have experience of homelessness.

106 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *National Youth Assembly of Ireland*, <<https://bit.ly/3KgdcO1>> accessed 8 April 2025.

107 Harry McGee, 'Elections 2019: Climate change sees Greens move to centre of politics' *The Irish Times* (Dublin, 25 May 2019); *The Irish Examiner*, '#Elections2019: 'It's wide open', says Martin as first counts start rolling in' (*The Irish Examiner*, 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2UPmt9h>> accessed 8 April 2025.

108 V Gubalova, L Dravecky (Eds) *Young Minds, Democratic Horizons: Paving the Way for the EU's Promising Future* (GLOBSEC 2023) 6.

109 V Gubalova, L Dravecky (Eds) *Young Minds, Democratic Horizons: Paving the Way for the EU's Promising Future* (GLOBSEC 2023) 6.

Young people under the age of 18 cannot vote in Ireland in any election. A range of multilateral bodies such as the EU, the Council of Europe, and the UN have called for a voting age of 16. In 2013, the Constitutional Convention recommended that the voting age in Ireland be reduced to 16 years of age in all elections.¹¹⁰ In 2024, the Electoral Commission published their *Research Programme 2024-2026* which outlines their research priorities over the next few years. 'Reducing the Voting Age' is highlighted as a research priority which commenced in 2024.¹¹¹ The Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023 initiated by members of the Seanad included provisions for the Commission to undertake research and possible changes to the voting age for elections in the State.¹¹² However, in May 2023, the Bill was defeated by vote in the second stage of the Seanad.¹¹³ On 20 May 2025 a new Bill, Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025, was introduced to the Dail and is now at second stage.¹¹⁴

There is momentum towards extending the right to vote to young people, with multiple countries in the EU now allowing individuals under the age of 18 to vote. Austria¹¹⁵ and Malta¹¹⁶ both allow 16-year-olds to vote in all elections, and Greece allows individuals from the age of 17 to vote in all elections.¹¹⁷ Other EU countries allow for 16-year-olds to vote in some elections. For example, 16-year-olds in Belgium can vote in European elections,¹¹⁸ and 16-year-olds in Estonia have the right to vote in local elections.¹¹⁹ In both the Scottish referendum in 2014 and the Austrian national elections in 2013, the voter turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds was higher than the turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds.¹²⁰

Given that children and young people experience the highest rates of poverty and social exclusion and that many budgetary and political decisions impact them directly, a change to the voting age for 16- and 17-year-olds should be considered to empower young people to have their voices heard and influence decisions that are based on their best interests. Expanding the right to vote would lead to an increase in voter turnout overall,¹²¹ as well as political consciousness and engagement among adolescents.¹²² Rights on paper are not enough, and it is clear from research undertaken by young people themselves that when they are given the right information and opportunities to do so, they bring valuable insights to the table.¹²³ There is a need to give children and young people a true voice in our political system by lowering the voting age to 16.

110 A change to the voting age for Dail and presidential elections would require a constitutional referendum. A change to the voting age for local and EU elections would require an amendment to the Electoral Act 1992, the European Parliament Elections Act 1997, and the Local Government Act 2001.

111 The Electoral Commission, *Research Programme 2024-2026*, (The Electoral Commission 2024) 13.

112 Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023, Seanad Bill (2023) 40.

113 Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023, Seanad Bill (2023) 40.

114 Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025.

115 Austrian Government, 'Right to Vote' (Austrian Government) <<https://bit.ly/4joLNZI>> accessed 8 April 2025.

116 Electoral Commission Malta, 'Elections' (Electoral Commission Malta) <<https://bit.ly/4jgUepl>> accessed 8 April 2025.

117 European Youth Forum, 'Greece Lowers Voting Age to 17' (European Youth Forum, 2016) <<https://bit.ly/4jmhTVR>> accessed 8 April 2025.

118 M McMahon, E Laliberte, 'A year ahead: Belgium lowers voting age to 16 for the European elections', (Euronews, 2023) <<https://bit.ly/3RbBUT3>> accessed 8 April 2025.

119 Valimised, 'Right to Vote' (Valimised) <<https://bit.ly/4iZ2x9Q>> accessed 8 April 2025.

120 European Youth Forum, 'Lower the Voting Age' (European Youth Forum) <<https://bit.ly/3XQSKu7>> accessed 8 April 2025.

121 See, e.g., the Council of Europe draft Resolution on expansion of democracy by lowering the voting age to 16, Parliamentary Assembly, Minimum age for voting, Report, Doc. 12546, 22 March 2011.

122 Parliamentary Assembly, 'Expansion of democracy by lowering the voting age to 16', Doc. 12546, 22 March 2011, <<https://bit.ly/3SrNgD0>> accessed 28 May 2025.

123 G Martinez Sainz, J Daminelli, *Voice, Rights, Action! Children's Knowledge about their Rights & Rights Education to Access Justice*. (Children's Rights Alliance, 2022) 31.

Recommendations

Budget 2026

- Appoint an expert on play in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to lead the development of a new National Play Plan. A focus on the need for green spaces and recreational facilities in local communities combined with a review of what currently exists at local authority levels should be a key area of focus for the plan.
- Invest in arts for children and young people at a proportional rate to that for adults.

Medium-term

- Prioritise children and young people experiencing poverty and inequality in the development and rollout of the Creative Youth programmes, which focus on outside-of-school activities.

Long-term

- Lower the voting age to 16 for Local and European Elections.

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 160 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child.

We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

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