



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

Annual Report 2024

Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth



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Foreword by Minister Foley



I am delighted to present the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's 2024 Annual Report.

My priority is delivering and securing a positive impact for those whom we serve – children, disabled people and those who experience inequality and disadvantage in our country.

This Annual Report highlights activities and achievements during the year in meeting the objectives of the Department's *Statement of Strategy 2023 – 2025*.

Among the achievements delivered by the Department in 2024 were:

- Government continued to make good on its commitment to Early Learning and Care with a 24% increase in Budget 2025, securing an unprecedented €1.37 billion budget for the sector. This included support for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme a review of which highlighted the very positive impact of ECCE on children's development, school readiness and accessibility for parents.
- A 12 per cent increase in funding for disability services with €3.2 billion secured in Budget 2025.
- A 14% increase in funding for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, with an allocation of €1.1 billion in Budget 2025.
- Publication of the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028* intended to create a more inclusive and fair Ireland for Traveller and Roma communities.
- Enactment of *the Maternity Protection, Employment, Equality and Preservation of Certain Records Act 2024* which allows women to postpone their maternity leave in cases of serious illness, and it also introduced maternity leave for Oireachtas members. There was also an increase in Parent's Leave to 9 weeks per parent of a child under two.
- The opening of the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme, providing financial payments and health benefits to eligible applicants. The Payment Scheme received 5,997 applications by the end of 2024 and made payments totalling €53,733,500 (general and work-related payments).
- 14,750 applications for birth information processed by Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland in line with the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.
- Appointment of the Director of the Guardian *ad litem* (GAL) National Service to set up office to ensure that the voice and best interests of children are always at the heart of public childcare proceedings and will provide a high quality, standardised service to the courts and to children and young people who are the subject of these proceedings.
- Establishment of an Interagency Group on Vulnerable Children which brings together stakeholders from across Government and its Agencies to address issues affecting vulnerable children and young people in care.
- National Review of Home Visiting Services and establishment of the Tusla National Home Visiting Programme which will help develop a sustainable national approach to home visiting services to improve outcomes for parents and their children.
- The publication of *The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024-2028* to support our young people and maximise their potential contribution to society and its development.

- Establishment of the Young Ireland Advisory Council which will advise and support the implementation of *Young Ireland*.
- Progress on the **National Centre for Research and Remembrance** including the submission of an application for planning permission to Dublin City Council by the Office of Public Works (OPW) and a series of in-person engagement events for survivors and affected persons, their families and advocates.
- The **Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (UNCRPD) came into effect in Ireland on 30th November 2024 and demonstrated Ireland's commitment to the continued and progressive realisation of the rights and obligations set out in the UNCRPD.

In January 2025, I was delighted to be appointed to the new Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The migration function had seen hard working staff in the department provide accommodation for 32,702 people seeking international protection and 75,000 Ukrainian people who came here after the Russian invasion of their country. This migration function transferred to the Department of Justice on May 1 2025, while the youth function transferred to the Department of Education.

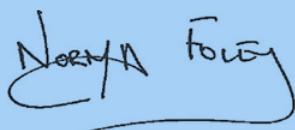
I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the work done by my predecessor Roderic O'Gorman, TD and by the former Ministers of State, Anne Rabbitte and Joe O'Brien as well as conveying my thanks to the Secretary General, the staff of the Department and all stakeholders who have worked collectively to deliver the Department's goals.

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality has recently launched its new Statement of Strategy to reflect our commitment to deliver on all areas within our remit.

This includes the recently launched National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, and beginning the development of a new vision and strategy for specialist disability supports and services for 2030.

There is also a strong focus on supporting and resourcing Tusla in their work for the wellbeing and protection of children, providing high quality, accessible and affordable early learning and childcare opportunities for all and addressing equality and inclusion as whole of government issues.

I very much look forward to working closely with the newly appointed Minister of State, Emer Higgins, and continuing to work with the Secretary General, Kevin McCarthy, the Department's staff and agencies, as well as representative organisations and individuals, to make a real meaningful difference to the lives of all the people we serve.



Norma Foley TD

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality

Foreword by Minister of State Higgins



I welcome the publication of the Department's Annual Report for 2024 in my capacity as the Minister of State for Disability.

Highlights of 2024 include the first year of implementation of the *Action Plan for the Disability Services 2024–2026* which focussed on increasing capacity and improving the quality of Disability Services in Ireland.

Throughout 2024, extensive stakeholder consultation took place across the disability sector, most importantly with disabled people themselves, as the Department worked to optimise the implementation of the Action Plan. The Action Plan targeted the expansion of children's disability services, respite care, residential placements and home support services.

The Autism Innovation Strategy, a cross-Government initiative aimed at making a meaningful difference to the lives of autistic people - was launched on 26 August 2024. This whole of Government strategy sets out 83 clear actions across four broad pillars to address challenges faced by autistic people and ensure better accommodation of their needs across the public system.

Following a robust and extensive public consultation process which concluded in 2024, the *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030* has now been published. Consultation has continued on an iterative basis with key stakeholder groups including Disabled Persons' Organisations and disability service providers, as well as across government.

In fulfilment of a major Programme for Government commitment, the *new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030* will represent a step-change in how we approach disability policy, with an ambitious agenda for the further implementation of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

In my new role as Minister for State for Disability, I welcome the opportunity to work closely with Minister Foley to make a real difference to the lives of Disabled people across Ireland. I also look forward to working alongside the dedicated and committed team in the Department to progress this vitally important work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Emer Higgins TD".

Emer Higgins TD

Minister of State with responsibility for Disabilities

Introduction by the Secretary General



I am very pleased to introduce the Department's Annual Report for 2024. It is published in accordance with section 4 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

This Annual Report takes a look back at 2024 and at the positive impact we, as a Department, have made in the lives of children, young people, adults, families and communities, in recognising diversity, responding to need and promoting equality of opportunity across the range of areas.

It highlights the work undertaken during 2024 and the great progress made in implementing the priorities set out in our Statement of Strategy 2023-2025.

As part of our commitment to developing an agile, engaged and motivated workforce delivering for the public, we carried out a detailed review of our organisational capacity and implemented continuous improvements actions to improve how we deliver our work for the public.

As always, I am proud to record my appreciation of the staff of the Department for their dedication and commitment to delivering work which makes a positive difference to society and our people.

I also want to acknowledge the significant contribution over a number of years of all staff in the Ukraine and International Protection teams who transferred to the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and the Youth Affairs team who transferred to the Department of Education and Youth and continue their important work.

I must thank colleagues in other Government Departments, our agencies and the funded bodies for their continued co-operation and support. Cross Government and inter-agency collaboration is a key feature of what we do and helps us to develop and deliver policies designed to support the people we serve.

I wish to extend a warm welcome to our new Minister, Norma Foley TD, and Minister of State, Emer Higgins TD, as well as giving my best wishes to Minister Hildegarde Naughton TD in her new role as Minister for Education and Youth. In reflecting on 2024, I want to thank former Minister, Roderic O'Gorman TD and former Ministers of State, Anne Rabbitte and Joe O'Brien for their support and leadership in that time. I look forward to working with Minister Foley and Minister of State Higgins as we now implement a range of ambitious commitments in the new Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kevin McCarthy".

Kevin McCarthy
Secretary General

Our Work in Numbers



106,553

Children enrolled in ECCE programme



32,702¹

International Protection Applicants accommodated



56

Initiatives funded to support International Protection Applicants' integration



75,012²

Shelter provided to those fleeing the war in Ukraine



276

Programme refugees accommodated in integration interventions



219,102

Children on National Childcare Scheme and legacy targeted schemes



155,159

Centre-based respite nights provided to people with disabilities



87%

Children in care in a foster care placement



185

Consultations and participative events held, involving children and young people



1.848 million

Personal assistance hours provided to people with a disability



24

Initiatives to support integration of LGBTI+ people



€6.132 million

Funding provided to 42 initiatives that benefit Traveller and Roma communities



6,649

People with a disability in receipt of home support services



2,446

Queries from members of the press answered

101 Press Releases issued



471

Freedom of Information Requests processed



11,369

Representations received by Minister's Office



3,898

Parliamentary Questions received



121

Family resource Centres funded



53

Bodies funded under the International protection Integration Fund

€7.988bn

Total Budget for 2024

4,781

Children and young people engaging in youth participation structures supported by the Department

Source: Public Service Performance Report 2024: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Public_Service_Performance_Report_2024.pdf

1 29.12.2024 IPAS Stats Weekly Report <https://www.gov.ie/en/international-protection-accommodation-services-ipas/publications/december-2024/>

2 Accommodation of Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection Weekly Report, 17 December 2024 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/publications/accommodation-of-beneficiaries-of-temporary-protection-bots/>

2024 Financial Overview

The 2024 gross funding provision for the Department, under Vote 40, was €7.988 billion. This followed one supplementary estimate and comprised €7.845 billion for current expenditure and €143 million for capital expenditure. It represented an increase of €804 million (11%) on the 2023 gross funding provision of €7.185 billion.

The provisional 2024 gross expenditure outturn of the Department was €7.866 billion, an increase of €721 million, or 10%, over the 2023 outturn of €7.145 billion.

The expenditure in 2024 enabled a significant level of services to be delivered across five programme areas.

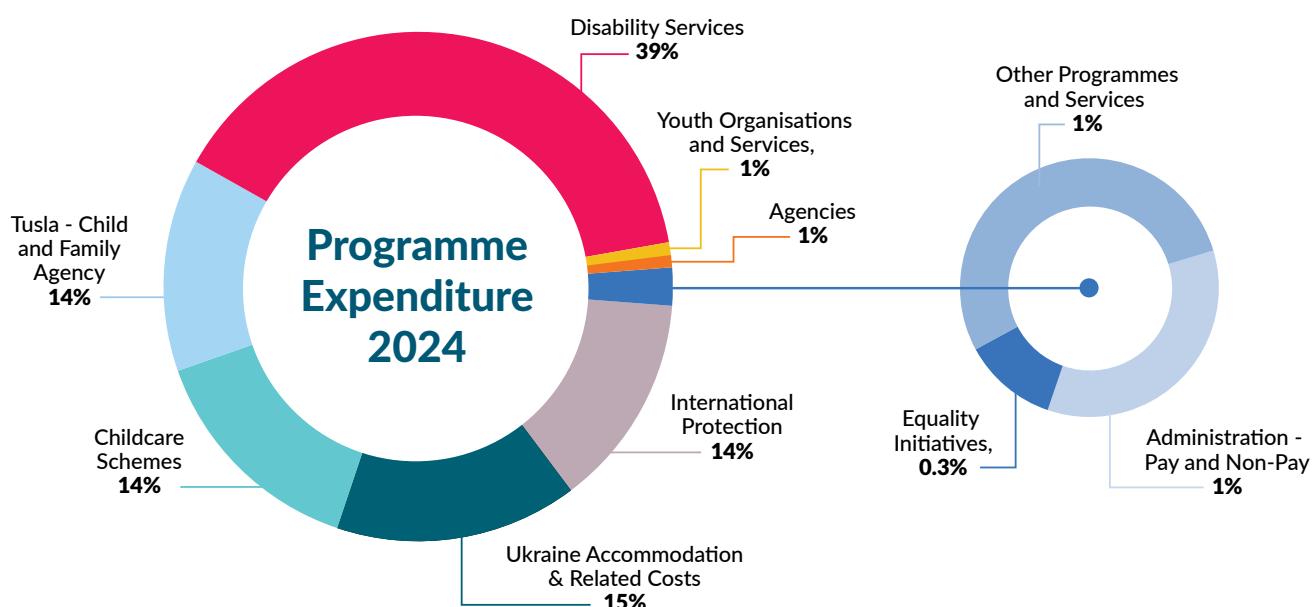
Table 1.1

Programme Expenditure 2024

Programme Expenditure ³		Outturn €000
A	Children and Family Support Programme	1,100,684
B	Sectoral Programmes for Children and Young People	1,237,012
C	Policy and Legislation Programme	106,685
D	An Equal and Inclusive Society	3,120,434
E	A Fair and Efficient Support System for International Protection Seekers	2,301,366
Gross expenditure		7,866,181
Deduct		
F	Appropriations-in-aid	30,863
Net expenditure		7,835,318

Figure 1.2

Programme Expenditure by percentage 2024



³ Please note, the values are based on provisional outturn figures and may be subject to change until the publication of the 2024 Appropriation Account for the Vote on 30 September 2025.

2024 Department Achievements

- The Department's new first ever *Digital Strategy 2024 – 2028* was launched in March 2024, and is a reflection of our collective commitment to leveraging technology, to improve the way we work as a Department and to enhance the public services we provide for the citizens of Ireland
- In April, the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making Action Plan 2024-2028* was launched which aims to promote further the inclusion of children and young people in decision making at all levels – in the home, in school, in their communities and at national level
- In September, *Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028* was launched which is intended to strengthen the role of youth work and related services in the lives of young people in Ireland, including through enhancing the visibility, accessibility and attractiveness of youth services and supporting better co-ordination with the range of other services and pathways for young people. It also focusses on enhancing service quality, including through a consideration of workforce needs, and strengthening the data and evidence base informing policy, investment and service-delivery
- *Equal Start* was launched in May 2024 delivering on a key commitment in the First 5 strategy (2019-2028), and initial roll-out commenced in September 2024. 788 settings (serving 35,000 children - 4,700 from priority cohorts) identified as operating in a context of concentrated disadvantage have been given Equal Start designation and are now receiving additional supports
- *The Autism Innovation Strategy* was launched on 26 August 2024 to address the bespoke challenges and barriers facing autistic people and to improve understanding and accommodation of autism within society and across the public system
- In June 2024, the Minister announced the extension of targeted supports under the Access and Inclusion Model to ECCE-age children beyond time they spend in the ECCE programme. From September 2024 this allowed children to access their early learning and childcare setting for up to an additional 3 hours per day in ECCE term and 6 hours per day out of ECCE term. Since AIM was first launched in 2016, more than 28,000 children have received targeted AIM supports in over 4,400 settings nationally and many more children have benefited from its universal supports
- The Department presented Ireland's submission of the mid-term report on Ireland's human rights actions to the United Nations under the *Universal Periodic Review* process and Ireland's *first interim report under the European Child Guarantee* to the European Commission in September. Ireland's Report for Beijing+30 process was submitted to the UN in August 2024 while the *8th State Report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) was submitted to the CEDAW Committee in November 2024. These reports outlined Ireland's progress in implementing human rights recommendations and initiatives related to women's and children's rights, respectively
- In September, Part VIIA of the Child Care Act 1991 was amended by the *Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024* introducing Childminder-specific regulations. This amendment allows for the registration and regulation of childminders, enabling parents who use their services to access National Childcare Scheme subsidies. It also provides Tusla with enhanced enforcement powers to address non-compliance in early learning and childcare services
- The new *Young Ireland* website was launched in October 2024. The website contains information on children and young people's rights, the Young Ireland Policy framework including the data and research that underpins it and its governance structures

- The Department's People Strategy, ***Valuing our People - Delivering Together 2024-2026*** was launched in October 2024. The goal of this strategy is that the Department is a "high-performing employer of choice, where our people are valued and supported to achieve their best and deliver on our vision." It focuses on building our culture and leadership, developing ourselves as an organisation of the future, and supporting our people every day in the work that we do
- In October 2024, the Minister announced a 15% increase in the ***Core Funding*** allocation – rising from €287 million to €331 million - for the third year of the Scheme. Parents leave also increased from 7 weeks to 9 weeks for children born or adopted after 1 August 2024
- In October 2024, the ***Maternity Protection, Employment Equality and Preservation of Certain Records Act 2024*** was enacted. This legislation provides for maternity leave for Oireachtas members and allows maternity leave to be paused when the mother is seriously ill. It also provides for the preservation of privately-held records relating to Ireland's institutional past, and restricts the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements where an employee has alleged discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment or victimisation
- In October 2024 Budget 2025 delivered increased investment for the following areas:
 - A 24% increase (€265.8m) in investment in Early Learning and Childcare, with an unprecedented €1.37 billion secured in Budget 2025
 - The Building Blocks Expansion Scheme allocated €1.3m to services to undertake renovations or to upgrade existing space to cater for more children
- From 1 January 2024 the rates of the foster care allowance increased to €350 per week for children aged under 12 and €377 per week for those over 12. The foster care allowance was further increased in November 2024, up to €400 per week for children aged under 12 and €425 per week for those over 12 years of age
- Funding for Tusla rose to over €1.1bn, reflecting the growing demand for Tusla's services, including the year-on-year increase in referrals
- In November 2024 the Government approved a draft General Scheme of legislative provisions to reform the Equality Acts and to respond to issues raised in the review of the Equality Acts



Department Vision, Mission and Values 2023-2025

Vision

A fair, equal and inclusive society where rights are respected and where everyone can achieve their potential



Values

Respect and Inclusivity, Equality and Human Rights, Integrity and Commitment



Mission

Enhance the lives of everyone in Ireland from childhood onwards by upholding rights, promoting equality of opportunity, recognising diversity, and delivering supportive legislation, policies and services

Respect and Inclusivity

- We place everyone in Ireland at the heart of what we do
- We respect the rights of all people to participate fully in society
- We recognise the diversity of Irish society and the importance of ensuring that we are responsive to diverse needs
- We acknowledge our role in supporting integration
- We deal respectfully with each other and with all our stakeholders

Equality and Human Rights

- We adhere to the principles of equality and respect for human rights
- We recognise the role and importance of all families in our society
- We listen to children, young people, and adults, realising their right to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives
- We act to protect children and all the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people and to champion their needs

Integrity and Commitment

- We act with integrity and impartiality at all times and are accountable for our actions
- We value and support our staff and we encourage creativity and innovation in the delivery of our vision and mission

Our High Level Objectives 2023-2025

1

We will develop, implement and influence evidence informed policies and legislation that improve the outcomes for those we serve

2

We will support the provision of a range of quality and sustainable services within our legislative remit underpinned by strategic investment that meets the needs of individuals, families, and society

3

We will provide shelter to people fleeing conflict and support those in particular need to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their potential including children, young people and at-risk individuals

4

We will promote the development of a progressive, respectful and equal society, including for persons with disabilities, in line with a rights-based approach, and informed by the experiences of past generations, and seek to respond to the needs of survivors

5

We will work in partnership with the people we serve and across Government Departments, public bodies, and civil society to achieve better outcomes

6

We will maintain high standards of performance and corporate governance with engaged, motivated, and supported staff in an organisation fit for the future.

Progress against Strategic goals in Department Statement of Strategy

The following section summarises the progress achieved during 2024 with regard to six strategic goals as set out in the Department's Statement of Strategy 2023-2025

Strategic Goal 1

We will develop, implement, and influence evidence informed policies and legislation that improve the outcomes for those we serve.

Strategic Action 1.1

We will ensure that delivery of the Strategy is underpinned by a comprehensive programme of legislation and is reflective of the Programme for Government.

- Regulation of non-disclosure agreements in cases of discrimination or harassment. A new section was inserted into the Employment Equality Act 1998 to introduce measures to limit the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements where an employee has alleged discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, or victimisation
- Preservation of Private Records. The Act also includes provisions to preserve privately-held records relating to Ireland's institutional past

Legislation

The *Maternity Protection, Employment Equality and Preservation of Certain Records Act 2024* was enacted in October 2024 and provides for the following:

- A pause in maternity leave for serious illness. The Maternity Protection Act 1994 was amended by the insertion of a new section creating a new entitlement for an employee who requires ongoing treatment for a serious health condition, including physical and mental health conditions, to postpone maternity leave for a period of between 5 and 52 weeks
- Maternity leave for members of the Oireachtas. The Act also provides for maternity leave for a period of up to 26 weeks for a member of the Houses of the Oireachtas when their child is born

Expansion of Family Leaves

In March 2024, the Minister and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment commenced the final provisions of the *Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023*, establishing the right for workers to request remote working from their employers, and for parents and carers to request flexible working arrangements to suit their caring needs. From August 2024, under the *Parents Leave and Benefit Act 2021*, parents of children under 2 have an individual entitlement to 9 weeks paid Parent's Leave to care for their child.

Child Care (Amendment) Act

The enactment and part commencement of the **Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024** allowed the Minister to remove the legal exemption on childminders registering with Tusla and also enhance Tusla Early Years Inspectorate's regulatory enforcement powers.

Amendment to Children Act 2001

In addition, technical amendments to the Children Act 2001 relating to the composition of the Board of Oberstown Children Detention Campus were prepared in 2024 and are being taken forward by the Department of Justice as part of the Children (Amendment) Bill 2024.

Transfer of functions

Under the auspices of a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding, and with the **Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) Agency Act 2023** commenced at the end of 2023, the Department and Tusla worked in 2024 to transfer the delivery of DSGBV services to the Department of Justice and in setting up of the DSGBV Agency, Cuan.

The Department worked closely with Cuan on its formation providing critical support during the first half of 2024 ensuring continuity of engagement with the DSGBV sector and smooth disbursal of funding to involved organisations.

Strategic Action 1.2

We will implement **Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023 – 2028**, including establishing and supporting the key governance structures reporting ultimately to the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, and the development of an Enabling Environment to ensure the systemic consideration of children's rights in decision making.

Young Ireland - the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People

Governance

In 2024, the governance structures for Young Ireland were established. These structures provide a forum for stakeholder engagement, drive implementation of existing policy commitments, and ensure accountability in the development of further policies impacting children and young people.

The Young Ireland Advisory Council, comprised of civil society members, enables the community and voluntary sector, as well as academics and other experts, to advise and support the implementation of *Young Ireland*. The Young Ireland Advisory Council may provide advice to the **Children and Young People's Policy Forum** and the implementation team for Young Ireland, reporting to the Senior Officials Group and Cabinet Committee on Children and Education. Two youth members from the National Youth Assembly also sit on the Council. The Advisory Council met for the first time in October 2024.



The Children and Young People's Policy Forum oversee and support implementation of policies impacting children and young people in their respective spheres of responsibility across government Departments, agencies and sectors. Membership of the Policy Forum consists of senior officials from relevant Departments and agencies, as well as the Chair and two ordinary members of the Young Ireland Advisory Council. This work includes cross-government implementation of *Young Ireland's Spotlights* and its constituent strategies. The Policy Forum met for the first time in December 2024.

Enabling Environment⁴

A draft Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) instrument, for use in government decision-making processes, was developed as part of an EU-funded CERV project with Children's Rights Alliance, University of Galway, Foróige, Tusla and Eurochild. Feedback on and input to this instrument received through a series of workshops and consultations in 2024 have informed the next iteration of the instrument. Work on a Child Rights and Youth Impact Assessment instrument will be progressed and piloted in 2025.

A public awareness campaign on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ran for four weeks across September and October 2024. The campaign included communications across digital, social media and radio advertising. The objective of the campaign was to raise awareness of the principles and provisions of the UNCRC and of children's rights among the public – before the campaign, 64% of those surveyed were aware of the UNCRC (to varying degrees). After the campaign, this increased to 73%.

The new [Young Ireland website](#) was launched in October 2024. The website contains information on *Young Ireland*, including the data and research that underpin it, its governance structures and children and young people's rights. It is used to communicate progress made under the Framework, as well as other relevant developments.

Progress the development of a policy on Kinship Care:

In 2024, Parenting Support Policy Unit continued to develop a policy scoping paper to develop a national policy on informal kinship care. The Steering and Advisory Groups for the development of the national policy met regularly throughout the year.

The piloting phase for the consultations with children and young people on their experiences of informal kinship care was completed in 2024. Wider consultations will take place in 2025.

Qualitative research into the experiences of informal kinship carers began in September 2024, following the appointment of researchers. The project is ongoing and will be completed by end Q2 2025. This research is one of the many resources that will inform the development of the national policy on informal kinship.

International Engagement on Children's Rights

In its concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Ireland "conduct a comprehensive review of all its legislation to align it with the Convention". In March 2024, the Department engaged Professor Ursula Kilkelly in the Child Rights Centre in UCC and her team to conduct this legislative review and this work commenced in Autumn 2024. Two underpinning pieces of work were completed by UCC and reviewed by DCDE in 2024 - a review of a broad scope of international literature, as well as a gap analysis report on existing policy and implementation as well as the full range of primary and secondary legislation. The final report, which will incorporate the findings of these reviews, is expected in Q3 2025.

The *European Child Guarantee* seeks to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing a minimum standard of access to key services to all children in the European Union. The Guarantee also aims to promote equal opportunity for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. The implementation and monitoring of Ireland's National Action Plan has been incorporated into *Young Ireland's* governance and monitoring structures. Ireland's *European Child Guarantee interim report* – the first of its biennial reports recommended in the Guarantee's National Action Plan – was sent to the EU in June 2024. The report was published on www.gov.ie with an accompanying [press release](#).

The [Young Ireland Advisory Council](#) met for the first time in October 2024 and has developed a work programme that will include the review of Ireland's implementation of the European Child Guarantee for future reporting cycles.

⁴ *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* aims to create an enabling environment where the rights and needs of all children and young people are central to policy and decision-making in Ireland.

Strategic Action 1.3

We will continue to develop and implement evidence-based policy to improve access to high quality and affordable Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) that will deliver better outcomes for children, families, the economy, and society.

Childminding

Following the part commencement of the **Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024** in September 2024, and the introduction of childminding specific regulations, all childminders are now eligible to register with Tusla. The legislative amendments also ensure that parents who use Tusla-registered childminders are eligible for subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme.

Updating of Aistear Curriculum Framework

An updated Aistear⁵, early childhood curriculum framework for babies, toddlers and young children, was published jointly by the Department and Department of Education in December 2024. This is the first update since 2009. The updated Aistear is for all children from birth to six years in all settings other than primary and special schools and can be used by anyone who supports babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development such as parents, childminders and early years educators. The Department will lead on the familiarisation and implementation of the updated framework within the sector throughout 2025.

Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy

[Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024 - 2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood](#) and a supporting five-year implementation plan, was published jointly by the Department of Education and this Department in 2024. The strategy recognises the importance of early childhood in laying the foundations of essential skills such as literacy and numeracy. The vital role that early learning and care services play in supporting early childhood development, complementing the central role of parents and families, is also recognised in the strategy.

Nurturing Skills

2024 saw the third year of implementation of [Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022 - 2028](#). Of the 57 actions for 2024, 47 were either completed or in progress. The 2024 Annual Progress Report for Nurturing Skills was published in Q1 2025. One key achievement during 2024 was the commencement of the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund on a pilot basis. The Fund supports those currently in the early learning and care workforce to upskill to a Level 7 or Level 8 degree qualification on a Qualification Advisory Board approved course, in line with the commitment to move to a graduate led workforce. 350 applications were approved to commence their studies in September 2024.

Early Years' Service Joint Labour Committee

Two new *Employment Regulation Orders*

commenced on 24 June 2024, building on the introduction of the first Employment Regulation Orders in 2022. The 2024 Orders increased the minimum hourly rates of pay for all grades in the sector and removed the requirement for graduates to have 3 years' experience before they are eligible for graduate minimum pay rates. It is estimated that over 50% of the workforce were positively impacted by this increase.

Outcomes from the Joint Labour Committee process are supported by the Government through the Core Funding scheme, which has an allocation of €331 million for the 2024/25 programme year alone. Furthermore, €15 million was specifically ringfenced in Budget 2025 to support employers to meet the costs of further increases to the minimum rates of pay in the sector from September 2025 and is conditional on the agreement of new EROs (equivalent to €45 million in a full year).

Forward planning tool

A forward planning model has been designed and developed to establish the basis for understanding the supply of different types of early learning age care and school-age childcare places across the country and the locations of children in the corresponding age categories. This will be an important tool in identifying the nature of alignment or mismatch, between supply and demand, and help to shape future policy responses.

⁵ Aistear, was Ireland's first curriculum framework for early childhood education when it was introduced in 2009.

In 2024, the following activities took place in relation to the forward planning work:

- Engagement across units within the division to understand available administrative data that could be configured into a metric for supply
- Collaboration with Data and Analytics Unit to secure demand side data
- Establishment of relationship with Government Information Services mapper to consider how best to visually represent complex supply and demand data and
- Meetings with Department of Education colleagues to understand their approach to forward planning

Independent Review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme

In 2024, an independent review of the ECCE programme was completed as a precursor to putting the programme on a statutory footing, as committed to in First 5. The review assessed whether the ECCE programme is meeting its core objectives and considered any potential change or improvement. The review highlighted the very positive impact on children's development, school readiness and accessibility for parents. It also identified potential enhancements to the programme, including changes to eligibility criteria, as well as further steps to support access for marginalised groups.

A New Operating Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (ELC and SAC)

Significant progress was made in 2024 on advancing plans for a dedicated State agency for ELC and SAC. It is envisaged that this agency will undertake the functions currently carried out by Pobal Early Years (including Better Start), the 30 City/County Childcare Committees (CCC), as well as operational functions currently undertaken by the Department.

The Department engaged independent consultants, Indecon, to undertake a phase of research, analysis and stakeholder engagement to inform the design of the agency. This phase commenced in December 2023 with an anticipated timeframe of 12-18 months.

Strategic Action 1.4

We will develop quality, evidence-informed youth policy, including through the establishment of a new National Youth Sector Engagement Structure and the production of a renewed Youth Strategy.

Opportunities for Youth

Opportunities for Youth: The National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services was published on 18 September 2024. The development of the Strategy was informed by extensive consultation with young people, youth workers, the wider youth sector, and other key stakeholders. It aims to provide a more strategic, data-driven, and joined-up approach to the delivery of youth work services in Ireland. Work also began on implementing the Strategy, particularly on the actions in relation to developing a Workforce Development Plan and on the mapping of services.

Collaboration & Evidence Informed policy

The Department participated in the implementation of the Youth Justice Strategy, including through participation in the associated multi-stakeholder oversight groups.

We will develop quality, evidence-informed youth policy, including through the establishment of a new National Youth Sector Engagement Structure and the production of a renewed Youth Strategy.

Strategic Action 1.5

We will lead on the development of family and parenting support policy. This will include clear policy guidance for and oversight of the provision and commissioning of family and parenting support services by Tusla and other relevant services.

Counselling, psychotherapy and therapeutic supports and services for children and young people experiencing social and economic disadvantage

Dormant Accounts funding of €1.5 million was allocated to 90 community and voluntary organisations - via Tusla. The funding helped to address unmet need and reduce waiting lists for community-based counselling and therapeutic services.

Parent Supports

A Goal of *Supporting Parents* is to build greater awareness of parenting support services. During 2024, Year 2 of the 3 year *Supporting Parents Communications Campaign* continued, with promotion of local and national parenting supports on the Department's social channels and the updating of the Supporting Parents webpages on gov.ie, as a source for trusted, evidenced based parenting support for all stages of parenting.

All Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) received €5,000 each to promote existing parenting support services in their areas, and to promote parenting support services to parents - online through webinars, coffee mornings, training programmes and school attendance tools. 37 different services, including organisations working with parents of LGBTI+ children and parents of children with a disability each received €2,000 from the *Parent Peer Support Fund*.

The Parent Support Policy Unit commenced work with Tusla on the categorisation of parenting support services. The objective is the commissioning of an online geo-spatial map of parenting supports that will assist parents and practitioners in finding parenting support services in their area.

Home Visiting

Aligned with First 5, a *National Review of Home Visiting services for families with babies and young children* was conducted by Maynooth University in 2024 complemented by economic research on the benefits of investing in home visiting. The findings inform the Tusla National Home Visiting Programme.

Family Resource Centres (FRC) – Core Funding Increases

A core funding equalisation measure for FRCs, at a cost of €1.5 million, was announced, ensuring a minimum of €160k for each FRC from 2025 onwards and benefitting 54 FRCs.

Strategic Action 1.6

We will progress reform of the *Guardian ad litem (GAL)* service in childcare proceedings, preparing for commencement of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 and establishment of a new national *Guardian ad litem* service in line with broader reform of the Family Justice system

The Department continued to work towards the establishment of the *Guardian ad litem (GAL) National Service* during the year. The GAL National Service will ensure that the voice and best interests of children are always at the heart of public childcare proceedings and will provide a high quality, standardised service to the courts and to children and young people who are the subject of these proceedings.

Throughout 2024, there was continued engagement with key stakeholders, to support the reform of current *Guardian ad litem* arrangements. The Inter-Departmental group that was established under the Family Justice Strategy continued to meet over 2024 and played a central role in informing the Department's work in establishing the National Service. This included assistance in the development of the operating model, practice manuals, workforce strategy and a transition plan, which will assist in the building of the new service.

The Department progressed the appointment of the Director of the GAL National Service in 2024 and continued preparations for further key appointments. Progress in relation to recruitment to the Executive Office represents a key milestone in the establishment of the National Service.

Strategic Action 1.7

We will publish an amendment bill arising from the Review of the Child Care Act, and follow this through to enactment to ensure that the Act is revised and updated in a way that allows the best interests of children to be upheld.

Parliamentary Counsel and Advisory Counsel

Throughout 2024, officials continued to liaise closely with Parliamentary Counsel and Advisory Counsel to advance as a priority the text of legislative amendments along the lines of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill published in April 2023. This work took account of the wide range of issues raised in pre-legislative scrutiny and other matters raised by stakeholders.

In 2024 the proposal was split into two Bills, with amendments to improve and strengthen enforcement and regulation procedures across the early years sector provided for in the **Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024** enacted in July 2024. Officials continued to engage with Parliamentary Counsel to advance the text of the second Bill, to update the Child Care Act, 1991 to reflect changes since 1991 in child welfare and protection services and address ongoing intersectional challenges at an operational level through a range of innovations to strengthen child protection measures. Publication of this Bill remained a priority during the year.

The Department monitored progress and engaged as appropriate with Department of Justice officials on advancement of the proposed Re-vetting Bill, and on the Family Courts Bill enacted in November 2024 with implementation planning now underway. The Department also engaged with Department of Health officials advancing the Mental Health Bill 2024, which interacts with the Child Care Act.

Strategic Action 1.8

We will oversee an effective adoption framework, with the best interests of children at its centre, driving policy and legislative reform, with a continued focus on access to birth information and tracing services and best practice in adoption.

The Adoption Authority of Ireland

The Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI) granted 131 adoption orders in 2024, including step-parent adoptions, adoptions from long term foster care, infant adoptions and adoptions by extended family members. In addition, 183 entries were made on the Register of Intercountry Adoptions.

An EU Technical Support Instrument project to develop a best practice framework and a roadmap for reform of domestic adoption commenced in November 2024. The project is led by the Department and supported by the Child Protection section of UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia in cooperation with the European Commission's Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM). The framework will enable the Government to reform its domestic adoption system to ensure better outcomes for all parties involved, especially the child.

Throughout 2024, the AAI and Tusla continued to process applications for services established by the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.

Birth Information and Tracing services 2022-2024

Applications for information	14,899
Information applications completed	14,750
Applications for tracing	7,608
Entries on the Contact Preference Register	4,034
• Matches between relatives	393
• Relatives placed in contact	201

A Statutory Review of the operation of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 commenced in October 2024. The objective of the review is to assess how the services established under the Act are delivering on the objectives which underpinned the development of the legislation.

The Department also advanced a *Periodic Critical Review (PCR)* of the Adoption Authority of Ireland in cooperation with representatives of the Authority and of the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform (DPENDR) to evaluate the Authority's effectiveness and to identify potential reforms to enable the Authority to respond to future challenges. The PCR process will conclude in 2025.

Strategic Action 1.9

We will continue to drive the new model of delivery for “Growing up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children and young people.”

The Research and Evaluation Unit

The Research and Evaluation Unit (REU) continued to drive the new model of delivery for *Growing up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children and young people*.

Twenty papers from external researchers using Growing Up in Ireland data were added to the publications database in 2024. Eighteen papers using Growing Up in Ireland data were presented at the annual conference, plus a keynote presentation from Professor Michelle Kelly-Irving from the University of Toulouse, and contributions from Comhairle na nÓg. Four in-depth reports were published as part of the research partnership with the ESRI, and four more publications were produced and released by the Growing Up in Ireland team in the Department.

There were 109 requests to the Irish Social Sciences Data Archive for 'AMF' Growing Up in Ireland datasets⁷ in 2024. In addition, the Central Statistics Office approved 35 projects using the more restricted 'RMF' format datasets⁶.

The Growing Up in Ireland team in the Department conducted three data workshops and introduced new content specifically for policymakers. The team also participated in additional dissemination activities including presenting research papers at the international research conference of the Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies.

The Department also supported colleagues in the Central Statistics Office to launch the new birth cohort (Cohort '24), which started interviewing the first of approximately 10,000 families with infants in October following an official launch event with Taoiseach Simon Harris, TD and Minister Hildegard Naughten, TD.

Strategic Action 1.10

We will develop and implement gender equality and wider equality policies.

Gender Pay Gap Reporting

The Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021 requires employers to report on their gender pay gap across a range of metrics, as set out in the Regulations under the Act.

Reporting began in 2022 for employers with over 250 employees and was extended to employers with over 150 employees in 2024. Work advanced in 2024 to develop a centralised reporting database into which employers will report their data. It is envisaged that employers will be required to publish their gender pay gap reports on this centralised portal.

National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality

The Department in association with the National Participation Office and a dedicated Youth Advisory Group convened the *National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality* on 24 September 2024 as part of the consultation process on the successor Strategy to the National Strategy for Women and Girls.⁷

The National Strategy for Women and Girls

The Programme for Government, "Our Shared Future" (2020), included a commitment to develop and implement a new *National Strategy for Women and Girls*. In 2024, the Department contracted IPSOS B&A for the consultation phase for the development of the successor Strategy.

⁶ Growing Up in Ireland datasets are made available to researchers on a confidential and anonymised basis through the Irish Social Sciences Data Archive. These files are known as Anonymised Microdata Files (AMFs). More detailed files, also on an anonymous and strictly confidential basis, may be made available to researchers at the discretion of the Central Statistics Office (CSO). These files are known as Researcher Microdata Files (RMFs).

⁷ For further information please see Strategic Action 5.3

Over the course of 2024 Tusla provided accommodation to some 299 unaccompanied minors from Ukraine with 157 remaining in care or accommodation at the end of 2024.

Strategic Action 1.11

We will develop and implement policies which facilitate integration of migrant populations, promote the inclusion and participation of Travellers, Roma and people with disabilities and address individual and structural racial discrimination and its impacts through the implementation of the National Action Plan Against Racism.

National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy

In 2024, a key focus of the Department's work for Traveller and Roma inclusion was the development of the successor Strategy and the first *2-year Action Plan*, both of which were approved by Government in July 2024 (Ref Action 5.3).

The Department has oversight responsibility for the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy* (NTRIS). There were two meetings of the NTRIS Steering Committee in 2024.

Work continued on a number of the objectives in the Strategy in 2024 including:

- Funding of €6.132m was allocated to Traveller and Roma representative bodies, and to advance NTRIS actions across areas such as employment, culture and heritage, inclusion, education, gender equality, mental health, and mediation. A further €1.340m was secured from Dormant Account Funding to support Traveller and Roma initiatives
- The commemoration of the 80th Anniversary of the Roma Genocide was held in the Mansion House on 18 September 2024. (NTRIS II Action 64)

- Funding was provided to celebrate Traveller Pride Week 2024 and International Roma Day. (NTRIS II Action 64)
 - The review of functions, processes, and membership of the NTRIS II Steering Committee was completed in the last quarter of 2024 (NTRIS II Action 70)
 - The reforms to reporting arrangements for monitoring the implementation of NTRIS II and the draft terms of reference for the Steering Committee were completed (NTRIS II Action 71)

The Department continued to undertake the role as the National Roma Contact Point for the purpose of the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion, and participation.

New national strategy for Migrant Integration and Inclusion

Following a public consultation in late 2023, the Migrant Integration Strategy team conducted a second, more targeted consultation in 2024 to reach migrant communities that had been underrepresented in the first phase. The findings of both consultations are informing the development of a new *national strategy for Migrant Integration and Inclusion*.

The appointment in 2024 of a *Special Rapporteur on Racial Equality and Racism*, supported by an independent Advisory Group representing a cross-section of Irish society, was an important milestone in the continued implementation of the National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-27.

Transposition of the European Accessibility Act (EAA)

Transposition of the *European Accessibility Act* (EAA) was completed in December 2023. The EAA introduced mandatory accessibility requirements for certain products and services across the EU. Accessibility is a central prerequisite for full participation and inclusion in our society.

The Directive's effective date is 28 June 2025. The EAA will deliver important benefits for persons with accessibility needs and also for businesses trading in accessible goods and services, who will benefit from harmonisation of standards across the Single Market. An Interdepartmental Group (IDG) has been established by the Department to facilitate engagement between the various Departments and Agencies affected by the legislation and oversee implementation.

The *European Disability Card Directive* aims to facilitate the freedom of movement of citizens with disabilities in the EU by removing barriers to travel across the EU. It will provide for the mutual recognition by Member States of a European Disability Card and an enhanced European Parking Card. This is intended to allow EU citizens in possession of the card(s) to avail of special conditions and treatment in relation to the provision of services, activities or facilities and parking conditions and facilities, when they travel to another EU Member State for a short stay. The Directive was published on 14 November 2024. Member States now have until 5 June 2027 (30 months) to transpose the Directive into national law and until 5 June 2028 (42 months) to introduce the Cards.

Ukraine

The Department continued to support Tusla in providing accommodation and services to children and families in Ireland, fleeing the war in Ukraine. Over the course of 2024 Tusla provided accommodation to some 299 unaccompanied minors from Ukraine with 157 remaining in care or accommodation at the end of 2024. To meet costs for residential care and other accommodation to separated children and young people arriving from Ukraine, €31.4m was provided in 2024. This funding includes provision for Family Resource Centres to provide supports in the community.

Separated Children Seeking International Protection (SCSIP)

Tusla continued to see significant numbers of separated children, arriving in Ireland from countries other than Ukraine. In 2024, the Department provided a budget of €13m to support Tusla in providing care and services to these children.

The level of demand in 2024 was such that this funding was not going to be adequate to meet the cost incurred in meeting the needs of separated children. The Department worked with Tusla to identify budget cost pressures and secured a Supplementary Estimate of €28.660m for Tusla, bringing the total funding for 2024 to €41.660m. At the end of 2024 there were 555 SCSIP not of a Ukrainian origin in receipt of services from Tusla, 298 in care or accommodated and 257 in receipt of an aftercare service.

Strategic Action 1.12

Working across sectors, we will lead the development and implementation of Ireland's successor National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy.

National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy 2024 – 2028 (NLIS II)

On 22 October 2024, the Government approved publication of the *second National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024–2028 (NLIS II)*. The Strategy was developed following a robust consultation process with LGBTIQ+ people, those who engage with LGBTIQ+ issues through their own lived experience, organisations who represent the views of the LGBTIQ+ community and with Government Departments and State Agencies. The NLIS II reflects a Whole of Government commitment to fostering a safe, fair, and inclusive society for the LGBTIQ+ community. The Pillars on which the NLIS II Strategy are built: Safety, Health and Wellbeing, Participation and Inclusion, and Equality and Non-Discrimination aim to address the continuing challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ people today.

Strategic Action 1.13

We will develop and implement high quality, evidence-based strategies and policies to help deliver better outcomes for people with disabilities.

The Disability Division of the Department has committed to developing policies in several specific areas of specialist disability services. Key among these, was the *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026 - Disability Services for Children and Young People*, which was launched in late 2023.

In 2024, the Department made significant progress in implementing various targeted actions from this plan. These actions are designed to address the challenges and improve the services experienced by children and their families.

Working with our partners, including HSE, and other disability stakeholders, 2024 saw progress in multiple areas including:

- Establishment and operation of the **Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026** governance structures
- Notwithstanding recruitment challenges, the Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT) workforce increased by 17% from 2023 to 2024. This represents a growth of +272 WTE staff working across CDNTs and a decrease in the vacancy rate from 29% to 22%
- **The Assessment of Need (AON) Waitlist Initiative** in 2024, enabled the procurement of 2,479 private AONs during June to December 2024 at a cost of €8.2m
- A total of 4,162 AONs were completed in 2024, a 30% increase on 2023

The Department also published the **Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026** in late 2023. This is a plan for increasing capacity in and access to disability services. The plan outlines actions for the period 2024-2026 under three key areas - providing better access to services, maximising impact of service delivery and improved planning and management through better information and systems

The Action Plan was supported in 2024 by €74m in New Development Measures funding to provide extra Residential Services places, Day Services places, Personal Assistance hours, new therapy assistants for Children's Disability Network Teams, extra Respite services and to further develop the National Neuro-Rehabilitation Strategy.

- 220 new priority 1 residential places were provided to people with disabilities, additionally, a total of 155,159 centre-based respite nights were provided
- 21,657 people were supported by HSE funded Adult Day Services
- 1.848m Personal Assistance hours were provided to people with disabilities as well as 3.85m Home Support hours

Action Plan monitoring and oversight structures were also initiated and embedded in 2024 with an Independent Monitoring Group established. This group met in July 2024 to review mid-year progress and again in 2025 to review the end-of-year position for 2024 for the Action Plan. The available service-delivery data indicates a strong performance across many of the Plan's key metrics.



Record levels of funding were secured for Disability Services in Budget 2025, announced in October 2024. This included an 11.6% increase amounting to €336m, bringing overall budget to €3.2 bn. Budget 2025 allocation supports delivery of the Action Plan through €42m in New Development Measures funding, and funding to provide for demographic change through the Existing Level of Service allocation.

In collaboration with the Department, service provider organisations, and disabled people, a HSE-led Personal Assistance Review Group was established in the latter half of 2023 to progress a programme of work to inform policy considerations. The work of the Group continued throughout 2024.

The Department continued to engage with the Department of Health to advance the development of a regulatory framework for home support service providers throughout 2024.

Furthermore, the *Autism Innovation Strategy* was launched on 26 August 2024. The Autism Innovation Strategy complements and enhances existing and emerging policy, including the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People was progressed during the year, by focusing on areas where there are bespoke needs for autistic people that are currently unmet within mainstream provision. The Strategy identifies 83 actions that can make a meaningful difference to the lives of autistic people, along with actions which provide a solid foundation for improved mainstream accommodation of autism, over the 18-month timeframe of the Strategy.

Engagement with the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, DHLGH, continued throughout 2024 on housing need for residential services across a range of measures including for people living in the community who now need a residential service, people aged under 65 inappropriately living in nursing homes, and people transferring from congregated residential services to community-based residential care. The HSE also commenced work to examine the status of current congregated settings.

A stakeholder event was held in September 2024 to discuss respite services. The output of the event will inform further considerations of the direction of respite services (including a working paper on respite to be finalised in 2025).

Record levels of funding were secured for Disability Services in Budget 2025, announced in October 2024. This included an 11.6% increase amounting to €336m, bringing overall budget to €3.2 bn.

Throughout 2024 the Disability Workforce capacity was strengthened through the continued implementation of the *Action Plan for Disability Services* and the *Roadmap for Disability Services for Children and Young People*.

Strategic Goal 2

We will support the provision of a range of quality and sustainable services within our legislative remit underpinned by strategic investment that meets the needs of individuals, families and society.

Strategic Action 2.1

We will support the provision of a range of quality and sustainable services within our legislative remit underpinned by strategic investment that meets the needs of individuals, families and society.

Community Based Disability Services

Throughout 2024 the Disability Workforce capacity was strengthened through the continued implementation of the *Action Plan for Disability Services* and the *Roadmap for Disability Services for Children and Young People*. The Interdepartmental Workforce Steering Group, chaired by the Minister of State for Disabilities, continued to direct efforts to address immediate and longer-term workforce supply.

Some key actions were achieved in 2024 to strengthen capacity and deliver an increased workforce in disability services, including:

- An Assistant National Director, Disabilities Workforce & Resourcing Lead was appointed by the HSE in May to drive disability workforce initiatives with particular emphasis on Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs). In 2024 the HSE and section 38 disabilities workforce increased by 963 WTE employees, representing a 45% increase on growth levels achieved in 2023
- Throughout 2024, The Department and the HSE intensified recruitment efforts across the HSE, section 38 and section 39 organisations⁸ to Education Institutions (HEIs) to promote careers in disability services. A range of initiatives to increase recruitment and retention in Health and Social Care Professions (HSCP) roles were developed and implemented including the first national CDNT recruitment campaign.

⁸ Section 38 organisations are funded to provide services on behalf of the Health Service Executive (HSE), whilst section 39 organisations, partly funded by the HSE, operate independently but provide essential health and social services that complement the public healthcare system. For more information, please see [here](#)

Additionally, the HSE has expanded the skills mix by developing the role of Health and Social Care Assistant (Therapy Assistant) and increasing practice education placements within CDNTs

- In line with the October 2023 WRC Agreement on funding for pay for workers in community and voluntary organisations and following agreement of a subsequent public sector pay deal, Departments, agencies, employer representatives and unions reconvened for talks at the WRC, in June. Progress was made on a new agreement over the second half of the year. Workers in section 39⁹ organisations benefited from the application of the terms of the 2023 Agreement, which included an increase of 3% from 1 March 2024. [Note this agreement also applied to NGOs who provide services to Tusla under section 56 of the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013.]

Strategic Action 2.2

We will develop and enhance youth service provision in Ireland, including through reform of youth funding programmes and strengthening of youth quality initiatives.

Youth Service Grant Scheme

The **Youth Service Grant Scheme** (YSGS) has been substantially reformed, allowing a pilot scheme to open in 2024. The YSGS was introduced in 1984 and is designed to provide funding to youth organisations providing universal youth work services to children and young people aged between 10 and 24. There are currently 30 organisations funded under the existing YSGS. The pilot scheme allowed for new organisations providing supports or activities to young people to support their social and personal development or organisations supporting the work of other youth organisations to submit funding applications.

Targeted Youth Employability Support Initiative

The **Targeted Youth Employability Support Initiative (TYESI) 2024-2027** was established in 2024 following the evaluation of a pilot scheme delivered in 2021-2022. The focus of the initiative to increase the 'employability' of the young people through developing work-related soft skills.

Focused interventions are intended to provide community-based support to assist young people to attain a level of confidence and agency to engage in a wide range of currently available progression routes, programmes, or services, to include Youthreach, Community Training Centres, Community Employment Schemes, Traineeships, Apprenticeships, Pathways to Work and/or to progress into employment.

Eighteen services were established, aimed at supporting circa. 3,000 young people by the end of 2027. Over 400 young people were supported in the second half of 2024 with in excess of 2,000 contacts recorded. These were primarily through one-to-one support, mentoring and small group work. The TYESIs are administered by sixteen Education and Training Boards and delivered by Youth Work Services. The aim of the TYESI is to engage and support the harder to reach young people aged 15 to 24 years who are not currently in employment, education or training.

Development of tools and methodologies to measure the impact of the TYESI from the perspective of the young participants, commenced in 2024 as part of measuring the quality of the overall initiative.

Integration support for Ukrainian Youth in Ireland.

In 2024 €2m was allocated for **integration grant supports to Ukrainian (migrant) young people**. This grant scheme supports youth organisations and youth clubs in assisting young people who have fled from war in Ukraine and are being integrated into communities throughout Ireland.

Volunteer Activation Fund

In 2024 the Department established a **Volunteer Activation Fund** to provide additional support to youth services organisations in recruiting, retaining, and supporting volunteers. The primary objective of the Fund is to increase the number of volunteers in the youth sector and the number of volunteer-led clubs operating across the country. A total of €812,500 is being made available by the Department to seven projects across 2024 and 2025 to meet these objectives. All projects funded under the Volunteer Activation Fund are being delivered by a national youth organisation funded under the Youth Services Grant Scheme of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Strategic Action 2.3

We will deliver a range of schemes and initiatives to ensure that children and families can access high quality and affordable Early Learning and Childcare (ELC). We will ensure that Government investment is utilised to best effect through monitoring of delivery, a robust programme of evaluation, and continuous quality improvement including feedback from service users.

National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

A number of enhancements to the *National Childcare Scheme* (NCS) were delivered in 2024 to improve the affordability and availability of Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) places for families availing of the NCS.

- As of September 2024, the NCS minimum universal subsidy was increased from €1.40 to €2.14 per hour. Additionally, the sponsor subsidy was increased to €5.30 per hour for children over 1 year of age. Lastly, new childminding regulations now allow families availing of a childminder to claim an NCS subsidy
- 218,352 children benefitted from NCS subsidies by year-end 2024 - a 20% increase on the previous year (2023).
- 106,551 children were enrolled on the ECCE programme in 2023/24.

Parent and Toddler Grants

Funding of €360,626 was allocated to *Parent and Toddler Groups* through local City/County Childcare Committees in 2024 with the emphasis on supporting Parent and Toddler Groups that offered a welcome to all families who were newly arrived in Ireland.

Core Funding

- €287 million was allocated to Core Funding in Year 2 (September 2023-August 2024) and 94% of providers signed up to the scheme
- €331 million was allocated to Core Funding in Year 3 (September 2024-August 2025)

Key achievements of the scheme to date include:

- High participation rates among services. While the 93% of providers participating in year 3 of the scheme representing a slight drop on the 94% figure achieved in year 2, the scheme attracted a higher number of providers in absolute terms than previous years

- A fee freeze in the majority of services and further developments to fee management including a fee increase assessment process and maximum fee caps
- A 20% increase in the number of services offering the NCS since 2022
- The Department supported the agreement of Employment Regulation Orders in 2022 that resulted in improved pay for more than 70% of those working in the sector and again in 2024 resulting in improved pay for more than 50% of those working in the sector
- Extended support for graduate-led provision outside the ECCE programme, with almost 3,000 services now receiving Graduate Premiums
- Improved stability of funding for services contributing to the lowest number of service closures in the last 6 years
- A significant expansion of capacity with analysis showing the increased capacity is the type of capacity that is in highest demand relative to supply.

Budget 2025 provided that the Core Funding allocation for Year 4 of the Scheme (September 2025 to August 2026) will exceed €390 million. This includes a ringfencing of €45 million of new funding to support updated Employment Regulations Orders.

Funding for upskilling

In 2024, 363 bursaries were awarded to graduates of Department approved degree programmes through the *Learner Fund Graduate Bursary Scheme*. In addition, the *Nurturing Skills Learner Fund* was launched in November 2023 for staff working in the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare sector. The fund makes a significant contribution to the upfront cost faced by Early Years Educators pursuing Level 7 and 8 qualifications in Early Learning and Care while continuing to work in the sector. The Nurturing Skills Learner Fund was oversubscribed. 617 completed applications were received, and of these, 350 applications were approved after the selection criteria was applied.

Workforce Qualifications

The Department maintains a list of qualifications that meet regulatory and contractual requirements for Early Learning and Care. *Better Start* continued to assist the Department in its ongoing assessment of applications for qualification recognition. Approximately 1,908 applications were processed in 2024. Included in this figure is the Student Fast-Track Process and the introduction of assessments of unfinished qualifications at Level 6 and higher on the National Framework for Qualification (NFQ).

Quality Improvement Supports

During 2024, the Department continued to provide oversight and funding, and support coordination and consistency, in quality practice supports provided by a range of organisations in the ELC/SAC sector, including **Better Start**, a national initiative established by the Department and hosted by Pobal.

Building Blocks

The **Building Blocks capital programme** was implemented in 2024. A scheme to offer Expansion Grants was made available which funded 23 early learning and care and school-age childcare services to undertake internal works to accommodate greater numbers of 1-3-year-olds. The Extension Grant scheme opened in 2024 and for the first time in many years offered support to community services to purchase or construct new buildings as well as funding both community and private services to undertake extensions to existing premises.

Strategic Action 2.4

We will deliver the latest phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) through efficient, robust, and customer-centric services to support the selection, arrival and integration of programme refugees across the country.

Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP)

The new phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) covering the period 2024 – 2027, was approved by Government on 27 March 2024.

The IRPP welcomed 276 refugees during 2024, including resettlements of Syrian nationals and humanitarian admissions from Afghanistan.

Refugees were resettled to the community following their orientation in one of the Reception and Orientation Centres (ROCs). The resettlement to the community was facilitated with the support of local authorities, who receive funding from IRPP. During 2024, 196 persons were resettled across 8 local authority areas.

Following a review in late 2023, the IRPP implemented a new **Community Sponsorship programme** from 1 July 2024 to assist with alleviating pressures on Local Authority housing for resettlement.

Resettlement selection missions were held in June and November 2024 in Türkiye and Bangladesh respectively. This was the first time for an Irish resettlement mission to Türkiye and the first to Bangladesh in almost 20 years.

Strategic Action 2.5

We will develop and implement a new model of accommodation and related supports for persons in the International Protection process, centred on a not-for-profit approach, and delivery of high-quality services to International Protection applicants.

Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy

A new **Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy (CAS) for International Protection applicants** was approved by Government on the 27 March 2024. The CAS seeks to reform the International Protection accommodation system over the medium to long-term with a move away from full reliance on private providers and towards a core of State-owned accommodation, delivering 14,000 State-owned beds by 2028. This will be supplemented, as required, by high standard commercial providers.

Accommodation in the new strategy is being delivered through the following multi-strand approach:

- Use of State land for prefabricated and modular units
- Conversion of commercial buildings
- Targeted purchase of medium and larger turnkey properties
- Design and build of new Reception and Integration Centres
- Upgrading of IPAS centres

Work has begun to deliver on the strategy with a focus on the delivery of modular accommodation and the targeted purchase of medium and larger turnkey properties through an Expression of Interest process and direct sourcing.

The CAS supersedes the White Paper to End Direct Provision and Establish a new International Protection Support Service, published in February 2021. Since the publication of the White Paper there had been an exponential growth in applications for International Protection with over 30,000 new arrivals since January 2022.

This increase placed significant pressure on the Department's capacity to source viable accommodation for new arrivals in 2023 and called for a re-examination of the underlying assumptions on which the White Paper was based. The delivery of State beds remains a key priority into 2025 and beyond.

Strategic Action 2.6

We will support Tusla in their commitment to continued improvements in service provision and performance to optimise outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Funding for Tusla:

For 2024, Tusla had a core budget allocation of €1,011.148m (€993.648m Current, and €17.5m Capital). In its financial reporting throughout the year, Tusla indicated that cost pressures in 2024 were likely to lead to a funding deficit at the end of 2024. The Department sought and secured Tusla a Supplementary Estimate of €52.0m on its core budget to cover its 2024 overspend including a double payment to foster carers in 2024, announced in budget 2025.

The final Tusla core budget for 2024, was €1,063.148m which was drawn down in full by Tusla by the end of year. This does not include other funding sources from the Department, such as Ukraine funding, International Protection, Early Years, which collectively totalled more than €50 million nor does it include funding provided by the Department of Education which also totalled more than €50 million.

€m	Current	Capital	Total
2024 Original Allocation	993.648	17.500	1,011.148
Supplementary Allocation	52.000	0.000	52.000
2024 Final Allocation	1,045.648	17.500	1,063.148

Barnahus model in Ireland

During 2024, the Department continued to work with Tusla on the *national implementation of the Barnahus model* in Ireland. This involves an interdepartmental and multiagency approach bringing together all relevant services under one roof to provide children who have, or may have, experienced sexual abuse with a coordinated and effective response. Barnahus aims to reduce re-traumatisation by ensuring timely access to child-centred care, minimising the number of interviews a child must undergo during the assessment of the alleged abuse, and ensuring that children's rights to safety, recovery and access to justice are fully upheld.

The Department chairs the Interdepartmental Group on which the stakeholder Departments (the Department, Department of Health, Department of Justice) and Agencies (Tusla, An Garda Síochána, HSE, Children's Health Ireland) are represented. It has a policy and advisory role for the overall service and oversees the development and implementation of the governance structure to support service delivery.

The Icelandic Barnahus model, adapted to an Irish context, commenced receiving referrals in Barnahus West (Galway) in 2020. It is fully operational in a building that was designed for and by children with a child friendly interview suite, medical and therapy rooms, and comfortable waiting and play areas for children and young people. Barnahus South (Cork) commenced receiving referrals in May 2024. Capital funding for a purpose-built space has been secured by Tusla and the HSE through budgetary process with their parent Departments. Immense work was carried out in preparing Barnahus East (Dublin) for its service commencement and is now its final stages of preparation.

Through the Joint EU-Council of Europe Project "Support the implementation of the Barnahus Project in Ireland", the Departments and Agencies engaged across several workstreams in 2024, including the development of a Communications Strategy, a Strategy and Action Plan to Scale Up Barnahus in Ireland, Data Protection documents, and a Trauma Informed Care training programme.

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)

The Department worked with the Centre for Effective Studies to progress the review of the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC). The main work of the review was completed, and the Department received a draft report in Q4 2024. The Department continued to engage with the CYPSC National Office to consider and progress the policy and strategic direction of CYPSC.



Since the publication of the White Paper there had been an exponential growth in applications for International Protection with over 30,000 new arrivals since January 2022.

“What Works”

Dormant Accounts funding of €1.27m was allocated to **What Works** in 2024 supporting a number of projects that sought to maximise the impact of prevention and early intervention measures. Projects supported included:

- €378,000 for the establishment of four pilot Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, young people and their families. These pilots form part of Ireland’s National Action Plan under the European Child Guarantee
- €402,000 was provided to Tusla to (inter alia) develop a pilot project that supported play therapy to support children to communicate or navigate difficult situations and a pilot to support parents and their infants for the first 18 months of a child’s life
- Tusla conducted a scoping and evaluation exercise of the 6 pilot Parent Fora⁹ sites, to assist the further roll out of parenting fora in new areas in 2025
- Tusla conducted a scoping exercise into the existing Parenting Hubs and associated parenting advisor roles around the country

Promote ESF+ and actively support the implementation and governance of the Tusla ESF+ Family Support Projects

- The **European Social Fund Plus** (ESF+) is the European Union (EU)’s main instrument for investing in people and supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Several family support projects are co-funded by the ESF+ and during 2024:
 - 15 of the 17 Family Support Practitioners, working with families living in IPAS accommodation and families from Ukraine, were recruited
 - Four new greenfield **Young Parent Support Programme** sites were established
 - Three existing Young Parent Support Programme sites were expanded in Donegal, Louth, and Kilkenny
 - Exchequer funding was secured, with co-financing from the ESF+, for the recruitment of a dedicated Parenting Support Adviser post in each of Tusla’s 30 new Network Areas External HR Governance and Sectoral Workforce Analysis Unit

The Department’s External HR Governance and Sectoral Workforce Analysis Unit continues to provide HR and industrial relations (IR) focused oversight of Tusla’s efforts in improving recruitment and retention in key areas, including Special Care and Social Work during 2024.

In 2024, the Department, through External HR and the Child Policy and Tusla Governance Division, worked intensively with Tusla to address retention and recruitment issues impacting Tusla’s Special Care service. In September 2024, Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform sanctioned a new pay scale for a **new “Special Care Worker” grade**. The new grade is aimed at increasing frontline staffing levels in Special Care settings. Following the introduction of this new grade, the Department has been providing oversight and support as Tusla works to introduce this newly sanctioned grade and associated higher pay scale. At the top of the scale, this new grade offers increases of over 20% for Social Care Workers, and over 3% for Social Care Leaders.

Influenced by a 2023 social work study commissioned by the Department, University College Cork introduced two new social work programmes which are expected to increase the number of annual social work graduates by 20%. The Department then supported University College Cork, the Health Service Executive, and Tusla, to introduce a two-year Social Work Apprenticeship Scheme, which provides apprentices with fully paid, on-the-job experience and skills while they pursue a third-level degree in social work. Tusla welcomed 36 apprentices to their staff base from the first cohort of apprentices undertaking this scheme, in September 2024.

In late 2024, the unit developed a **Social Work Changes Lives** media awareness campaign to improve public perception of social work as a profession and increase the number of social work students. The campaign will be run in early 2025. The unit also conducted an internal research paper on recruitment and retention issues in Social Work, in comparison with other countries, to inform our Department’s Priority Areas of Research Interest for 2025.

⁹ The 6 pilot Parent Fora refer to a program where six special schools in Dublin and Cork are participating in a pilot to enhance in-school therapy supports for children with special needs. This initiative, approved by the government, aims to increase therapy hours for children attending these schools and improve outcomes. It’s a key action under the Roadmap for Service Improvement for Disability Services for Children and Young People

Strategic Action 2.7

We will oversee and support continued improvements in service provision to optimise outcomes for people with disabilities including through stronger governance, financial reporting and performance monitoring.

An *Oversight Agreement between the Department and the HSE* reflecting the Department's responsibility for funding, policy and oversight of disability services, and the responsibilities of the HSE in delivering disability services, was put in place and implemented across the year. It provided structured arrangements for communications, reporting, accountability and governance. A Performance Engagement Model focusing on service delivery, workforce and financial performance was developed, agreed and implemented in 2024.

The Department ensured disability service considerations and resourcing were, and continue to be, appropriately factored into organisational and service delivery reforms under Sláintecare. Additional disability-specific Assistant National Director Disability posts are now in place at the HSE Centre and a new National Disability Office has been set up. This capacity will be supported by the recruitment of Disability leads at Health Region level and a complementary management and implementation structure at Integrated Health Area level within the HSE.

The HSE's *National Service Plan* was approved by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 17 December 2024 and following approval by the Minister for Health, was subsequently published by HSE in January 2025. Following record investment in the sector, the Plan sets out the services that will be delivered to people with disabilities during the year ahead. It also identifies a range of initiatives designed to address the known challenges within the sector.

In line with the *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People*, the Department's *Action Plan for Disability Services* and the *Roadmap for Service Improvement*, the HSE is in the process of developing a multi-annual strategic capital plan for disabilities. A Steering Group has been set up to drive progress with the development of this plan and will ensure that the plan is sufficiently advanced at an early date to inform the National Development Plan review discussions.

External HR Governance and Sectoral Workforce Analysis Unit

The Department's External HR Governance and Sectoral Workforce Analysis Unit continued to assist the HSE's efforts in improving recruitment and retention in key areas throughout 2024, including sanctioning of the *new Health and Social Care Assistant grade* in the HSE.

Strategic Action 2.8

We will assist people with capacity difficulties by supporting the Decision Support Service and the full and effective operation of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, as amended.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015

The *Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015* commenced in April 2023, along with most of the *Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Act 2022*, providing for a new system of tiered decision-support arrangements, abolishing wardship in the State for adults, and establishing the Decision Support Service. The role of the Decision Support Service is to promote the rights and interests of people who may need support with decision-making through a framework that emphasises the will and preference of each individual.

A total of 2,227 decision support arrangements were registered by the Decision Support Service in 2024, including Enduring Powers of Attorney, decision-making assistance agreements, co-decision-making agreements, and decision-making representation orders. These arrangements enable those with capacity difficulties to retain as much autonomy over their own decisions and lives as possible.

An Interdepartmental Group monitors and oversees the operation of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Acts, addressing issues as they arise. This Group will continue to meet to ensure the full and effective operation of the Assisted Decision-Making legislation, ensuring that those with capacity difficulties are supported in the most appropriate and least restrictive way possible, and that those wishing to plan ahead can have their wishes respected should they lose capacity at a later date.

In July 2024 Government announced that Ireland had ratified the *Hague Convention on the International Protection of Adults*. The Convention entered into force in the State on 1 September 2024. The Convention provides for greater legal harmonisation, cooperation and communication among Contracting States to the Convention, ensuring that persons lacking capacity abroad are protected in international situations. The Decision Support Service was nominated as the Central Authority for Ireland in respect of the discharge of certain duties under the Convention.

Strategic Goal 3

We will provide shelter to people fleeing conflict and support those in particular need to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their potential including children, young people and at-risk individuals.

Strategic Action 3.1

We will further develop Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) programmes and schemes to ensure that children and families who need services most can access them. This will include children living with economic disadvantage, children with additional needs and parents seeking to engage in or return to work.

Equal Start

Equal Start is a funding model and set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and meaningful participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage. Equal Start was launched in May 2024 delivering on a key commitment in the First 5 strategy (2019-2028), and initial roll-out commenced in September 2024. Equal Start includes a suite of universal supports, child-targeted supports, and setting-targeted supports to ensure every child and every early learning and childcare setting will benefit from a continuum of supports that reflects a continuum of need. Children to benefit from child-targeted supports will include children living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller children, Roma children, children availing of the National Childcare Scheme through a sponsor body, children experiencing homelessness and children in the International Protection system. 769 settings (serving 35,000 children - 4,700 from priority cohorts) identified as operating in a context of concentrated disadvantage have been given 'priority designation' and are now receiving additional supports.

Since September 2024, these settings have been receiving funding for additional staff that can be used to support engagement between the settings and families, as well as other child and family support services.

Budget 2025 also secured funding to support:

- The design and rollout of an **Additional Nutrition Programme** in services with the highest levels of need
- Rollout of the **Traveller Parenting Support Programme** with responsibilities on Family Link Workers to engage with Traveller parents of young children, supporting them to attend and participate in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare
- Development of new Family Community Liaison role and associated training, the roll-out of **Early Talk Boost** – an intervention for language delay - to settings with a priority designation
- The appointment of Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists to work in **Better Start** to promote inclusive Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare
- A review and rollout of **updated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines** and associated training

Traveller and Roma Education Strategy

The Department of Education led the development of the [**Traveller and Roma Education Strategy**](#) (TRES) in close collaboration with this Department and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The first implementation plan 2024 - 2026 was published alongside this strategy. The Strategy focuses on Traveller and Roma children and young people's success in three areas: participation in early learning and care, completion of the Leaving Certificate and entry to and completion of further and higher education. A consultation with children and young people on the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy was facilitated by Hub na nÓg.

Access and Inclusion Model

2024 saw the expansion of targeted **Access and Inclusion Model** (AIM) supports which extended critical supports for ECCE-aged children with disabilities to ensure those children can fully participate in and reap the benefits of quality early learning and care. From September 2024, children have been able to access their early learning and childcare setting for up to an additional 3 hours per day in ECCE term and 6 hours per day out of ECCE term.

Little Library

First 5 Little Library initiative ran a successful collaboration with Libraries Ireland again in 2024. Every young child finishing pre-school and starting school in September 2024 was offered a free book bag with storybooks and resources for parents on supporting the child's transition to school. Children received an invitation to attend their local library to pick up their bag and sign up for membership.

Over 25k children joined the library in 2024 because of this initiative.

Strategic Action 3.2

We will continue to strengthen the safeguarding and protection of children through leadership across Government, strong direction and support to Tusla and engagement with other stakeholders to enhance child welfare and protection.

Addendum to Children First National Guidance (2017)

Over the course of 2024, the Department developed a **draft addendum to Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)**, in line with legal advice and in consultation with the **Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group (CFIDIG)**. The purpose of the addendum is to bring the 2017 Guidance in line with Court of Appeal Decision in the case of McGrath v HSE (December 2023) which clarified the legal responsibilities of mandated persons in cases of adult disclosures of retrospective childhood abuse.

Statutory Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group

The statutory **Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group** (CFIDIG), chaired by this Department, includes representatives from every Department, the HSE, Tusla and An Garda Síochána. The Group met twice in 2024 and continued to focus on monitoring implementation of the Children First Act 2015. The annual report of the CFIDIG for 2023 was published in June 2024.

The report included contributions from Departments and Agencies outlining initiatives and actions to promote Children First and child protection and welfare in their sectors.

Support implementation of the Department's actions in Department of Justice's Family Justice Strategy and participate in the Working groups:

The Department continued to progress relevant strategic actions in the Department of Justice's [Family Justice Strategy 2022-2025](#) in 2024. A working group tasked with deciding on the location of the new national Guardian *ad litem* (GAL) service and preparing for the opening of the GAL office continued to meet. The GAL National Service will be initially located as an executive office within this Department. The group also assisted in the preparations for the establishment of the new GAL service.

Under Action 4.8 of the Family Justice Strategy, the Department continued to explore the use of **Alternative Dispute Resolution** (ADR) mechanisms to resolve secondary issues in public childcare plans and to build more positive relationships between all parties in public childcare proceedings.

The Department continued to participate in working groups established under the Family Justice strategy in 2024, including the working group on hearing the voice of the child in private family law and ADR processes and the family justice training working group.

Strategic Action 3.3

We will further develop the policy and strategic approach to children in care (Residential, Foster and Special Care) and care leavers, and work with stakeholders to enhance outcomes and ensure that the rights of children in care to access required services are upheld.

As part of Budget 2024 the Department secured a meaningful increase to the foster care allowance. From 1 January 2024 the rates of the foster care allowance increased to €350 per week for children aged under 12 and €377 per week for those over 12. The foster care allowance was further increased in November 2024, up to €400 per week for children aged under 12 and €425 per week for those over 12. From 2025, foster carers will receive an additional €3,900 over the course of the year.

Additional funding was secured to be used to provide a bonus payment at the start of each initial foster care placement from 2025. The bonus payment will aim to alleviate the substantial out-of-pocket expenses during the initial placement period, which can deter potential foster carers from coming forward and can strain the resources of those already fostering.

In addition, in 2024, a double week of the foster care allowance was paid to foster carers in respect of each child in foster care.

An **Interagency Group on Vulnerable Children** was established on an interim basis and first met in March 2024. Work has also commenced on the development of a new Alternative Care Policy Framework.

Strategic Action 3.4

We will conduct formal assessments of international protection applicants to determine any special reception needs for vulnerable persons, including children.

In early 2024, the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) Resident Welfare team continued to conduct Vulnerability Assessments with International Protection applicants.

The assessments, which were carried out by Assessment Officers and Social Workers, are to identify any applicants who have one or more vulnerabilities within the meaning of S.I. No. 230/2018 - European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018. As a result of the assessment, persons can be provided with support and signposting to relevant services.

However, the significant increase in numbers of arrivals and constraints on available accommodation across the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) portfolio placed extreme pressure on IPAS resources, including the Vulnerability Assessment Programme. As a result, a decision was made in March 2024 to procure an external contractor to manage this programme. This decision allowed for a redirection of internal resources to support operations across the Resident Welfare Team and IPAS overall, including to conduct a Vulnerability Triage of newly arrived single male applicants and identify those with very high needs requiring priority for accommodation when available. Under the triage programme, 6,613 assessments were conducted in 2024.

The Vulnerability Assessment Programme recommenced on 11th November 2024 for families applying for International Protection. Vulnerability Assessments are being offered to those who were queued for assessment prior to the suspension of the programme.



Strategic Action 3.5

We will oversee safe and secure care for young people sentenced or remanded by the Courts in a way which meets their health and education needs, supports them to move away from offending, and prepares them to return to their families.

The Department continued to provide oversight of Oberstown Children Detention Campus performance and compliance in 2024. The Department closely monitors daily occupancy levels of both remand and detention orders. The Minister is represented by a Department Official on the Board of Management and Board Sub-Committees.

Established under the Children Act 2001, Oberstown provides the best possible child centred, rights-based care and education to young people. This is provided through an integrated multi-professional approach that enables young people to address their offending behaviour and return successfully to society. The Department continues to work closely with the Oberstown management to ensure the Children's Rights Framework is at the core of the work done on the campus.

Strategic Action 3.6

We will continue to lead on innovations in prevention and early intervention to optimise outcomes for children, young people, their families and communities.

Clinical and Therapeutic Leads in Family Resource Centres

In May 2024, the Minister welcomed the establishment of Clinical and Therapeutic Leads in eight Family Resource Centres, ensuring that there is a Clinical Lead in all six Tusla regions. The role of the Lead is to develop therapeutic specialisms, responding to needs as they emerge, to expand the counselling service to offer additional counselling hours, and to expand play therapy services

Strategic Action 3.7

We will work with partners across Government, Local Authorities, Communities, NGOs, Agencies and EU Stakeholders to ensure that Ireland develops policies designed to:

- (i) meet its legal obligation to provide temporary protection for those fleeing the war in Ukraine and
- (ii) address Government's medium-term response for Ukraine.

Furthermore, we will continue to ensure we are meeting the Temporary Directive requirements in a manner which aligns with European colleagues and engaging as required in Europe with respect to policy developments.

Rapid Build and Modular Homes

Delivery of the *Rapid Build and Modular Home Programmes* was significantly advanced in 2024. In addition to the seven Rapid Build sites delivered in 2023, a further three additional sites were completed providing 262 more units to accommodate 1,072 Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BOTPs). This brings the total number of units delivered under the Rapid Build programme to 572 and the total number of BOTPs which can be accommodated in these more independent living arrangements to 2,312. Expectations included one final site to be delivered in 2025 to complete the programme, providing accommodation in a further 82 units for an additional 328 BOTPs. The proof-of-concept modular accommodation project located at Columb Barracks comprising 62 modular units with capacity for 257 BOTPs was also fully allocated in 2024.

The Department worked closely with Approved Housing Bodies, Tuath and the International Organisation for Migration to maximise occupancy of the rapid build and modular homes. Vacancy periods are minimised to ensure value for money, with 43 units reallocated quickly across all 11 locations in 2024.

Our collaborative work with other Government Departments, NGO and Local Authorities in supporting BOTP needs and concerns has facilitated their integration into local communities and surrounding areas. Many have availed of local employment and educational opportunities, thereby reducing the burden on the State and increasing their prospects for sustainable and independent living.

BOTP Accommodation Inspections

Following a tender process in late 2023 for an expanded inspections service, contracts were signed in February 2024, and a new inspections protocol was launched. This protocol centralises requests for inspections, prioritises those requests and allows for the monitoring of trending outcomes all under one team in the Ukraine Division. In addition to ad-hoc inspections, which are generally driven by a specific matter raised in relation to a property, the tender also provided for scheduled inspections of a proportion of the BOTP portfolio each year. A total of 229 inspections of accommodations for those fleeing the war in Ukraine were completed in 2024, a significant increase on the 72 inspections in 2023. Of the inspections completed in 2024, 147 of these were ad-hoc inspections and 82 were scheduled.

Citywest Transit Hub

The main function of the Department's team in the Citywest Transit Hub (CWTH) is the provision of emergency accommodation to newly arriving BOTPs. The number of BOTPs processed in 2024 decreased significantly from almost 31,000 in 2023 to a total of 6,887 in 2024.

Since 14 March 2024, the Government's new 90-day policy led to BOTPs being accommodated in Designated Accommodation Centres (DACs). People who were granted Temporary Protection prior to this have not been affected by the 90-day policy and continue to be accommodated elsewhere in properties paid for by the Department. In 2024 a total of 3,639 BOTPs were accommodated in DACs. A further 449 BOTPs arriving after the introduction of the 90-day policy were granted an exemption to the policy and accommodated in other properties across the Department's portfolio.

The team in Citywest worked closely with the Local Government Management Agency and individual Local Authorities throughout the country to provide emergency rest centres. These centres were systematically closed and returned to the community throughout 2024 as the need for emergency beds declined.

The Department's operations commenced in the Emmaus Centre on 26 March 2024, providing overnight and weekend accommodation for newly arrived BOTPs who were subsequently transported to the Citywest Transit Hub for processing on the next working day. In 2024, 5,283 people were accommodated overnight at the centre.

Ukraine Strategy and Stakeholder Management

The Department successfully implemented the new 90-day Accommodation Policy for BOTPs. Since the policy came into effect on 14 March 2024,

4,238 people have been accommodated in a 90-day Designated Accommodation Centre, representing 75% of all of those seeking state accommodation. To date, 3,566 people have departed 90-day designated accommodation centres, with 52% moving into private accommodation in Ireland, and a further 34% moving into accommodation through a government scheme.

This time-bound accommodation policy is in line with policies in other European Member States. The supports provided through Designated Accommodation Centres under the policy have contributed towards people moving to independent living in Ireland. These supports include information on accessing housing (either privately or through the Pledge or Offer a Home schemes), employment supports, English language supports and information sessions on Irish life and culture to facilitate integration.

The success of the policy has also allowed for the reduction in contracted capacity in the Designated Accommodation Centres and has supported the overall consolidation of the Department's accommodation portfolio, leading to cost reductions.

Strategic Action 3.8

We will continue to evolve and improve our organisational processes, capacity and capability so that we can respond to our obligations in meeting the Temporary Protection Directive effectively.

A technology solution (P2P) was successfully launched by the Department for the portfolio of Ukraine accommodation providers on a staged basis throughout 2024. It allowed the providers to engage with the Department through an online portal in relation to contract renewals and to initiate any contract terminations. The system also allows the Department to process contract renewals in a more rigorous and efficient way, ensuring that all the required documentation has been gathered during the renewal process. Over 800 contract renewals have been initiated through P2P since March 2024, while over 400 termination notices have been issued. The P2P system also ensures that accurate statistical information is readily available. The positive impact of the successful design and implementation of the P2P system was recognised at the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards where it was the award winner under the "Delivering in a Dynamic Environment" category.

Strategic Goal 4

We will promote the development of a progressive, respectful and equal society, including for persons with disabilities, in line with a rights-based approach, and informed by the experiences of past generations and seek to respond to the needs of survivors.

Strategic Action 4.1

We will continue to support the State's response to the priority needs and concerns of survivors of institutional trauma, and to the Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

The Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme

The Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme opened for applications on 20 March 2024. The Payment Scheme provides financial payments and health supports to eligible applicants in recognition of their experience while resident in mother and baby and county home institutions in Ireland. In the period up to the end of December 2024 the Payment Scheme received 5,997 applications and made financial payments totalling €53,733,500. In addition, 860 medical cards were issued by the HSE on foot of eligibility being notified to them by the Payment Scheme Office and 408 applicants living abroad were provided with the once-off health support payment of €3,000 in lieu of the medical card.

Second annual report on implementation of Government's Action Plan.

The second annual report on the implementation of the Government's Action Plan for Survivors and Former Residents of Mother and Baby and County Home Institutions was published. Quarterly updates were also sent directly to survivors throughout the year.

Special Advocate for Survivors of Institutional Abuse

Ms Patricia Carey was appointed as **Special Advocate for Survivors** on 25 March 2024. Operating independently, the role of the Special Advocate is to promote the collective interests of survivors and to amplify their voices as an essential input to Government deliberations on matters which affect them. In this important role, Patricia has started a significant engagement process,

meeting and engaging with individual survivors and people affected, with survivor groups, as well as with partner and support organisations in Ireland and overseas.

Office of the Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam

In 2024 the **Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam** continued the necessary preparatory works for the excavation, recovery, identification (if possible) and reburial of the children's remains at the Tuam site. Preliminary ground works were completed in late 2024. The Office continued to engage with families, survivors and advocates as a priority in 2024 and a Community Liaison was appointed to support engagement with local residents. The website, www.odait.ie, also went live in 2024.

National Centre of Remembrance

In March 2024 Government approved the preliminary business case for the full **National Centre of Remembrance** campus comprising a museum and archive, social housing, educational and community facilities. A major milestone was reached in November 2024, when an application for planning permission was submitted to Dublin City Council by the Office of Public Works (OPW). A series of in-person engagement events for survivors and affected persons, their families and advocates commenced in late 2024 (and early 2025). All feedback gathered through these events will help to inform the ongoing work on the National Centre, and future engagement.

Legislation

Legislation that provides for the preservation of privately-held administrative and other records related to Ireland's institutional past was commenced in November 2024. The legislation forms **Part 3 of the Maternity Protection, Employment Equality and Preservation of Certain Records Act 2024**.

Access to Information

The Department continued to meet its obligations to provide access to records for individuals in 2024 by responding to 202 subject access requests from individuals and 20 FOI requests in respect of Commission records. It continues to support individuals who may wish to make a subject access request and operates a dedicated telephone information line providing information to callers on procedures for making requests. In addition in 2024, the Department received 4 requests for information from Tusla for the purposes of progressing a trace under section 34 of the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022.

Magdalen Redress

The Department continued to receive applications from women who had been in Magdalen institutions and to provide redress to them under the *Magdalen Restorative Justice Ex-Gratia Scheme*.

Strategic Action 4.2

We will develop policies and legislation to promote gender equality and wider equality and to address barriers preventing individuals from full participation in Irish society.

Equality Data Strategy

Work continued in 2024 to develop a *National Equality Data Strategy*, led by the Central Statistics Office in partnership with the Department. The Strategy is intended to improve the collection of all equality data and will improve the ability of public bodies to monitor the impact of policies and initiatives and will complement the Equality Budgeting initiative led by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is intended to publish the Strategy in 2025.

Gender Mainstreaming

The Department continued to participate in an EU Commission funded Technical Support Instrument (TSI) project to advance gender mainstreaming and gender responsive budgeting in Ireland. The project includes a number of beneficiary authorities including Spain, Portugal, Germany, Greece, Italy and Romania. Commenced in 2022 and to conclude in August 2025, Ireland's project will provide extensive training and guidance on all aspects of gender and equality impact assessment, piloting new processes to enhance gender and equality mainstreaming throughout the budgetary cycle.

The ultimate goal of the *TSI project on Gender Mainstreaming* is to build the capacity of Government Departments to integrate gender equality into the budgetary and the policy making process. As a longer term impact, the project can contribute to reducing gender disparities and to a wider use of gender mainstreaming and budgeting tools in public policy in the participating beneficiary states. Wider use of gender mainstreaming and budgeting tools has the potential to bring economic benefits from more efficient use of human capital and resources.

Review of the Equality Acts

In November 2024, the Government approved a draft *General Scheme of legislative provisions to reform the Equality Acts* and to respond to issues raised in the review of the Equality Acts. The General Scheme was informed by research commissioned by the Department as well as the submissions received during the review.

The main provisions of the General Scheme are:

- Repeal of section 19 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003
- Changes to the definition of reasonable accommodation
- Amendments to transpose Article 5 of the EU Pay Transparency Directive
- Amendment to the definition of 'vocational training'
- Removal of differential pay for a disabled person
- Amendments to the redress mechanisms under the Equality Acts
- Amendment to the concept of victimisation
- Compounding effect of discrimination

The General Scheme was referred to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Equality for pre-legislative scrutiny in 2025.

Strategic Action 4.3

We will support Government to develop proposals for a Constitutional Referendum on Gender Equality.

Referenda

A referendum was held on 8 March 2024 on proposals for amendments to the Constitution based on the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. The proposed amendments to the Constitution were:

- To amend Article 41 of the Constitution to provide for a wider concept of Family
- Delete Article 41.2 of the Constitution to remove text on the role of women in the home, and to insert a new Article 42B to recognise family care

Neither proposal was accepted by the public.

Strategic Action 4.4

We will facilitate the development and collective oversight of a whole of government programme of work under the next National Disability Strategy to further advance rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

On 8 October 2024 government announced its decision to accede to the *Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD). The Optional Protocol came into effect in Ireland on 30 November 2024. Accession to the Optional Protocol demonstrates Ireland's commitment to the continued and progressive realisation of the rights and obligations set out in the UNCRPD.

National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030

The development process for the next *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People* was progressed to an advanced stage. In 2024, the National Disability Authority, (on behalf of DCDE), led and completed an extensive public consultation process that included 5 town hall events, 484 responses to a national survey, 34 focus groups and more than 80 written submissions.

This has informed ongoing and extensive engagement with Departments across government and Disabled Persons' Organisations for the finalisation of what will be an ambitious and transformative whole-of-government strategy to advance the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Ireland.

Strategic Action 4.5

We will promote inclusion by funding public information campaigns and disability inclusion projects.

Disability Participation and Awareness Fund

On 26 February 2024, the *Disability Participation and Awareness Fund* of €3.5 million was announced to support people with disabilities to participate in community life. The purpose of the fund is to promote disability awareness and training in local communities, increase participation among disabled people in social, cultural, arts and sporting activities, and support pathways for young people with disabilities in transitioning through education. The funding was dispersed in partnership with Rethink Ireland, to a range of successful projects across four separate themes. This funding stream further supports Ireland's commitments under the United Nations on the Convention of Rights for Person with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Communications

The Communications Unit collaborated with colleagues in divisions across the Department to support the delivery of six major public information campaigns throughout 2024. The campaigns were as follows:

- **Supporting Parents:** Promoting a cross-government initiative that brings together trusted parenting resources in one place
- **National Childcare Scheme:** Driving public awareness of supports available to parents to assist with cost of early learning and childcare
- **Accommodation Policy Changes:** An international campaign focused on raising awareness of the changes to Ireland's accommodation policy for those fleeing the war in Ukraine
- **Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme:** An international public information campaign encouraging people eligible to apply for redress
- **Gender Pay Gap Reporting:** Informing businesses of their obligations under new gender pay gap legislation and ensuring they comply
- **UNCRC:** A public information campaign for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Campaigns were carefully monitored to ensure goals were achieved, with many targets being exceeded. The Department also explored new, innovative ways to ensure public information campaigns reached our target audiences, including continued investment in digital and social channels. This approach reflects the importance, breadth and scope of the Department's public information campaigns, and their importance in promoting the development of a progressive, respectful and equal society.

The Department also reported to An Coimisinéir Teanga on the use of the Irish language in paid advertising for the first time in 2024, in line with our requirements under the Official Languages Act 2003.

Digital Assistive Technology

The Government of Ireland entered into a funding agreement with the World Health Organization (WHO) to progress Digital Assistive Technology initiatives including the development of evidence-based guidance for Member States on strengthening access to assistive technology and improving equitable access.

In addition to this Global Lead Agreement, a separate domestic Project Collaboration (PCA) was developed between the Department and the WHO to progress three key objectives which are:

- Workforce Optimisation through the scaling of Digital Assistive Technology
- Conducting a Country Assessment of domestic Assistive Technology Capacity (ATA-C)
- Advancing one of two Global Workforce and Digital Assistive Technology Expos in Ireland

The Department is currently engaging with the WHO Regional Office for Europe in progressing the assessment of Ireland's Assistive Technology capacity. This will identify the assistive technology capacity of Ireland's health service, which will support the direction of the Government and HSE in assistive technology investment.

Disability Participation and Awareness Fund

On 26 February 2024, the €3.5m **Disability Participation and Awareness Fund** was announced and opened. Applications were invited for projects supporting people with disabilities to participate in community life by helping to promote disability awareness and training in local communities, increasing participation among disabled people in social, cultural, arts and sporting activities, and supporting pathways for young people with disabilities in transitioning through education. The funding was dispersed in partnership with Rethink Ireland, and awardees were announced in August 2024.

A further iteration of the Fund was announced and opened in September 2024, which invited applications for projects under four thematic strands:

- Community, sports and physical participation
- Participation in arts and cultural activities
- Employment and apprenticeships
- Projects and initiatives in the area of neurodiversity.

The Communications Unit collaborated with colleagues in divisions across the Department to support the delivery of six major public information campaigns throughout 2024.

Strategic Goal 5

We will work in partnership with the people we serve and across Government Departments, public bodies and civil society to achieve better outcomes.

Strategic Action 5.1

We will lead Ireland's effort to realise the right of children and young people to have a voice in decisions that affect their individual and collective lives through effective legislation, policy and service provision.

Participation Play and Recreation

The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making Action Plan 2024-2028 was published in April 2024. The Action Plan brings a renewed focus on reaching and including seldom heard children and young people in national participation structures and building the capacity of decision makers to consult with them meaningfully. The overall aim of the Action Plan is to strengthen and promote the inclusion of children and young people in decision-making at all levels: in the home, in school, in their community, at national level, and in the digital world.

A review of the implementation of the *Comhairle na nÓg Five Year Development Plan* was completed, indicating that 62% of actions are fully completed or broadly on track for completion at this mid-point. A review of the Comhairle na nÓg funding model was also commenced.

The National Youth Assembly was convened three times, supported by the National Participation Office, providing input to Ireland's Climate Action Plan and the Action Plan for Our Rural Futures, and to the forthcoming Gender Equality Strategy.

The first in a series of practical, evidence-based toolkits for child and youth participation was published by Hub na nÓg, the centre for excellence in participation. The Toolkit focusses on supporting adults to hear the voices of very young children (birth to 5 years) in decision making processes.

Participation initiatives with children and young people were undertaken and targeted training provided to support the work of Departments of Education, Health, Rural and Community Affairs, Public Expenditure, Housing, Environment Climate and Communications, Department of an Taoiseach, Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Local Authorities, and Civil and Public Servants.

Dáil na nÓg, the biennial youth Parliament, was held for the first time in 2024 in the Houses of the Oireachtas, with 157 delegates from all 31 Comhairle na nÓg attending.

National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality

The Department in association with the National Participation Office and a dedicated Youth Advisory Group convened the *National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality* on 24 September 2024. This assembly gathered 45 young delegates from across the country to address ongoing issues of gender inequality. The assembly was specifically designed to provide young people with an opportunity to discuss how gender inequality affects their lives, explore solutions, and make recommendations that could be integrated into national policy, in particular the next National Strategy for Women and Girls.

National Education for Sustainable Development Stakeholder Forum

During 2024, the Department organised the annual *National Education for Sustainable Development Stakeholder Forum*. The event facilitated dialogue with key stakeholders and partners in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

While the Forum is traditionally targeted at educators, young people are involved in most areas of education. Our National Participation Office established an *Education for Sustainable Development Youth Advisory Group* to increase youth representation at the event. The group had a set of guiding principles in line with the nine basic requirements set out by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The Group advised on the selection of a youth speaker, the theme of an inter-generational workshop, potential organisations to be represented at stands in the main hall, and representation of young people at the event including an inter-generational panel. The Group included 12 members taken from the National Youth Assembly and different Comhairle na nÓg around Ireland. The creation of the Youth Advisory Group was a new initiative to the Forum and was considered a highlight of the event.

Play and Recreation

The Department continued to provide funding in 2024 to support the right of all children and young people to play and recreation, as enshrined in Article 31 of the UNCRC.

- Under the annual capital grant scheme for play and recreation, €500,000 was allocated across the country to Local Authorities for the refurbishment and development of playgrounds and play areas.
- National Play Day 2024** (which took place on any day or combination of days between 13-21 July) saw 30 Local Authorities each receive funding of €3,000 to promote play opportunities for children and young people all across the country. The theme for 2024 was 'Time to Play!', recognising the importance of both making and taking playful opportunities in your day.
- The Department hosted a seminar on **Participation, Play and Recreation** on 30 October 2024, which brought together a range of professionals, practitioners, and young participants, representing their Local Authority, to celebrate and explore the transformative power of play, the importance of recreation, and the value of meaningful participation by children and young people in decision-making.

The Department commissioned a suite of reports, which were launched at the event and will be used to inform any future plans in relation to play and recreation:

- A Scoping Review - Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents**
- Outdoor Play and Recreation Provision for Children and Adolescents: A National Review for Ireland**
- Examples of Good Practice: Play and Recreation - Local Authority and International**

Strategic Action 5.2

We will continue to oversee the implementation of First 5 and continue to contribute to the development of cross Government policy taking shared ownership for delivery. We will use our comprehensive stakeholder engagement framework to consult with children, families, the Early Learning and Care and School Aged Childcare providers and staff, and other stakeholders in developing policy and overseeing implementation.

First 5 Annual Implementation Report

The 2023 *First 5 Annual Implementation Report* was published in July 2024. This report details progress in 2023 on over 125 actions which are being progressed across 10 Government Departments, the HSE and Tusla as well as 31 delivery partners as part of the First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025. 80% of all 2023 commitments were met at the time of publication.

Wild Child Awards

First 5 sponsored the *Wild Child Awards 2024*. The Wild Child award is presented to the event or project that most successfully encourages children and families to get outdoors to explore their local heritage and learn about biodiversity. The Department also sponsored research on embedding Education for Sustainable Development in Early Years through New Foundations Research Scheme 2024. The aim is to support research, networking and collaboration for the purpose of enhancing understanding and influence attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4.7. This includes issues such as equity, poverty reduction, economic growth, social exclusion, hunger, and climate change.



Stakeholder Engagement

Over 2024, there were 4 meetings of the **Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum**, 9 meetings of the **Administrative and Regulatory Simplification Sub-Group**, 6 meetings of the **Workforce Recruitment and Retention** and 5 meetings of the **Core Funding Financial Reporting Stakeholder Group**. A range of consultations were also undertaken, including a consultation on the draft childminding regulations and the National Plan for Irish Language Provision in Early Learning and Care / School-Age Childcare.

The North East Inner City Initiative (NEIC)

The Department actively contributed to the Government's NEIC initiative, and under the new NEIC Strategy, chairs a group focused on supporting children, young people, and family wellbeing in the area. Through 2024, the Department engaged with the NEIC's work on projects linked to after-schools, youth clubs and parenting supports.

Strategic Action 5.3

We will implement equality strategies through proactive partnership with key stakeholders, including through cross Government collaboration.

National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024 – 2028 (NTRIS II)

The new **National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024 – 2028 (NTRIS II)** and its first **2-year Action Plan for 2024 – 2026** were approved by Government and announced on 31 July 2024.

NTRIS II represents a whole of Government approach to ensuring and facilitating the full inclusion and active participation of Travellers and Roma in Ireland's social, economic, cultural, and political life. Its vision is of a safe, fair, and inclusive Ireland where Travellers and Roma are supported to lead inclusive, healthy, and fulfilling lives. NTRIS II was developed on the basis of extensive consultations with representatives of the Traveller and Roma communities, Government Departments, State Agencies, and civil society groups.

LGBTIQ+

In 2024 an **independent review of the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019 – 2021** was carried out and the final report was published in June 2024. The Review highlighted progress on many of the Strategy's goals.

As already set out under Strategic Action 1.12 above, the **new National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024 - 2028** was developed and approved by Government in October 2024. The Strategy provides a roadmap towards equality for LGBTIQ+ people in Ireland over the coming years, seeking to provide for a safe, fair, and inclusive Ireland where people are supported to live inclusive, healthy, and fulfilling lives, whatever their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. The actions under the four pillars on which the Strategy is built - Safety, Health and Wellbeing, Participation and Inclusion and Equality and Non-Discrimination, seek to address the challenges LGBTIQ+ people continue to face in their daily lives.

Following a successful **LGBTI+ Community Services Funding Call in 2024**, 15 projects received funding totalling €998,916. These projects aim to address gaps in LGBTI+ services, including in rural communities, and to support existing LGBTI+ initiatives to maintain and enhance services, ensuring that LGBTI+ persons are supported in realising their rights. Projects funded include:

- A daily freephone national LGBT Helpline service
- The provision of nationwide educational workshops on LGBTI+ inclusion in schools, youth centres and workplaces
- The inclusion of LGBTI+ groups who are at risk of marginalisation in GAZE LGBTQIA+ Film Festival
- The continued rollout of LGBTQ+ Quality Mark for Post-Primary Schools and Alternative Education Centre
- The creation or continuance of peer support groups for LGBTI+ refugees and those seeking international protection, LGBTQ+ women, older LGBTI+ persons, LGBTI+ persons from a migrant background and persons who are intersex

Under the LGBTI+ research programme, the following was published in 2024:

- **'Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland: The National Study on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ Communities in Ireland'**. (Higgins, A., Downes, C., O'Sullivan, K., de Vries, J., Molloy, R., Monaghan, M., Keogh, B., Doyle, L., Begley, T. and Corcoran, P. (2024))
- The following research was progressed in 2024:
 - **Wellbeing and Mental Health in the Older LGBTQI+ Population in Ireland**. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin. (Higgins A; Downes C; O'Sullivan K; de Vries J; Molloy R; Keogh B; Doyle L; Begley T; Monahan M.)

- **Mental Health in the Irish LGBTQI+ Population with Disabilities.** Dublin: Trinity College Dublin. (Higgins A; Downes C; O'Sullivan K; de Vries J; Molloy R; Monahan M; Keogh B; Doyle L; Begley T; Corcoran P.)
- **Not Being Out on Your Own: Research on the Needs and Experiences of Parents of LGBTQI+ Children and Young People.** Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. (Hurley, E. & Garner)
- **Recognising Preferred Gender for Under 16s in Ireland.** (Fenton-Glynn C; Martin S; Ryan F.)
- **Strategies for Promoting Non-LGBTI+ Youth Allyship with LGBTI+ Young People in Ireland.** (Singleton S; Pachowicz M; Ó Críodáin R, Murphy E.)

The Department also supported the Central Statistics Office in its work to develop questions on sexual orientation and gender identity for the Census Pilot Survey, which took place in September 2024. The [Census Pilot Survey](#) took place in 44 locations across six counties throughout September. New questions on gender and sexual orientation were tested as part of this pilot survey.

Progressing legislation to ban Conversion Practices

In 2024, work progressed to advance legislation to prohibit conversion practice in Ireland. Given the complex and sensitive nature of proposed legislation key policy principles were carefully considered and will underpin the legislation to ensure that individuals are protected from harmful conversion practices while the necessary and appropriate services for those with concerns in areas of sexual orientation and gender identity are not affected.

The National Strategy for Women and Girls

The Programme for Government, “Our Shared Future” (2020), included a commitment to develop and implement a new National Strategy for Women and Girls. In 2024, the Department contracted IPSOS B&A for the consultation phase for the development of the successor Strategy.

As part of the consultation phase a **National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality** was convened in September 2024 to gain the views of young people on gender equality and on priorities for the next National Strategy for Women and Girls.

Consultations & Engagement for UN Reporting Obligations

During 2024, the Department held a number of dedicated consultations with relevant stakeholders on gender equality to inform the State's **8th Report under the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women** (CEDAW) and Ireland's Review on the 30th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the State's **10-12th Report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination** (CERD).

Ireland's Report for **Beijing+30¹⁰** was submitted to the UN in August 2024 for inclusion in the review process scheduled to take place in 2025 at the 69th Commission on the Status of Women. The **8th State Report under CEDAW was submitted to the CEDAW Committee** in November 2024, while the **10-12th State Report was submitted to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** (CERD) in February 2025.

The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making

In 2024 the Department, along with the National Participation Office supported young people to engage with key decision-makers through cross government and national level fora including the National Economic Dialogue, the National Climate Stakeholder Forum, the Sustainable Mobility Transport Forum, Road Safety Authority, and others. Young people were also nominated to be members of the Online Health Taskforce and the Young Ireland Advisory Council.

Strategic Action 5.4

We will engage with EU institutions, and lead and coordinate Ireland's implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and response to the UN Committee's Concluding Observations.

The Department participated in the visit to Ireland in May 2024 of the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture. The Committee visited Oberstown Children Detention Campus and the Ballydowd Special Care Unit, which is operated by Tusla.

¹⁰ Beijing+30 refers to the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is a comprehensive plan to achieve the equal rights of all women and girls. Agreed by 189 governments in 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Platform centres on 12 areas of action – referred to as “critical areas of concern”, including jobs and the economy, political participation, peace, the environment, and ending violence against women.

We will actively engage at relevant EU and International levels to promote Ireland's interests and values, and to inform and influence policy, regulations and strategies.

In its concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Ireland "conduct a comprehensive review of all its legislation to align it with the Convention". In March 2024, the Department engaged Professor Ursula Kilkelly in the Child Rights Centre in UCC and her team to conduct this legislative review and this work commenced in Autumn 2024. Two underpinning pieces of work were completed by UCC and reviewed by DCDE in 2024, a review of a broad scope of international literature, as well as a gap analysis report on existing policy and implementation as well as the full range of primary and secondary legislation. The final report will incorporate the findings of these reviews.

A public awareness campaign on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ran for four weeks across September and October 2024.

Strategic Action 5.5

We will actively engage at relevant EU and International levels to promote Ireland's interests and values, and to inform and influence policy, regulations and strategies.

EU Presidency

The Department began planning for the responsibilities that will arise for it as part of Ireland's EU Presidency which will take place from July-December 2026. This will include Ministerial-level meetings, working party meetings and EU conferences and events in Ireland and Brussels. The Department participated actively in the Inter-Departmental planning structures that have been established to plan for the EU Presidency.

European Union

The Department continued to participate in EU working parties and committees to negotiate on areas under its remit. In 2024 agreement was achieved on a Directive to establish a new **EU Disability Card**. These cards are due to come into operation in 2028, as proof of disability across the EU for special conditions such as priority access or free entry to museums and other facilities, or lower fares on transport services.

The Department led the negotiations for Ireland on the **Standards for Equality Bodies Directive**, work on the transposition of which has now begun. It also had policy responsibility, with the Department of Justice, for the Reception Conditions Directive and the Union Resettlement Framework, which came into force in June 2024 as part of the Migration Pact.

North-South Ministerial Council:

Over 2024, Department officials continued to meet with colleagues from Northern Ireland under the aegis of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in relation to the Child Protection agenda. This officials group covers areas of mutual interest, and it progresses a Work Programme, which includes Information/knowledge exchange, monitoring of emerging issues relating to vulnerable groups of children, social work practice, and cross border co-operation on specific child welfare and protection initiatives. The three-year work programme ran up to the 31 December 2024. Colleagues in both jurisdictions worked together to draft the next three-year work programme.

The Department actively also engaged the NSMC in cooperation on early years policy and youth exchanges. An NSMC Plenary meeting between the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive was held in Dublin in December 2024, and the issue of cooperation on common issues linked to the legacy of Mother and Baby institutions was discussed.

Council of Europe

The Department continued to participate in Council of Europe fora in areas under its remit. These included the Steering Committees on Anti-discrimination, Diversity, and Inclusion (CDADI) and for the Rights of the Child (CDENF). The Department also contributed to the Council of Europe's emerging work through their Committee of Experts on Artificial Intelligence, Equality and Discrimination and the Consultation Group on the Children of Ukraine.

The Department supported the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance's visit to Ireland from 4-7 November 2024 as part of its Sixth Monitoring Cycle to assess the actions being taken by Ireland to tackle racism and intolerance.

Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

In October 2024, the Government received the 5th Opinion on Ireland under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM). In the last Quarter of 2024, the Department commenced the preparation of the response to the 5th Opinion on Ireland in collaboration with all relevant Government Departments to meet the deadline for submission to the Council of Europe in February 2025.

Revised European Social Charter to Government

In July 2024, the Department brought Articles 8§3 and 27§1(c) of the Revised European Social Charter to Government for ratification. Article 8§3 aims to ensure that mothers who are nursing their babies are entitled to sufficient time off work for that purpose. Article 27§1(c) aims to ensure measures are taken to develop or promote child daycare services and other childcare arrangements.

Ireland's ratification of these Articles shows the commitment to supporting workers with family and care responsibilities, as well as making quality early learning and care more affordable and accessible. In particular, ratification shows the very substantial progress achieved in relation to early learning and childcare services, especially in areas such as quality, affordability, and supporting inclusion of children from vulnerable groups. The ratification of these Articles of the Revised Charter will also help drive gender equality in Ireland's labour market, as lack of access to these services has previously been identified as a barrier to workplace equality.

United Nations (UN) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

In February 2024, Departmental officials joined a State delegation in Geneva for the *4th review of progress on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). They reported

on a range of achievements since Ireland's 2015 review, including the Gender Pay Gap Act, improved access to and affordability of childcare, and the development of the new Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.

The Department also provided support to civil society to participate at the UN ICESCR hearing. The UN Committee observations and recommendations followed in March 2024 and the Department is now working to ensure recommendations under its remit are addressed.

UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

In July 2024, the Department prepared and submitted a *mid-term report on behalf of the State under the Universal Periodic Review* (UPR), a peer review of the full human rights records of all UN countries. The report outlined progress on recommendations since Ireland's last review in 2021. This exercise will inform preparations for the full State report due in July 2026, including consultations with stakeholders.

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

In November, the Minister announced Ireland's *formal accession to the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, to strengthen accountability on how we uphold rights under the Convention.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Ireland was invited to co-chair the OECD's inaugural Forum on Gender Equality which took place in Paris on 10-11 June 2024. The then Minister of State Joe O'Brien represented Ireland as a co-chair of the Forum and spoke at the event.

The OECD published a new report in April 2024 on a whole of Government approach to tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people in Ireland. *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework* was the final output from a joint project between the Department and the OECD, funded under the European Commission's Technical Support Instrument (TSI). The report was launched in tandem with a workshop for policy makers to explore how best to implement its recommendations.

The Department continued to engage with the OECD on developing institutional capacity in relation to gender mainstreaming and equality budgeting. The Department participated on the OECD's Gender Mainstreaming and Governance Committee and its Network on Gender Budgeting, the latter in cooperation with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform.



Since the publication of the White Paper there had been an exponential growth in applications for International Protection with over 30,000 new arrivals since January 2022.

Strategic Action 5.6

We will review how we communicate with our stakeholders and develop and implement a comprehensive Communications Strategy to support delivery of the Department's strategic objectives.

New Department Communications Strategy

A review of the current Department Communications Strategy which runs from 2022-2025 was undertaken in 2024. This review provided guidance on successful elements in the strategy, as well as areas for improvement. On foot of this review, a decision was taken to begin drafting a new Department Communications Strategy.,

The Department's Communications team worked with colleagues across the Department to deliver several multi-platform communications campaigns throughout 2024. The creative use of new channels and tools was explored and implemented across multiple communications campaigns. The Department also continued to grow its effective use of digital and social channels ensuring the Department's messages continued to reach target audiences.

The Communications Unit also continued to support Ministers and the Department by providing an agile Press Office, which dealt with over 2,446 media queries in 2024 and issued 101 Press releases.

Stakeholder Engagement: New Operating Model

Initial consultation events to develop the vision, mission and values for the proposed dedicated agency for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) took place. A report on this exercise was prepared, circulated to the participating stakeholders and published on the dedicated agency website¹¹. Consultation events also took place in Q2 2024 with the focus on function mapping across the current operating model. The most recent consultation sessions in October 2024 were focused on the mapping of the workforce across the operating model. Engagement with a wide range of stakeholders will continue as a key feature of this reform programme as we work together to design a new operating model for the benefit of children and their families, providers, educators and practitioners.

National Childcare Scheme

The *National Childcare Scheme* was promoted through local and national press releases, social media campaigns and stalls at Bord Bia Bloom and the Pregnancy and Baby Fair. Plain English communications were issued to providers on the new compliance framework. Consultations were also held on child-minding regulations and the provision of Irish language in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare.

International Protection and Integration Division

Work began on developing and implementing a comprehensive Communications Strategy and action plan for the International Protection and Integration Division. An expert NGO partner group was established in 2024 and its work is ongoing. The Department arranged meetings with the expert partner organisations to:

- Provide information and share updates
- Hear from expert partner organisations and to receive feedback
- Identify ways to collaborate and deliver improvements

Strategic Action 5.7

We will develop partnership structures with key stakeholders, both to develop successor equality strategies and the next National Disability Strategy through proactive partnership with key stakeholders, including through cross Government collaboration.

The Department has enhanced engagement with disability sector stakeholders, reinforcing accountability, transparency and its commitment to co-design in shaping disability policy and service delivery.

Action Plan for Disability Services

In May 2024, the Department hosted an event themed around the *Action Plan for Disability Services*. This event was attended by Ministers and brought together members of Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs), service providers and other disability stakeholders to discuss implementation of the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026. At the event, group discussions were facilitated focussing on achieving Action Plan targets, exploring alternative service models, and identifying opportunities for innovation and improvement to enhance efficiency, equity, and alignment with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

¹¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/national-early-learning-and-childcare-agency/>

Disability Stakeholder Strategic Advisory Group

The Disability Stakeholder Strategic Advisory Group (DSSAG) met a number of times throughout 2024. The DSSAG comprises members of disabled persons' organisations, advocacy groups, service provider umbrella organisations and statutory organisations, offered strategic advice and input to the Department on matters related to high-level disability policy and strategy.

Autism Innovation Strategy

The Autism Innovation Strategy Oversight and Advisory Group was appointed following an application process, and comprises autistic individuals, parents, professionals and organisations supporting autistic people. This group was instrumental in the development of the Strategy and will play a key role in monitoring as implementation progresses.

Stakeholders

In preparation for Budget 2025, the Department held the *first annual pre-Estimates forum on disability services*. This event brought together a broad range of different disability stakeholders. This consultation ensured that stakeholder perspectives were reflected in Budget considerations, reinforcing a more inclusive and responsive policy approach.

The Department has enhanced engagement with disability sector stakeholders, reinforcing accountability, transparency and its commitment to co-design in shaping disability policy and service delivery.

Strategic Goal 6

We will maintain high standards of performance and corporate governance with engaged, motivated and supported staff in an organisation fit for the future.

Strategic Action 6.1

We will involve our people in completing a review of the Department's Structures, Staffing, Processes and Systems and develop an implementation plan to support the continuing development of the capacity and capabilities needed to meet the range of future challenges.

Organisation Development Plan

The Department implemented a groundbreaking **Organisation Development Plan** with the support of staff volunteers across the organisation. Developed in response to the Department's 2023 Employee Engagement Survey, and with the collaboration of over 100 staff, the Organisation Development Plan sought to deliver 50 actions which, taken together, would maintain progress in areas where the Department was doing well and improve in areas where change was required.

The Organisation Development Plan concluded in October 2024, with the completion of most actions, and mainstreaming of others. Highlights included improvements to the facilities in one of the Department's offices in Montague Court, the installation of lockers and privacy booths, a new mentoring programme and newsletter for staff, improvements to the Department's intranet and the introduction of formal exit interviews for staff. It also resulted in the restructuring of the Department to include a new Organisation and Strategy Division, resourced to ensure an ongoing focus on organisation development, and the commencement of two major strategic initiatives:

1. To embed strategic prioritisation and planning across the Department and
2. The launch of a new [People Strategy](#).

People Strategy

In October 2024, a new People Strategy was launched with the ambition to support the Department as "a high-performing employer of choice, where our people are valued and supported to achieve their best and deliver on our vision." Focusing on analysing and building the Department's culture and leadership, developing the Department as an organisation of the future, and supporting staff and development, the People Strategy sets out 20 actions which will be implemented by the end of 2026.

Strategic Action 6.2

We will ensure that there is a strong and effective corporate governance framework operating within the Department, including structured governance and performance oversight, led by senior management, of aegis bodies and funding intermediaries.

staff in their work performance while also ensuring that they complied with their obligations and expectations. **The Corporate Governance Framework**, which documents how the Department sets and meets required standards was reviewed and published in September 2024.

The Department's 2024 Business Planning was framed by Programme for Government commitments as well as the goals and objectives set out in its Statement of Strategy.

The Management Board established key priorities at the beginning of the year. The identification of key priorities informed workforce planning decisions and, in particular, decisions on the allocation of scarce staff resources in filling vacancies in different business units. The Management Board reviewed progress in delivering these key priorities at the end of each quarter and took the steps necessary to address the challenges that inevitably arose.

The Department's **Risk Committee** met four times during the year. It reviewed and published an updated Risk Appetite Statement. It prepared a

new Departmental Risk Register that reflected increasing uncertainties, many of which are identified by the National Risk Assessment and set out steps the Department needed to take to counter the risks and achieve its strategic goals.

The Department established a **Sectoral Governance forum**. The primary purpose of the forum is to ensure effective and consistent application of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. It also seeks to work with relevant teams to ensure that there is as an alignment, in broad terms, between the direction of aegis and funded bodies with those of the Minister, taking account of the statutory independence of these bodies.

External HR Governance and Sectoral Workforce Analysis Unit continued to progress HR-focused Memoranda of Understanding with aegis bodies, to document and formalise its interactions and HR/IR sanctioning arrangements with them.

Ukraine Finance and Cost Recovery Unit

The establishment of a Ukraine Finance and Cost Recovery Unit in June 2024 contributed to enhanced corporate governance oversight within the Department. The new finance team, including 3 qualified accountants, allowed for close monitoring of programme expenditure, timely reporting to key stakeholders, and effective engagement in the 2025 Estimates process, securing appropriate funding for 2025. This has ensured ongoing value for money and efficient use of Exchequer funding. This is coupled with a newly established Financial Compliance team within the unit, which engaged in cost recovery as appropriate and thereby protecting Exchequer funding.

Information Management

The Department continued to expand its capacity in respect of data protection in 2024 to ensure its obligations under GDPR are met and to implement best practice records management. Activities included introductory talks on both records management and data protection at inductions for new staff, enhanced supports to embed eDocs as the Departments document and records management system, various data protection learning opportunities and network events including a data protection week to raise awareness and a monthly data protection newsletter.

Strategic Action 6.3

We will develop and implement a flexible and dynamic operational Workforce Plan to ensure that HR can respond to the Department's evolving business needs.

The Department's HR team developed and implemented an annual operational **Workforce Plan** to support the delivery of key Government policy initiatives across the Department's varied remit including International Protection and Integration, Specialist Community Based Disability Services and the Mother and Baby Homes Payment Scheme Office while responding to the Department's evolving business needs. Key achievements include:

- 327 staff recruited into the Department during the year through various recruitment streams, averaging at 27 persons per month
- An increase of staff from 778 to 986 by the end of the year, representing a 27% staff increase during 2024
- Appropriately managed the exit process for 104 staff
- Specialist competitions run by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) supported by the Department
- Utilisation of the Department's direct recruitment license to recruit staff at the EO grade and specialist posts
- Held internal promotion competition for HEO grade

Strategic Action 6.4

We will ensure that the Department's employees are equipped with the skills required to fulfil the requirement of their roles.

Learning and Development (L&D)

To support the implementation of the **People Strategy 2024-2027**, the Learning & Development (L&D) Unit commenced the development of a L&D Strategy aimed at aligning employee development with organisational objectives. One of the key goals under the strategy is to position L&D as a strategic business partner and to strengthen its function by shifting from an operational focus to a more strategic, partnership focussed and collaboration driven approach.



In line with Government's strategic approach to build capacity at senior level by equipping existing leaders with the strategic knowledge and skills necessary for operating within a complex and fast evolving environment, four senior officials in the department (PO and above) successfully completed the Senior Public Service (SPS) Strategic Leadership Programme in 2024. An additional seven staff members attended the Mastering Senior Public Service Leadership Programme 2024.

In September 2024, the L&D team launched a 9-month pilot mentoring programme designed to support new staff and those on probation.

As part of the programme, mentees were paired with experienced colleagues who have on the job, grade-relevant experience and a strong level of knowledge about this Department. The aim of the mentoring programme is to help mentees navigate the Department, their grade and their roles and to focus on their professional development.

The Department is committed to ensuring all staff have the skills to carry out their roles effectively.

A new onboarding development plan is available to all staff. The L&D team proactively identified core skills that are required and ensured training to develop those skills is made available. During 2024, 50 training sessions were conducted with over 840 staff members participating.

Strategic Action 6.5

Among the key skill areas identified as important in supporting the Department's business activities was implementing best practice records management and ensuring compliance with obligations under the GDPR. In this context, the Department delivered a comprehensive knowledge and awareness building programme of activities in respect of records management and data protection.

We are committed to ensuring that our employees are supported appropriately to ensure a positive employee experience.

A strong performance culture

The Department developed its digital capacity so that its staff had access to modern and effective information technology resources. In delivering on this requirement in 2024, ICT and Procurement Unit have:

- Delivered a programme of enhancements and new business functionality to the application for managing the provision of short-term accommodation to Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BOTPs), and to the online system for managing contracts and the associated payments to providers of short-term accommodation to BOTPs. These new features brought further efficiencies to business processes, reflecting new business objectives,

- and thereby supporting staff in the delivery of effective services
- The **Digital Payment Authorisation Form** (DPAF) project was initiated in Q3 2024 to digitise and automate the Department's standard highly manual PO to PAF process. The DPAF project used software components developed as part of the P2P project which delivered exceptional efficiencies for the Ukraine Response Payment Team. This approach aligned with the wider eGovernment objective of 'Build to Share' which promotes using and/or repurposing existing technology. The DPAF application will deliver significant cost and time efficiencies to the department. In addition, it will streamline the Department's processes and data and ease the Department's transition when it migrates to the NSSO's Financial Management System. The DPAF application will be delivered at end of Q1 2025
- The Digital Strategy 2024-2028 **Our Digital Future** published in March 2024 sets out several Action Items for the future of digital delivery within the Department. By December 2024 over 75% of these actions were In Progress, Ongoing, or Completed

Communications

The Department's Communications Unit delivered a programme of transformative internal communications throughout 2024. This included regular updates on the Department intranet and creation and delivery of a successful staff newsletter **The Voice** launched in August 2024.

During the year, the Department held three all-staff sessions – 2 virtual meetings and 1 in-person All Staff Day, with record attendances of 550, 679 and 780 colleagues from across three locations. The Department also held the first Staff Recognition event to acknowledge achievements, including the Departments entries to the Civil Service Excellence & Innovation Awards. A new Internal Communications Strategy for the Department, designed to drive continued improvements in this space, will launch in 2025.

Human Resources

Key achievements include:

- Publication of the Department's People Strategy – **Valuing our People, Delivering Together 2024 – 2026** which recognises staff as the Department's biggest asset in delivering its mission
- Employee wellbeing programme was put in place with wellbeing events including social events, wellbeing seminars, presentations and health challenges held throughout the year

- Financial Wellness programme was available to staff including one-on-one guidance calls, theoretical sessions and masterclasses
- Health checks and flu vaccines were made available to all staff
- Higher Scales were awarded at all relevant grades
- Staff with disabilities were supported by the Disability Liaison Officer, who acted as a point of contact for reasonable accommodation and accessibility needs
- Staff and managers were supported during the probation process to ensure successful probation outcomes. There were 538 staff on probation, staff who were new to the Civil Service or new in their grade, during 2024

Strategic Action 6.6

We are committed to ensuring that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is embedded and reflected across our policies and practices.

Work was commenced on an EDI Policy, Strategy, and action plan. Work also commenced to advance equality, diversity and inclusion across the Department and foster a culture where staff feel valued, respected and empowered.

Strategic Action 6.7

We will ensure that there are strong and effective Vote management arrangements in place within the Department to account to Government, the Oireachtas and the public for all expenditure incurred.

The Department operates a structured devolved financial budget process with the day-to-day responsibility for budget management residing with the budget holder in line units. The Finance Unit manages, and coordinates matters regarding overall expenditure on Vote 40. Budget management activities include working collaboratively with line units to report regularly on expenditure to a range of stakeholders including the Government, Minister, Management Board and DPENDR.

In 2024, the extensive Vote monitoring regime in place continued. It incorporated regular monitoring meetings with DPENDR, the submission of quarterly expenditure Memos to Government regarding updates on both current and capital expenditure as well as existing formal monitoring and reporting arrangements.

The Finance Unit (Vote management) led out and secured supplementary funding for the Vote in 2024. Additionally, the Finance Unit (Vote management) along with the line units proactively managed the expenditure during the year within the agreed original and revised allocations.

The 2023 Appropriation Account for Vote 40 was prepared and laid before the Oireachtas, detailing the Department's outturn for the year against the amount provided by Dáil Éireann. As part of a programme of reform to move towards more modern and transparent accounting methods, a number of new government accounting requirements were adopted in 2024.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General provided independent assurance that the Department's funds and resources were used in accordance with the law, properly accounted for and managed to good effect.

A new **Procure to Pay** (P2P) system was developed and implemented to support the large volume of invoices for providing commercial accommodation to Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection. Reports of material spending and prompt payment interest were published periodically for transparency.

The Secretary General, as Accounting Officer, was invited to attend a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts in April 2024 to present further on the 2022 appropriation account and responded to questions from Committee members on a range of topical matters related to the Department's vote.

Strategic Action 6.8

We will ensure that appropriate governance arrangements are in place for the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare budget in order to achieve optimal outcomes and ensure value for money.

Core Funding

Financial reporting requirements under Core Funding was a recommendation of the Expert Group in their report **Partnership for the Public Good**. All Partner Services that had an active Core Funding contract during the 2022/23 programme year were required to provide these validated Financial Returns for Year 1 of Core Funding (1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023). The deadline for the submission of the 2022/2023 programme year was 26 June 2024. The financial reporting that took place in 2024 was a transitional arrangement that consisted of an income and expenditure report.

The Income and Expenditure Report was required to be completed and submitted by an accountant from a registered practice or a registered professional body (ACCA, CAI, CPA and CIMA) on behalf of each Partner Service.

Financial returns will inform the ongoing development of Core Funding, including the allocation model for Year 4 of the Scheme and will inform preparations for Budget 2026. This collation of reliable data will enable the Department to design new developments and enhancements to the Core Funding model and to analyse the efficiency of the funding provided at the service and sector levels.

New Operating Model

A governance framework was approved for the design and planning phase for a new state agency for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare in 2023. A **Programme Oversight Board** comprising inter-Departmental representatives and external experts with experience at senior level in change management and large-scale reform, leadership, governance, public policy and a knowledge of the sector was appointed to oversee this phase. An internal Design Authority comprised of Departmental officials has also been appointed to act in an advisory capacity to assist the Board. Memorandums of Understanding to cover the programme to establish the agency between the Department and Pobal/Better Start and boards of each of the 30 City/County Childcare Committees have been agreed and signed. This work continued in 2024.

Oversight of Funded Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Organisations

The Department continued to ensure oversight of Pobal, 30 City/County Childcare Committees and funded Support Organisations (formerly National Voluntary Childcare Organisations) through 2024. There is an overarching Service Level Agreement between the Department and Pobal/Better Start, an annual Programme of Work and series of Performance Delivery Agreements, accompanied by quarterly reporting requirements have been devised, agreed and implemented. In the case of City/County Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, there are annual statements of work agreed accompanied by a quarterly reporting requirements have been devised, agreed and implemented.

Strategic Action 6.9

We will continue to operate systems which procure accommodation for persons seeking International Protection, which comply with National Standards and ensure that inspection systems effectively monitor that compliance.

International Protection

Enhanced resources enabled a more robust inspection regime to monitor compliance with standards required for centres to operate. Pre-occupancy inspection regime ensured standards are in place before contracting new centres.

Strategic Action 6.10

We will ensure that funding programmes are delivered according to stated objectives and requirements.

Compliance Inspections

The Compliance Function for the Department's Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare programmes/schemes is administered by Pobal who conduct unannounced inspections of ELC and SAC services to confirm that they are adhering to key rules pertaining to relevant programmes/schemes (ECCE, CCSP, NCS and AIM). Compliance resources are administered efficiently, to ensure coverage of 945 services in 2024, and 1,377 scheme/programme contracts. Pobal also undertook verifications of grant schemes. Ineligible expenditure found during compliance inspections or grant scheme verifications were recouped by the Department.

Strategic Action 6.11

We will ensure delivery of the Department's obligations under the National Climate Action Plan and any future initiatives in this area. This will include a focus on aegis bodies.

The Public Sector Climate Action Mandate requires government Departments and public bodies to lead by example in implementing climate related goals. The Department published its *Climate Action Roadmap* in 2024 setting out its targets and achievements in reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions and improving energy efficiencies. . In this regard, the Department tracks progress in terms of its targets through the SEAI's Monitoring and Reporting system and continues to offset carbon emissions from official air travel through our annual payment to the Climate Action Fund.

Reflecting on the role the Department plays in developing and delivering policies and services that inform and influence society, the Roadmap also sets out the steps the Department is taking to promote awareness and inform behaviours of Departmental staff so that climate action and sustainability are embedded in the way we work.

In 2024 the Departmental Green Team led the following initiatives:

- Participation in the Annual step challenges, Marchathon and Walktober which occurred in March and October respectively
- A Deposit Return scheme collection point was introduced in Miesian Plaza. This is in partnership with Department of Health to support a number of children's charities
- A review of paper-based processes was begun in the Department, and the evaluation and adaptation of digitisation practices is becoming the default approach throughout the Department

Strategic Action 6.13

We will continue to enhance our capacity in data, analytics, research and evaluation.

Research

During 2024, five research clubs were hosted by the Department which were attended by Departmental staff and external stakeholders. Three were in-person events, held in the Town Hall, Miesian Plaza.

A range of evaluation supports were provided to policy units across the Department. A mid-term review of the Comhairle na nÓg Five Year Development Plan was published and a review of the Comhairle na nÓg funding model commenced, as well as a Spending Review on Disability Residential Services.

Research support was provided across the Department, primary research was conducted and commissioned, and the Department ESRI Research Programme utilising Growing Up in Ireland data was renewed. Projects and papers completed in 2024 covered a range of thematic areas including pregnancy loss, methodological Growing Up in Ireland guidance, lone parenting, disability prevalence among young people, and caregiving among young adults.

Care Experiences: Journeys Through the Irish Care System

Care Experiences: Journeys Through the Irish Care System is a research and data programme, which is being run the Department in close collaboration with Tusla.

The Programme, which commenced in 2022, is using a combination of primary research and strengthened administrative data collection and analysis to examine and better understand the lives of children in care and aftercare and those who were in care as children.

The Programme comprises a number of iterative Projects:

- Developing the capacity of Tusla's case management system to better understand the pathways that children and young people take through the care system
- Cross sectional research with care experienced adults who left the care system
- Longitudinal research with young people who are currently in the care system and bespoke research studies and activities on topics related to the Irish care system

The Programme has three governance and advisory structures which support its work. A Programme Board, which comprises officials from government Departments and public bodies, a Stakeholder Advisory Group, which comprises representatives from key stakeholder organisations, academics and care experienced adults and a Care Experienced Expert Panel, which comprises 11 adults who are care experienced.

In 2024 the Programme commenced work with Tusla on utilising its case management data to better understand the pathways that children and young people take through the care system. The Programme also commissioned research on the retention and attrition of foster carers and the educational and employment experiences of care experienced young people. Research, being carried out by Trinity and the University of Sussex, on the experiences and outcomes of adults who were in care ten to fifteen years ago continued in 2024.

Research

A range of key Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare research and data projects were progressed in 2024, including:

- Ireland's inaugural participation in the OECD Teaching And Learning International Survey (TALIS) Starting Strong
- a representative survey of Early Years Educators and Managers
- delivery of the new Early Learning and Childcare Data website – which includes a suite of interactive dashboards hosted by Pobal, data that were previously published in the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report

- completion of the Better Start Evaluation conducted by Centre for Effective Services as well as a range of research projects in the area of minority languages, staff qualifications, Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare needs of families who live in urban areas and/or work atypical hours and a quarterly awareness poll of the National Childcare Scheme

During 2024 the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) Division also engaged with the OECD on a research project providing country specific input on translating research into policies quality and inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care and worked with relevant bodies to update and improve national and international indicators on ELC and SAC for Ireland.

Strategic Action 6.14

We will support our aegis bodies in ensuring best practice human resource management, workforce planning and corporate governance.

External HR Governance and Sectoral Workforce Analysis Unit continued to progress HR-focused Memoranda of Understanding with aegis bodies, to document and formalise its interactions and HR/IR sanctioning arrangements with them. The Unit created standardised template forms for aegis bodies' HR/IR sanction requests, both for requests to create and fill posts beyond aegis bodies' level of delegated sanction, as well as requests to vary terms and conditions of employment.

The Unit continued to engage regularly with HR counterparts from aegis bodies and worked with the respective policy and finance units in this Department and the HR/IR policy units of Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, including the Sectoral Pay and IR and Senior Pay Policy sections. It has also put in place dedicated monthly meetings with colleagues in the Department of Health to ensure consistent and effective HR oversight of the HSE and section 38 organisations following the transfer of Disability functions to this Department.

Corporate Governance and Climate Action Unit worked with policy units with responsibility for bodies under the aegis of the Department in the process of Board Appointments. The Unit acts as a liaison between the Department and Publicjobs.ie to ensure that all board vacancies are advertised and filled as necessary. The Unit also chairs the Sectoral Governance Forum to provide guidance and an opportunity for policy units with responsibility for aegis bodies to share useful governance resources.

Appendix I:

Overview of Energy Usage in 2024

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's energy consumption is reported to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) on an annual basis and tracked against the targets set out in the Climate Action Mandate to achieve a 50% improvement in energy efficiency and a 51% reduction in Green House Gas emissions (measured in kgCO₂) by 2030.

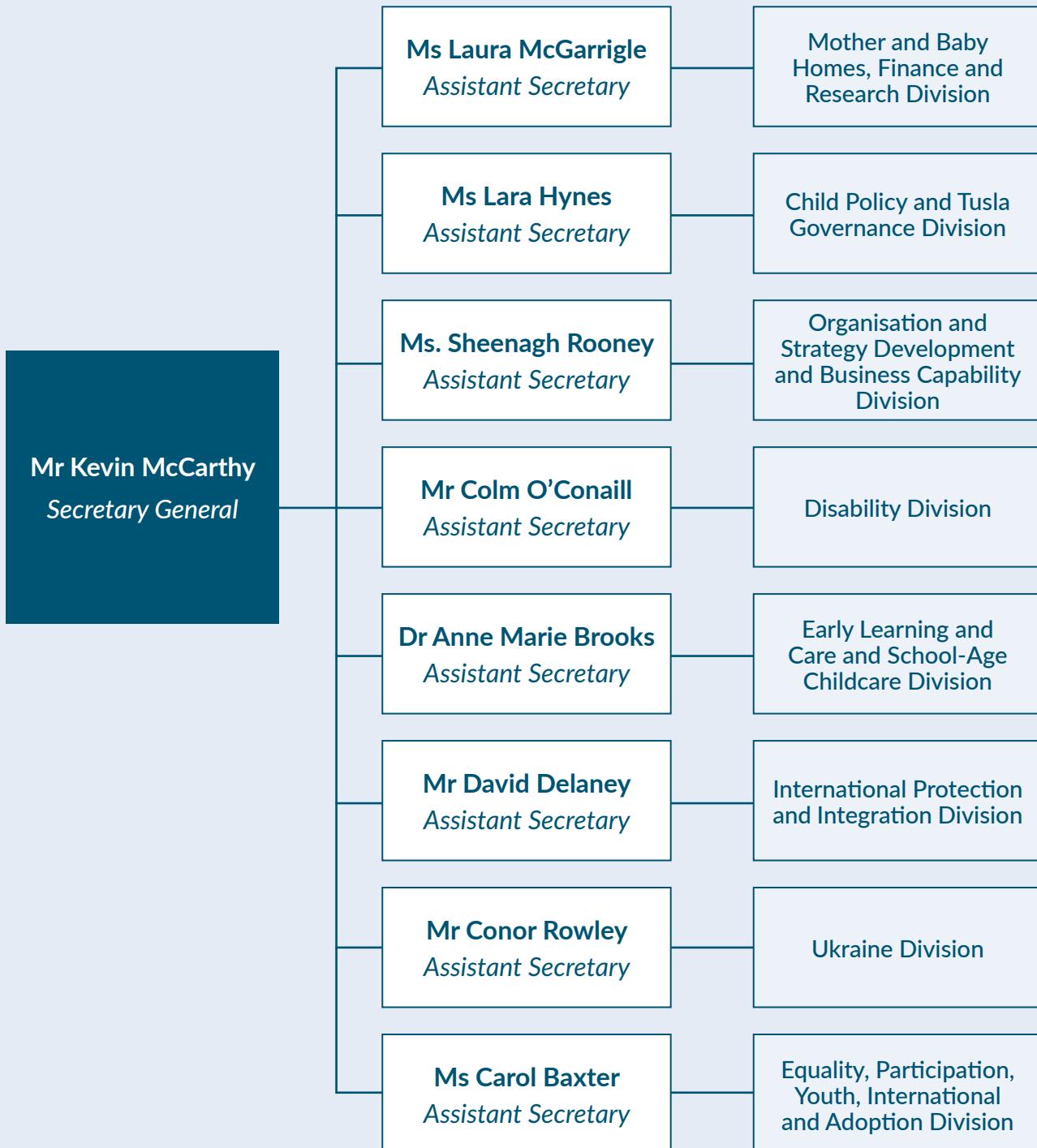
2024 was a challenging year for the Department, with the humanitarian response to the war in Ukraine and the continued pressures on accommodation for applicants for International Protection driving large increases in staff and operations. The larger staff cohort required to service these priorities and the significant accommodation footprint across Miesian Plaza, Montague Court and the Citywest Transit Hub were the drivers for a significant increase in greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel sources (e.g. Gas), which rose by 21% over 2023 levels. This was partly offset by a reduction of 5.1% in greenhouse gas emissions in 2024 from non-fossil fuel sources, such as electricity.

However, in 2024 the Department almost reached the public sector target of improving energy efficiency by 50%. This is due to the high occupation levels in the Department's buildings across the year, which provided economies of scale in terms of the energy used per member of staff.

Agencies under the aegis of the Department reported their energy consumption directly to the SEAI and, as a result, their energy usage is not covered by this overview.

Appendix II:

Management Board 2024



Appendix III:

Bodies under the aegis of the Department in 2024



Údarás Náisiúnta Michumais
National Disability Authority

National Disability Authority

25 Clyde Road
Dublin 4
www.nda.ie



An Gníomháireacht um
Leanáí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Tusla, Child and Family Agency

The Brunel Building
Heuston South Quarter
St. John's Road West
Kilmainham, Dublin 8
www.tusla.ie



ÚDARÁS UCHTÁLA na hÉIREANN
THE ADOPTION AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

The Adoption Authority of Ireland

Shelbourne House
Shelbourne Road
Dublin 4
www.aai.gov.ie



Coimisiún na hÉireann
um Chearta an Duine
agus Comhionannas
Irish Human Rights and
Equality Commission

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission¹²

16-22 Green Street
Dublin 7
www.ihrc.ie



ombudsman
do leanáí
for children

Office of the Ombudsman for Children¹³

Millennium House
52-56 Great Strand Street, Dublin 1
www.oco.ie



Oifig an Stiúrthóra um
Idirghabháil Údaraithe, Tuam
Office of the Director of
Authorised Intervention, Tuam

Office of the Director of Authorised Intervention, Tuam

Customs House, Flood Street, Galway,
H91XV2C
www.odait.ie



CARE
EDUCATION
HEALTH
WELLBEING

Oberstown

Oberstown, Lusk, Co. Dublin,
K45 AY66
www.oberstown.com



GAISCE
THE PRESIDENT'S
AWARD

Gaisce, the President's Award

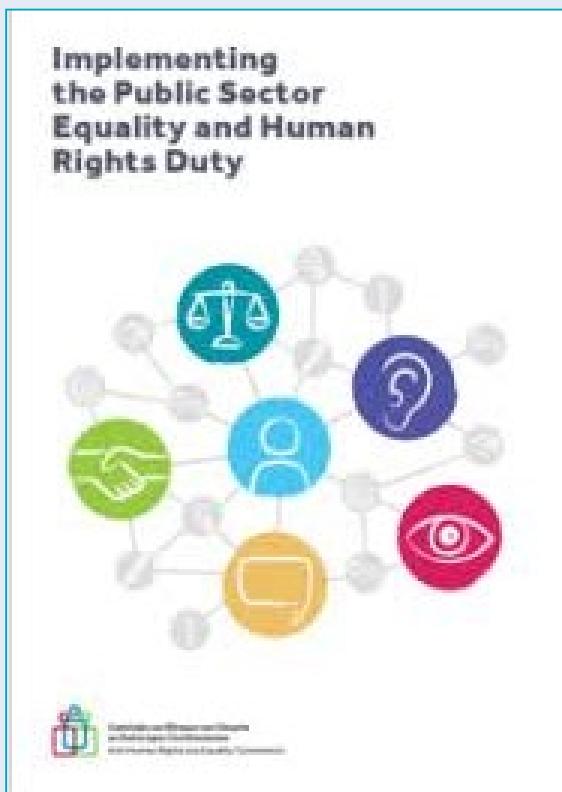
Ratra House, North Road
Phoenix Park, Dublin 8
www.gaisce.ie

¹² The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is independent in its functions and reports directly to the Oireachtas, in accordance with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, 2014.

¹³ The Ombudsman for Children's Office is independent in its functions and reports directly to the Oireachtas, in accordance with the Ombudsman for Children Act, 2002.

Appendix IV:

Public Sector Duty



Public bodies have a duty and legal responsibility to demonstrate equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans.

The Department acknowledges the positive duty imposed on it by section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 to have regard to human rights. Under section 42 a public body shall, in the performance of its functions, have regard to the need to – and equality in the performance of its functions:

- (a) eliminate discrimination,
- (b) promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services, and
- (c) protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services.

The Department's work embodies proactive consideration of equality and the human rights of all individuals in the development of policy and legislation.

The Department's Public Sector Duty Assessment and Implementation Plan outlines various measures that the Department has committed to in the interest of maintaining standards of public sector duty.

IHREC provided training to members of the Equality, Youth and Participation Division on the public sector equality and human rights duty on 6 February 2024.

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) published details of compliance in 2024 with requirements under section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. The Department publication status is currently recorded as 'Published' and compliant.

Appendix V:

Protected Disclosures

The Department received five reports of wrongdoing under Protected Disclosures legislation in 2024. One was received through internal reporting channels, and four were received through external reporting channels. During the year, the Department closed the one report received internally and two of the reports received externally. At the end of 2024, there were two reports outstanding.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland