

CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS

ALLIANCE

Uniting Voices For Children

Child Poverty Monitor 2026

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FOREWORD

Estimates that it will take four-to-five generations to level the playing field for children and families living in the shadow of poverty and deprivation underlines the need for courage, ambition and leadership to solve the challenge before us.

Community Foundation Ireland is proud to partner with the Children's Rights Alliance for our fifth annual Child Poverty Monitor – a pioneering and effective mechanism in holding those who make the decisions and the policies to account.

We do so as a philanthropic hub working with donors, supporters and 5,000 partner organisations focussed on delivering a fairer and more sustainable future for people, place and planet.

While the Monitor is capturing reductions in the levels of consistent poverty (down from 8.5% in 2024 to 7.8% in 2025), this rate of progress offers little comfort when we see that almost 1-in-5 children are experiencing enforced deprivation.

Policies which the Monitor has informed such as hot school meals, the successful piloting of holiday hunger programmes, the Deis Plus programme with its extra supports, and increases in welfare payments have been hard fought and are welcome.

But the question arising is whether as a society we are content for rates of progress which are so slow that for the next century children will be living in homes where the stark daily choice is food, clothing or heat. A legacy none of us should be proud of.

Community Foundation Ireland partners through working with families on the ground and as researchers and advocates have identified a number of ways to deliver the seismic change which has remained elusive for successive Governments.

A second targeted child benefit payment has been identified through our partnership with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and has gained very significant support nationally and internationally – yet despite political commitments it is still not a reality.

Other research calls for extensive investment to build both community infrastructure and a sense of belonging, to open up new accessible opportunities to childcare, education and training for everyone, including people currently marginalised.

The Child Poverty Monitor joins that body of evidence to encourage true leadership and ambition from our policymakers by taking the big steps needed to finally end the crisis facing children and families.



Denise Charlton,
Chief Executive of Community
Foundation Ireland

INTRODUCTION

The **2026 Child Poverty Monitor** is the fifth edition of the Children’s Rights Alliance annual report, tracking government progress on reducing the number of children experiencing poverty.

The report benchmarks against measures set out in the European Commission’s Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. Building on decades of research and bodies of strategies, literature reviews, and evaluations, *Investing in Children* provides a roadmap for EU Member States outlining the most effective measures and actions Governments can take to break the cycle of disadvantage.

To address the impact of poverty in children’s lives, Member States need to take an integrated approach that not only ensures ‘children’s material security’ but promotes ‘equal opportunities’ to enable all children to ‘realise their full potential’.¹ Responses should not only be rights based and take the child’s best interests into consideration but they should balance universal policies with targeted interventions. The Recommendation draws on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and provides European Union (EU) Member States with a common framework calling on states to:

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

Child Poverty in Ireland

The official data on poverty in Ireland is captured by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) through the annual Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC). This data source provides information on household and equivalised disposable income and gives a national picture of poverty across three different measures: the ‘at risk of poverty’ rate, the rate of enforced deprivation and the consistent poverty rate.²

- The ‘at risk of poverty’ rate describes the proportion of the population who have an income below 60 per cent of the national median income.
- Enforced deprivation describes a household’s inability to afford at least two items out of a set of 11 goods and services which are considered the norm for society. This includes things like a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day or the ability to keep your home adequately warm.
- Consistent poverty combines the proportion of the population who are identified as being at risk of poverty and who are also experiencing deprivation.

In March 2026, the most recent data from SILC was published. It showed that in 2025, children were over-represented in all three measures of poverty. While children make up 22.8 per cent of the entire population, they comprised 30.7 per cent of those deemed to be at risk of poverty; 29.7 per cent of those experiencing enforced deprivation and 37.8 per cent of those experiencing consistent poverty.

When examined by age group, the rates of all three measures of poverty experienced by children are higher than the general population and the highest across all age groups.

In 2025, almost one-in-five children in Ireland were experiencing enforced deprivation. This meant that there were 239,146 children living in a household unable to afford some of the most basic items needed.

One-in-six children were living in households with incomes 60 per cent below the median in Ireland. This amounted to 206,202 children in households below the poverty line.

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

2 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions Explained* < <https://bit.ly/3u4QXGj> >

There were one-in-twelve children living in the worst form of poverty in 2025, with 95,170 children experiencing consistent poverty.

	At risk of Poverty	Enforced Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
Population	12.6	15.1	4.7
0-17 years	16.9	19.6	7.8

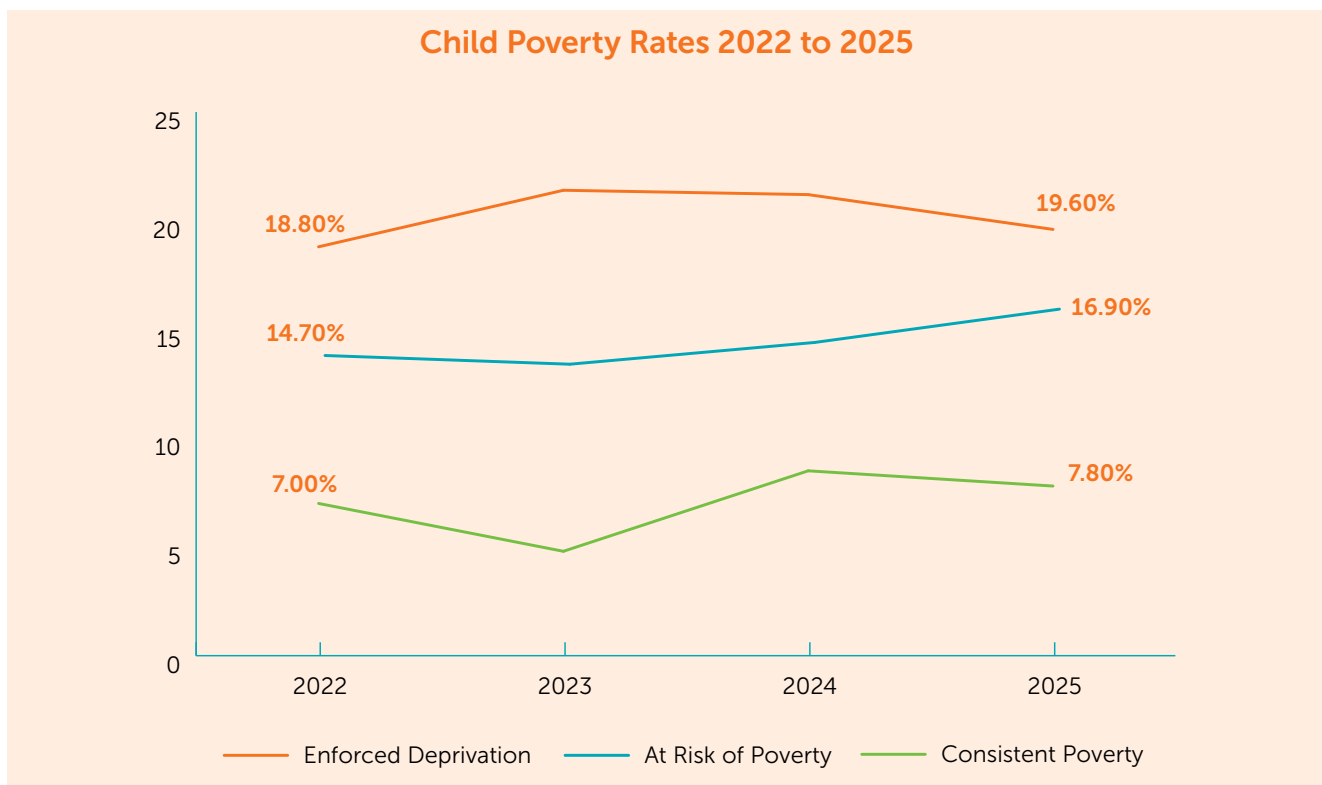
Source: Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025 (CSO 2026).

Over the last five years the rates of child poverty have marginally increased and decreased. However, the trends have mostly remained constant with children having the highest rates of poverty compared to all other age groups.

Responses from Government

Policy responses from government can help to ameliorate or exacerbate poverty and the effects of individual policies are evident in the official poverty statistics. With access to adequate resources a central pillar of *Investing in Children* it is welcome to see the positive impact that social transfers have on poverty rates. While data is not available on the impact on child poverty rates, without social transfers the overall 'at risk of poverty' rate would be substantially higher at 33.2 per cent compared to 12.6 per cent.³

However, conversely the failure of government policy to ensure that children and their families have access to affordable quality housing exacerbates the rates of child poverty. This means that the 'at risk of poverty' rate for children increases from 16.9 per cent to 27.9 per cent after housing costs.⁴



Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2025 (CSO 2026).

3 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025 (CSO 2026).
 4 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025 (CSO, 2026).

In line with *Investing in Children*, policy responses over the last number of years have aimed to take a cross-government approach to addressing child poverty. In 2022, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office was established in the Department of the Taoiseach to provide much-needed leadership on child poverty at the highest level of government. The Programme Office follows the successful track record of other child poverty offices in Scotland and New Zealand that have delivered positive outcomes for children and young people. In September 2025, the Taoiseach and Minister for Social Protection announced a new child poverty target with the aim of reducing the consistent poverty rate to 3 per cent by 2030.⁵

Alongside the work of the Department of the Taoiseach, a number of strategies published by government departments have included priority actions to take a cross-government approach to prioritising child poverty. This includes:

- Child poverty being identified as one of three spotlight areas in the *Young Ireland*, the national strategy for children and young people, published in November 2023 by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.⁶ The spotlight on Child Poverty connects this with the work of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office.
- *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030* was published in November 2025, and as part of a commitment to focus on ending child and family homelessness, the plan outlines a number of key priorities, including the development of a cross-departmental and agency-led Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁷

- In May 2026, the new *Roadmap on Social Inclusion 2026 to 2030* was published with a specific focus on child poverty with 15 specific cross-government actions to be delivered by 2030 along with a restatement of the child poverty target of a 3 per cent consistent poverty rate.⁸ Alongside the *Roadmap* the European Union has developed its first anti-poverty strategy. The *European Union's Anti-Poverty Strategy* focuses on addressing poverty across within every age group across member states.⁹

Despite strong political leadership, from the Taoiseach, and strengthened policy frameworks which aim to address child poverty across government, sustained investment in multiple Budget cycles is needed to implement key commitments in these strategies. Over the last four Budget cycles the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office have deepened its engagement with government departments as part of the annual Budget process. This has included publishing a post-Budget analysis of the key commitments to address child poverty.¹⁰

In the last number of Budget cycles incremental investments in key measures have led to the introduction of free school books, the expansion of hot school meals and the establishment of Equal Start, a DEIS-type model of early childhood education to increase access and participation in early years for children experiencing disadvantage. Budget 2026 saw a number of significant investments including a record level increase in the targeted child income support paid to recipients of social welfare, funding for the new DEIS plus Programme targeting education supports in areas with high levels of disadvantage and measures to support greater participation in early childhood education and care for children from a disadvantaged background.

5 Department of Social Protection 'Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Minister Dara Calleary publish the new National Child Poverty Target' (Press Release 10 September 2025).

6 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *Young Ireland National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* (Government of Ireland 2023).

7 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025).

8 Department of Social Protection *Roadmap on Social Inclusion 2026 to 2030* (Government of Ireland 2026).

9 DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion *European Union's Anti-Poverty Strategy* (European Commission 2026).

10 Department of the Taoiseach *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2025).

However, the context for Budget 2027 may severely undermine these recent efforts following an edict from the Minister for Public Expenditure to levy government departments to cover a 'shortfall' in the budget of the Department of Education and Youth.

On 16 April the Minister for Public Expenditure stated that the government had provided a 10 per cent uplift in the funding allocated to the Department of Education and Youth as part of the government's commitment to the delivery of high-quality education. While noting the increased level of expenditure allocated to the Department in recent years the Minister noted that no levy would be applied to other government departments.¹¹ Less than a month later, the Minister for Justice, in response to a Dáil question about public expenditure, noted that an extra €646 million would be provided to the Department of Education and Youth in 2026 with €446 million provided by way of a levy. This levy would be calculated on the current expenditure from the revised estimates and would apply from 2027 to all other government departments.¹²

The issue of additional funding for the Department of Education and Youth has emerged as critical because of the historical underfunding of that department particularly in respect of its Existing Level of Provision which has grown year-on-year due to population growth, and increasing complexity needed for service provision. This underfunding has been noted by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (IFAC). IFAC have stated that not only has the base year calculation been underestimated at the start of the Budget each year, but that the Department of Public Expenditure has 'consistently underestimated the cost of maintaining existing services'.¹³

Embedded in this is spending on the salaries of teachers, doctors and other public service workers. IFAC note that expenditure on these salaries tends to be higher by December than forecasted three months earlier in October. If these workers remain employed the following year costs will be higher but 'bad budgeting in the base year' leads to overruns the following year.¹⁴

The total current expenditure for the levied departments amounts to €88.86 billion.¹⁵ A levy of €446m amounts to just 0.5 per cent of this total. Further detail provided by the Minister for Public Expenditure shows that the levies applied are between 0.02 per cent to 1.4 per cent on current expenditure allocation.¹⁶ While the levy is excluded from a number of expenditure lines, such as specialist disability services in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the Department of Health pay allocation, a disproportionate burden is placed on departments likely to provide public services, programmes and interventions for children, young people and other vulnerable groups.

Based on the levies applied by government the Department of Children, Disability and Equality will incur almost 10 per cent of the total levy and the Department of Health covering just over 39 per cent. These two departments, alongside the Departments of Social Protection; Housing, Local Government & Heritage; Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht; Culture, Communications and Sport and Justice, Home Affairs and Migration will shoulder almost two-thirds of the entire levy. In comparison, key economic portfolios including Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; Agriculture and Defence will account for just over one-third of the levy.

11 Jack Chambers TD Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation Departmental Expenditure Written Answers 16 April 2026 [27569/26].

12 Jim O'Callaghan Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration Public Expenditure Policy Written Answers 12 May 2026 [35085/26].

13 K. Carroll *Spending overruns – when to shout stop* (Irish Fiscal Advisory Council) <https://bit.ly/4enUmnM> accessed 5 June 2026.

14 K. Carroll *Spending overruns – when to shout stop* (Irish Fiscal Advisory Council) <https://bit.ly/4enUmnM> accessed 5 June 2026.

15 Department of Public Expenditure Infrastructure Public Service Reform and Digitalisation 2026 *Revised Estimates for Public Services* (Government of Ireland 2026) 11.

16 Jack Chambers TD Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation Departmental Expenditure Written Answers 19 May 2026 [36722/26].

Breakdown of Levy Applied to Departmental Vote Groups				
Vote Group	Levy %	2026 REV €m	Levy €	Proportion of entre Levy
Housing, Local Government & Heritage Group	0.10%	€4,043	€5m	1.12%
Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht	1.30%	€339,900	€5m	1.12%
Social Protection	0.02%	€28,943,947	€6m	1.35%
Culture, Communications and Sport	1.40%	€825,895	€11m	2.47%
Children, Disability and Equality Group	0.60%	€6,930,603	€42m	9.42%
Justice, Home Affairs and Migration Group	0.70%	€5,947,948	€39m	8.74%
Health Group	0.70%	€25,790,013	€175m	39.24%
Sub-total		€72,821,531	€283m	64%
All other votes (10 departments)		€13,678,875	€163m	36%
Total	0.5%	€86,500,406	€446m	

Sources: Department of Public Expenditure Infrastructure Public Service Reform and Digitalisation 2026 Revised Estimates for Public Services (Government of Ireland 2026). Jack Chambers TD Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation Departmental Expenditure Written Answers 19 May 2026 [36722/26]. Jack Chambers TD Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation Departmental Budgets Written Answers 27 May 2026 [40795/26].

Other departments: Climate, Energy and the Environment (0.66%); Taoiseach's Group (1.03%); Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (1.65%); Finance Group (2%); Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation Group (2%); Defence Group (3%); Foreign Affairs and Trade Group (4%); Transport (4%); Agriculture, Food and the Marine (6%); Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science (12%).

The disproportionate impact of the levies on government departments providing vital services for children and young people is of concern. The implementation of the levy could have an extremely negative impact on services for children, young people and families depending on how it applied because essentially it could result in a cut to public services. Services for vulnerable children need to be safeguarded in the national budget. The costs incurred addressing the impact of child poverty throughout a person's life are much higher than the investment in the public services and targeted measures in childhood that could break the cycle of poverty.

A Children's Budget – Budget 2027

Budget 2027 is the second budget under this Government, and needs to build on the success and progress made in recent years. This includes expansion of universal measures and rolling out incremental change but crucially, an opportunity to go further. We urge Government to be more ambitious with Budget 2027 and prioritise the supports that are needed to effectively break the cycle of poverty and lift children and young people out of poverty.

Addressing the **income** gap will be critical to this over the course of this Programme for Government. Too many children and families are living below the poverty line. The record level increases in target child income supports in Budget 2026 were much needed as previous budgets focused on one off payments in place of permanent measures to improve income adequacy.

Increases of €16 for children over and €8 for those under 12 rate bring the current rates of the Child Support Payment to €78 and €58 per week respectively.¹⁷ However, despite this much needed increase, the net impact for families' incomes mean they will only be marginally better off when compared to the one off payments provided in the year before. The Vincentian MESL Research Centre post-Budget Analysis shows income adequacy will improve for many households. The analysis compared the incomes these households received from social welfare with the costs they would incur to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.¹⁸ Based on 214 test household comparisons, the changes in social welfare supports in Budget 2026 mean 26 fewer households would experience deep income inadequacy while an extra 28 households will now have an adequate income. However, there is a need to continue to improve incomes by increasing the over 12s by a further 20 per cent and the under 12s by 10 per cent at a minimum.

Housing costs and entrenched crisis impacting this sector continues to pull more children and families into poverty. The housing crisis is compounded by spiralling rents, a scarcity of available housing and the failure of the government to meet its own house building targets. Child and Family homelessness remains shamefully high. For many families, housing costs are the primary pressure point, eating away at the household income each month. Since the first Child Poverty Monitor was published in 2022, the number of children experiencing homelessness has risen from 3,028 in May 2022 to 5,604 in April 2026. All the evidence points to the detrimental impact homelessness has on a child. With building targets far short of where they should be, the conditions for improving the outcomes for children and young people become far more challenging. The imminent publication of a child and family homeless action plan is long overdue and will require a strong commitment from government in Budget 2027 to ensure resources allow it to have the greatest impact.

All the evidence shows that investing in **early childhood education and care** is critical in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. The sustained investment in this area over successive budgets is welcome and funding has exceeded €1 billion for successive years. However, affordability still needs to be addressed. The long term commitment to reduce childcare fees to a maximum of €200 per month is much needed but it is still a while away. In the interim, it is critical that families living on a low income can access the maximum subsidy available. The adjustment to National Childcare Scheme thresholds in Budget 2026 were welcome but long overdue. The government should continue to expand these thresholds to ensure that they keep up with increases in the National Minimum Wage and increases to other income supports. Continued support for Equal Start is also critical in order to improve the access and participation of services for children experiencing disadvantage.

Each year the Children's Rights Alliance see the increased need for support to tackle **food poverty** from our members applying for funding under our food poverty schemes. While the expansion of hot school meals to all primary school children is a welcome and much needed support, further work is needed to ensure that young people in DEIS secondary schools can access the same support. The emerging issue of 'holiday hunger' arising during school holiday periods when schools are closed is a growing concern and while there is a welcome commitment to address this issue in the new Roadmap on Social Inclusion, government funding is needed to make this a reality.

The wider misplaced focus on the Department of **Education's** budget is a worrying context moving into Budget 2027. No other government department has been subjected to such scrutiny and it points to an acute lack of adequate funding to ensure that schools can ensure all children's right to education is upheld. There is a clear need for a reset in the mindset of the funding provided to schools with a need to increase overall capitation rates. The complex and acute needs of children who are experiencing poverty has been noted by principals, teachers and support staff across the DEIS programme, and beyond. The trauma these children are experiencing has adverse effects on their education and it is very welcome to see the DEIS Plus Scheme prioritised with funding in Budget 2026.

17 Department of Social Protection, *Budget 2026 Factsheet* <https://bit.ly/4dccrEO> accessed 15 May 2026.

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

Access to **quality healthcare** is essential for children's development. The cost of healthcare remains far too high, placing undue pressure on families living on low incomes. The expansion of GP care to all children under the age of 12 would be a welcome focus in Budget 2027. Complimenting universal access to GP services with targeted support for GPs working in high levels of disadvantage along with targeted funding for GPs working in areas of high level of disadvantage would provide a proportionate universalist approach to tackling health inequalities. We are once again calling for Budget 2027 to revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum, these should be set above the poverty thresholds.

We know it is morally wrong that there are over a quarter of a million children living in poverty today and 206,202 at risk of being pulled below that poverty line. Budget 2027 is Government's chance to get ahead of the curve which is why we are calling on them to make it a Children's Budget. As it stands, it will take Ireland four-to-five generations to break the cycle of poverty and bring those on lower incomes on par with the median income. If we continue to only progress universal measures without prioritising targeted supports for the children most in need, Government will fail to steer us back in the right direction. We are calling on the new Government to utilise the bank of evidence as a blueprint for policy development and take a more ambitious approach to breaking the cycle of poverty in one generation.

Adequate income



INCOME ADEQUACY

The first Pillar of the *Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* Recommendation (Investing in Children) calls on Member States to provide access to adequate resources for children and their families.¹ This should be achieved by supporting parents' participation in the labour market and providing a combination of benefits for adequate living standards.²

The Recommendation emphasises the connection between parental participation in employment and children's living conditions and urges Member States to 'take all possible measures' to support this. Of particular concern are those the furthest from the labour market and families at particular risk of poverty and disadvantage. This can be achieved by ensuring work 'pays' by tackling disincentives including those related to how the tax and social welfare systems interact. Member States should support the employability and participation of lone parents and second earners. This includes promoting gender equality in employment and in caring responsibilities along with the promotion of inclusive working environments which support the balancing of work and parenting. For parents reintegrating into the workforce following parental leave, training measures and job search initiatives should be supported. Finally, Member States are called to ensure 'effective access to affordable, quality early childhood education and care'.³ This latter measure is considered in the **Early Years** section.

The second part of this Pillar urges Member States to provide for adequate living standards by providing access to a combination of income and in-kind supports.⁴ Family incomes should be supported through adequate benefits, including specific income supports for children and families as well as access to schemes providing minimum income.⁵ The

Recommendation proposes that eligibility for support should be sensitive to the adequate redistribution of resources across income groups.⁶ EU Member States need to ensure that disincentives to work are not created for lone parents and second earners, as well as ensuring targeted income benefits avoid stigmatisation and poverty traps.⁷



Children make up
30.7%
of the population in
Ireland at risk of poverty

Investing in Children echoes Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that while parents and guardians have the primary responsibility to provide for the child's material needs, the State also has the responsibility to assist them to alleviate poverty where needed.⁸ In Ireland, a disproportionate number of children are living in households on incomes below the poverty line. While children make up just 22.8 per cent of the entire population in Ireland, they comprise 30.7 per cent of those at risk of poverty.⁹ The Child Poverty Monitor focuses on child specific income supports as opposed to adult-specific measures to support employment. This includes consideration of the adequacy of the child income supports provided by the Irish State. The redistribution of income across income groups particularly in relation to how the Government has tackled recent increases in the cost of living is also considered.

- 1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 5-6.
- 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 5.
- 4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 6 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 7 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 8 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 27.
- 9 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

Finally, given the high level of poverty for children in one parent families, how income supports available allow them to transition from welfare to employment is important.

Income support and joblessness was one priority area identified in *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office at the Department of the Taoiseach.¹⁰ The Plan recognised that national and international evidence indicates that changes to the social welfare system can have a positive impact on child poverty.¹¹ The key areas of focus included ensuring that the Increase for a Qualified Child (now known as the Child Support Payment)¹² and Working Family Payment¹³ are cognisant of increases in the cost of living.¹⁴ There is also a focus on promoting labour market inclusion policies for those families further from the labour market and supporting the income and employment situation of families headed by a lone parent.¹⁵

In response to each Budget, the Programme Office published an overview and analysis of the key measures introduced to break the cycle of poverty.¹⁶ As part of a deepening of its work during the Budget 2025 process, the Office set out six principles to bear in mind in addressing child poverty in Budget allocations.¹⁷

Three of these are relevant to adequate income:

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

The *Progress Report* outlines that, in the first eighteen months of its work plan, the Programme Office has focused on ensuring that targeted income support (such as the Child Support Payment) have not been undermined by once-off, cost of living measures and that primary social welfare payments contribute to addressing child poverty by working with key relevant departments.¹⁹

Access to income Supports for Children and Families

Investing in Children calls for the provision of an adequate standard of living through a combination of cash and in-kind benefits.²⁰ This can be achieved by supporting families with 'adequate, coherent and efficient benefits'.²¹ The annual poverty statistics captured by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) provide important data on the proportion of the population without an adequate income. The latest statistics available relate to 2025.²²

10 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.

11 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13.

12 In Budget 2025, the Increase for a Qualified Child, which is paid to social welfare recipients with a dependent child, was renamed the Child Support Payment. Government of Ireland *Budget 2025 Expenditure Report* (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform) 146.

13 Citizens Information 'Working Family Payment' <https://bit.ly/437vw6b> accessed 20 May 2025.

14 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 14.

15 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 14.

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

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

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

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

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

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

22 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

When examined by age cohort, children have the highest 'at risk of poverty' rate at 16.9 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 12.6 per cent.²³ This means that one-in-six children in Ireland are living in households with an income 60 per cent below the median income.

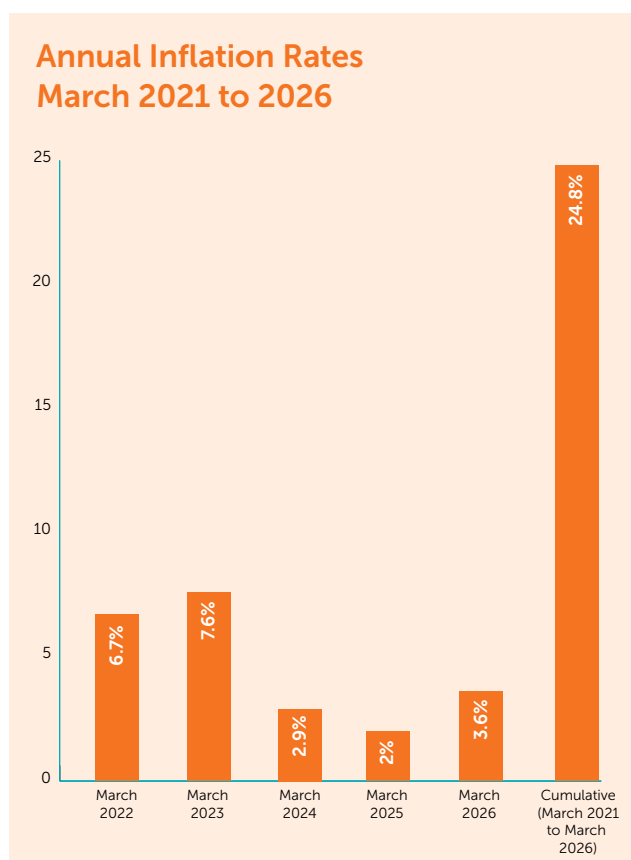
In 2024, total social welfare expenditure by the Government amounted to just under €27 billion, of which, 12.1 per cent was spent on supports for children.²⁴ The SILC data provides information about the impact social transfers have had on the poverty rates. Without social transfers, the 'at risk of poverty' rate would be substantially higher at 33.2 per cent (compared to the overall rate of 12.6 per cent).²⁵ While the data does not provide a breakdown by household type or age, it highlights the importance of the social welfare system in Ireland in addressing poverty. Therefore, it is critical that continued investment in social transfers maximises the impact that they can have on children and families on the lowest incomes.

Consumer Price Index Trends

The effectiveness and adequacy of income supports can be quickly undermined by changes in the cost of goods and services. Families on a low income are particularly impacted by increases in prices. According to data from the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the overall annual inflation rate was 3.6 per cent between March 2025 and March 2026.²⁶ This is in comparison to an annual rate of inflation of 2 per cent the previous year (March 2024 and March 2025) and 2.8 per cent in the year preceding that.²⁷ This increase in annual inflation is still far off the peak of the cost of living crisis which saw the rate increase to 7.6 per cent between March 2022 and March 2023.²⁸

However, cumulatively, inflation has gone up by 24.8 per cent in the last five years (March 2021 to March 2026).²⁹

While the latest overall annual inflation rate is 3.6 per cent, some individual components have increased further. This includes the cost of clothing which has increased by 8.5 per cent,³⁰ individual food items such as meat (12.9 per cent) and eggs (5.9 per cent)³¹ as well a significant increase in energy and fuel costs.³²



Source: Central Statistics Office (CSO) Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator <https://bit.ly/4cFydAI> accessed 11 May 2026.

23 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

24 Department of Social Protection *Statistical Information On Social Welfare Services Annual Report 2024* (2025) 8.

25 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

26 Central Statistics Office (CSO) *Consumer Price Index March 2026* (2026).

27 Central Statistics Office (CSO) *CPI Inflation Calculator* <https://bit.ly/4cFydAI> accessed 11 May 2026.

28 Central Statistics Office (CSO) *CPI Inflation Calculator* <https://bit.ly/4cFydAI> accessed 11 May 2026.

29 Central Statistics Office (CSO) *CPI Inflation Calculator* <https://bit.ly/4cFydAI> accessed 11 May 2026.

30 Central Statistics Office *Consumer Price Index 2026; Table 6 - ECOICOP Division 03 Clothing and Footwear - March 2026* (CSO 2026).

31 Central Statistics Office *Consumer Price Index 2026; Table 4 - ECOICOP Division 01 Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages - March 2026* (CSO 2026).

32 Central Statistics Office *Consumer Price Index 2026; Table 7 - ECOICOP Division 04 Housing, Water, Electricity, Gas and Other Fuels - March 2026* (CSO 2026).

Inflation has a varying effect on households with research indicating that the prices of individual items can have a disproportionate impact on certain households.³³ This is due to the different type of items each household purchases. In 2023, the Central Statistic Office published insights into how overall inflation impacts households with different patterns of consumption of goods and services.³⁴ By using data from both the Household Budget Survey and the CPI, estimates of inflation were broken down by different characteristics such as household income and household composition.³⁵ For households on the lowest income, the increased cost of energy and food were the largest contributors to their estimated rate of inflation.³⁶ For households on the highest income, mortgage interest payment, and expenditure on restaurants and hotels were their biggest contributors.³⁷

Investing in Children calls on Member States to ensure eligibility for support is sensitive to the distribution of resources across income groups. Evidence from the CSO highlights the disproportionate impact of inflation on lower income groups and the need for supports to address the cost of living to be targeted towards these groups. An analysis of inflation between September 2022 and September 2023 indicated that households with the highest incomes had a higher rate of inflation, up to 6.9 per cent compared to some households on a lower income at 6 per cent.³⁸ However, between September 2018 to September 2023, households in the lowest income decile experienced price increases of 20 per cent compared to a rate of 18.7 per cent for those in the highest income decile and an overall rate of 19.1 per cent.³⁹ This is due to price increases in daily essentials that comprise the majority of items in the budget of households on the lowest incomes. When examined

by household type, one parent families had an even higher rate at 20.3 per cent, second only to single adult households.⁴⁰ This means for low-income families ensuring children and young people have access to an adequate diet and a warm home has become increasingly difficult. This cumulative impact on low-income households needs to be addressed through investment in targeted income measures for these families.

This research has not been repeated since 2023. However, with the volatility in prices over the last number of years, conducting this analysis on an annual or biennial basis could help to further inform budgetary decisions on tackling the increased cost of living.

The Government has intervened in response to increased prices by providing a range of one-off payments in Budget 2023, 2024 and 2025 along with a number of interventions outside of the budget cycle.⁴¹ The CSO's analysis of SILC 2025 data highlights the importance of one-off measures in reducing poverty rates. The analysis shows that the 'at risk of poverty' rate for children would have been just over two percentage points higher at 19.2 per cent if the cost-of-living measures were excluded.⁴² However, these measures do not represent permanent increases in income which are needed for many families who are in receipt of social welfare or receiving a low wage from employment at rates inadequate to meet the minimum essential standard of living.

Recent geo-political events have led to a spike in energy costs and revision upwards of the forecasted inflation rate for 2026.⁴³ This is borne out in the March 2026 CPI report which shows the annual increase in the cost of heating oil was 63.3 per cent while petrol and diesel have increased by 16.5 per cent and 5.7

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

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

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

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

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

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

39 Central Statistics Office, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

40 Central Statistics Office, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

41 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2023: Expenditure Report*, (DPER 2022), p. 26. Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 'Your guide to Budget 2024', <https://bit.ly/3PLAJsY> accessed 21 May 2026. Department of the Taoiseach, 'Government announces further measures to help households with rising cost of energy' (Department of the Taoiseach 2022) < <https://bit.ly/3Oghd4R> > accessed 25 March 2025. Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 'Ministers McGrath and Donohoe announce €505 million package in measures to mitigate the cost of living' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2022) < <https://bit.ly/3zAS0y1> > accessed 14 June 2022.

42 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

43 A. Barrett, C. O'Toole and D. O'Shea *Quarterly Economic Commentary*, (ESRI Spring 2026) 28-31. Central Bank of Ireland *Quarterly Bulletin No. 1 2026* (2026).

per cent respectively.⁴⁴ This substantial increase in energy prices will have a significant impact on families on a low income. Data from the Society of St Vincent de Paul shows that in the first four months of 2026, requests for support with energy are significantly higher than in the same period in 2025.⁴⁵ However, for many households the cost of energy was already proving too high. At the end of February 2026, 316,838 domestic electricity customers were in arrears, 60.4 per cent of whom were in arrears for over 90 days. There were 179,439 domestic gas customers in arrears of which 82 per cent were in arrears for over 90 days.⁴⁶

Responses to energy increases in the last number of years have resulted in the introduction of universal measures to help families meet the costs of energy.⁴⁷ However, the cost of providing universal energy credits is significantly higher than providing target interventions to lower income households. Analysis from the Economic and Social Research Institute shows that policies like means-tested welfare increases, targeted lump-sum supports, or Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) credit changes target energy poverty hardship better than broad universal interventions.⁴⁸ It found that focusing efforts on those experiencing energy poverty would simultaneously reach more than 80 per cent of the income-poor, 85 per cent of lone parents, and 50 per cent of tenants.⁴⁹ The latter are the groups most impacted by energy poverty. This is also highlighted in the data from SILC 2025 which reveals that out of all family composition types, one parent families are most likely to be unable to keep the home adequately warm (at 12.5 per

cent).⁵⁰ Housing tenure is also an important factor with just 3.5 per cent of owner occupiers going without heating at some point in the last year compared to 16.5 per cent in the rent, or rent-free, sector.⁵¹

The ESRI calculate that supporting vulnerable households to close the gap in energy poverty gap would cost €370 million. This is 40 per cent lower than the cost of providing a €250 electricity credit in 2024 which cost €550-575 million in 2024.⁵² It is critical that Budget 2027 introduces targeted supports for the families most impacted by rising energy costs. In response to the rising costs in energy in March, the government extended the Fuel Allowance for an additional four weeks meaning that 470,000 households will receive additional financial support totalling €152.⁵³ This extension in the payment should be retained in Budget 2027 as well as increasing the value of the payment.

Adequate income supports

Investing in Children calls for family incomes to be supported by adequate benefits.⁵⁴ A Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)⁵⁵ is a measure which establishes the minimum needed to live and participate in Irish society and is a standard of living which no one should be expected to live below.⁵⁶ Through its work, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre not only establishes the cost of a MESL, but also the adequacy of social welfare payments and the national minimum wage rate in terms of meeting this cost.

44 Central Statistics Office *Consumer Price Index 2026; Table 7 - ECOICOP Division 04 Housing, Water, Electricity, Gas and Other Fuels - March 2026* (CSO 2026).

45 Communications receive by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Society of St Vincent de Paul 21 May 2026.

46 Commission for Regulation of Utilities *Arrears and NPA Disconnections February 2026 Update* (2026) 2.

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

48 Andrés Estévez and Miguel Tovar Reaños, *Energy Poverty and Affordability in Ireland* (ESRI 2026) 32.

49 Andrés Estévez and Miguel Tovar Reaños, *Energy Poverty and Affordability in Ireland* (ESRI 2026) 32.

50 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025*, (CSO 2026).

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

52 Andrés Estévez and Miguel Tovar Reaños, *Energy Poverty and Affordability in Ireland* (ESRI 2026) xi.

53 Department of the Taoiseach 'Government Announces Measures to Reduce Energy Costs' (Press Release 24 March 2026).

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

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

56 Vincentian MESL Research Centre 'What we do' <https://bit.ly/4v2uSsf> accessed 21 May 2026.

In its latest update report, published in June 2025, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre examined the adequacy of social welfare rates for 145 test household cases (95 per cent of which are families with children) over the six-year period 2020 to 2025.⁵⁷ The analysis compared the incomes these households received from social welfare with the costs they would incur to meet a Minimum Essential Standard of Living.⁵⁸ In 2025, just nine out of the 145 test household cases had an adequate income from social welfare, meaning their income was sufficient to cover the costs associated with a minimum essential standard of living.⁵⁹ Households whose income meets between 90 and 100 per cent of the MESL costs, are categorised as having an inadequate income and there were 66 out of 145 households in this category in 2025. The remaining 70 households were in deep income inadequacy as their income met less than 90 per cent of the MESL costs.⁶⁰ This means that the vast majority of households (134 out of 145 test household cases) had insufficient income from social welfare to allow them 'to meet basic needs and to take part in normal day-to-day activities and participate in society'.⁶¹ This includes children having access to adequate food and clothing, basic materials for school or attending birthday parties.⁶²

The Vincentian MESL Research Centre forecasted an improvement in income adequacy for families with children in 2026 in their post-Budget Analysis published at the end of 2025. An increase in the Child Support Payment announced in Budget 2026 raised the weekly rate of the Child Support Payment by €16 to €78 for children aged over 12 in 2026. An increase of €8 brought the rate for children under 12 years of age to €58 per week.⁶³ This increase and other social welfare measures means that the number of households in deep inadequacy is forecast to reduce from 70 to 44 while the number of households with an adequate income is forecast to increase from 9 to 37. There is a marginal change forecast in the number of households with an inadequate income from 66 to 64.⁶⁴

Social Welfare Income Adequacy Assessment (145 test cases)			
	Adequate	Inadequate	Deep Inadequacy
2026*	25%	44%	30%
2025	6%	45%	48%
2024	13%	30%	56%
2023	5%	19%	75%
2022	20%	38%	42%
2021	19%	34%	47%
2020	17%	34%	49%

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025* (2025), 36. *2026 forecasted adequacy assessment taken from Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2026* (2025) 7.

While the permanent increase in the Child Support Payment rates in Budget 2026 are welcome, in real terms the net impact to families' incomes are not as significant when compared to the one-off payments awarded at the end of 2024 in Budget 2025.⁶⁵ These combined one-off payments gave families with one child approximately €18 extra per week when spread out over a year. Yet the increase in the core social welfare rate by €10 and the rise in the Child Support Payment means that families with a child under 12 merely retain an €18 weekly increase and those with a child over 12 are just €8 per week better off.

It is critical that Budget 2027 maintains a commitment to improving the weekly Child Support Payment in order to move towards adequate social welfare payments. Benchmarking weekly social welfare rates to MESL can ensure that such income supports are responsive to the actual costs incurred by families and less likely to be masked by inflation.

57 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (2025).

58 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (2025) 36.

59 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (2025) 36.

60 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (2025) 36.

61 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (2025) 36.

62 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, Detailed Budgets <https://bit.ly/4nuiJ63> accessed 14 May 2026.

63 Department of Social Protection, *Budget 2026 Factsheet* <https://bit.ly/4dcccEO> accessed 15 May 2026.

64 MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2026* (2025) 7.

65 This calculation is based on the double-double Child Benefit payment; two additional payments of social welfare in October and December and the €100 Child Support Payment lump sum payment.

Specific Income Supports for Children and Families

The government provides both universal and targeted income support payments for families with children. This is in line with *Investing in Children* which emphasises a need for specific income supports for families and children.⁶⁶ Child Benefit is a universal payment made each month to parents of children under the age of 16.⁶⁷ The payment is also made in respect of children aged 16, 17, and 18 who are in full-time education or training or who have a disability and cannot support themselves.⁶⁸ To access Child Benefit, recipients must meet the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC).⁶⁹ The HRC has a disproportionate impact on certain groups of children and families, such as those living in Direct Provision, or those from Traveller and Roma communities, who can face difficulties in accessing Child Benefit. While Child Benefit is paid to all families regardless of their income, adults in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment and who have a dependent child receive additional support with the Child Support Payment.⁷⁰

The analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre highlights the inadequacies of current social welfare rates, making a strong argument for targeting increases in the Child Support Payment as a means of tackling child poverty.

Analysis from the Parliamentary Budget Office shows that increasing the weekly rate of the Child Support Payment by €5 has the greatest impact on families in the lowest income decile increasing income by 0.51 per cent followed by the second (0.22 per cent) and third (0.147 per cent) deciles.⁷¹ A €20 increase in the monthly rate of Child Benefit does show greater improvements in the income of the three lowest deciles at 0.69 per cent; 0.578 per cent and 0.484 per cent respectively.⁷² However, the costs of the latter is substantially higher at €294.45 million versus €67.68 million for the Child Support Payment.⁷³

Addressing the different needs of children

Investing in Children calls for income supports to differentiate between children's needs.⁷⁴ Adequate social welfare rates that address the changing needs of a child are vital to ensuring their basic needs are met. The MESL research has consistently identified older children as having additional and distinct needs in comparison to younger children. In 2025, the minimum needs of children in second level education cost €162.15 per week in an urban area and €152.09 per week in a rural area.⁷⁵ The needs of a pre-school child are half the cost of this at €75.84 and €75.96 per week respectively.⁷⁶ Significantly lower costs are also calculated for infant and primary school age children.

MESL Cost of a Child 2025		
Age Group	Urban	Rural
Infant	€81.18	€81.38
Pre-School	€75.84	€75.96
Primary	€100.73	€94.93
Secondary	€162.15	€152.09

Source: Vincentian MESL Research Centre, Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 (2025), Appendix Tables 3A.

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

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

67 Citizens Information 'Child Benefit' <https://bit.ly/43lcUQx> accessed 18 May 2026.

68 Citizens Information 'Child Benefit' <https://bit.ly/43lcUQx> accessed 18 May 2026.

69 Citizens Information 'Habitual Residence Condition' <https://bit.ly/3XZklE0> accessed 18 May 2026.

70 Citizens Information 'Claiming for a Child Dependent' <https://bit.ly/41ZMtNW> accessed 18 May 2026.

71 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Progressivity of Universal v Targeted Measures', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 18 May 2026.

72 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Progressivity of Universal v Targeted Measures', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 18 May 2026.

73 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Progressivity of Universal v Targeted Measures', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 18 May 2026.

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

75 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025* (MESL Research Centre 2025), Appendix Tables 3A.

76 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025* (MESL Research Centre 2025), Appendix Tables 3A.

In 2024, income supports for an infant child met just 84 per cent their MESL costs.⁷⁷ However, in 2025, the introduction of the new baby grant⁷⁸ meant that income supports met 113 per cent of their MESL costs.⁷⁹ In 2025, the costs for a pre-school child were also fully met by income supports at 115 per cent of costs.⁸⁰ In 2026, the costs of a pre-school child are forecast to further improve with the expansion of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to 2 and 3 year olds meaning their needs will be met by social welfare income supports by a 128 per cent.⁸¹

Income supports for other age groups of children were inadequate, with the social welfare income for primary school children meeting just 88 per cent of costs and the shortfall for children at second-level even greater at 64 per cent in 2025.⁸² The record increases in the Child Support Payment in Budget 2026 means that these rates are forecasted to improve at 95 per cent and 73 per cent respectively.⁸³ This underlines the importance of targeting increases in income supports towards those in most in need, such as older children and families in receipt of social welfare.

Introducing a new Targeted Child Payment

In line with the *Investing in Children Recommendation* which calls for means-tested supports to targeted 'in a way that avoids stigmatisation...and reduces the risk of poverty traps' the government has been giving to the introduction of a new targeted child income support payment. The *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future* contains a commitment to explore a 'targeted Child Benefit Payment' and how this would interact with 'existing targeted supports to reduce Child Poverty such as the Working Family Payment and Child Support Payment'.⁸⁴

In May 2026, the Department of Social Protection published a discussion document exploring both the introduction of a Targeted Child Payment and a Working Age Payment.⁸⁵

Existing work by researchers at the ESRI have explored the introduction of a targeted child income support and this included modelling a number of different scenarios to see how the 'at risk of poverty' rate for children could be reduced through income supports.⁸⁶ Amongst the options explored, was raising existing child-specific income supports. Achieving a similar outcome, of reducing the 'at risk of poverty' rate by 1 per cent, required investing an additional €535 million in Child Benefit or €334 million in Child Support Payment paid to all social welfare recipients with dependent children. Focusing investment on the Child Support Payment represents a more targeted approach than directing resources to Child Benefit as beneficiaries are at the lower end of the income distribution. Targeting increased resources towards Child Benefit would mean much of the spending would go towards parents on higher incomes.⁸⁷

Another proposal looked to address the potential disincentives to work that increases to the Child Support Payment may present by increasing the Work Family Payment (WFP). To achieve the reduction in the 'at risk of poverty' rate for children, spending would need to increase by just €187 million, substantially lower than the two previous proposals. While this proposal would not benefit children in households on the lowest incomes, combining it with an increase in the Child Support Payment may help with reaching those on the lowest incomes. Although, it could still exclude some children living in households which fall between both of these payments, such as those ineligible for the WFP and receiving little from the Child Support Payment.⁸⁸

77 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2025) 32.

78 Budget 2025 introduced a grant for children born or adopted on or after 1 December 2024. This grant is €280 and is paid in addition to the first month of Child Benefit. Citizens Information 'Child Benefit' <https://bit.ly/43lcUQx> accessed 18 May 2026.

79 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2025) 32.

80 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2025) 32.

81 MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2026* (2025) 5.

82 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2025) 32.

83 MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2026* (2025) 5.

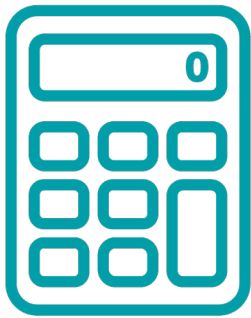
84 Government Of Ireland, *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 101.

85 Department of Social Protection *A Public Discussion Paper exploring options for a new Targeted Child Payment and a new Working Age Payment in Ireland* (2026).

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

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

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



The final option considers the recommendation from the Commission on Taxation and Welfare to introduce a second-tier child income support. By integrating the Child Support Payment and the Working Family Payment, each family would receive an income support based on their means and the number of dependent children.

This would mean providing increased resources to those who currently do not qualify for the Working Family Payment. A worked example from the authors proposes that a one parent family with one child (aged 13), in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, would receive €222.60 per week, versus the then existing rate of €50 per week. This simplified version of this proposed reform calculates that the 'at risk of poverty rate for children would reduce by 3.8 percentage points, or 40,000 children, at a cost of €691 million per year. In addition, it would move those on incomes lower than the poverty line closer to the poverty line.⁸⁹ The distributional impact of this proposal indicates that those on the lowest incomes would benefit the most.⁹⁰

The introduction of a second-tier child benefit payment achieves a greater impact than other proposals in terms of reducing the 'at risk of poverty' rate for children. However, this measure would require reform of existing social welfare payments. The researchers caution that the introduction of such a proposal needs 'careful consideration and analysis' to minimise the unintended interactions with other taxation and social welfare measures.⁹¹ For example, there is a need to consider how a second-tier payment would interact with existing entitlements to secondary benefits and whether it could act as a disincentive to work.

Access to an Adequate Income for Families in Direct Provision

In 2021, the previous Government committed to the introduction of a monthly International Protection Child Payment that would be provided at the same rate as Child Benefit.⁹² The Government made provision in two budgets for this payment, yet this has still not been implemented. Children in Direct Provision currently receive a Daily Expense Allowance (DEA) weekly payment of just €29.80.⁹³ Historically, the rate of DEA has been significantly lower than other social welfare payments for children. The DEA rate has remained unchanged since 2019 despite increases being applied to the Child Support Payment and a separate rate being established for children under and over the age of 12.⁹⁴

While families in Direct Provision can access the annual Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme and the Exceptional Needs Payment Scheme,⁹⁵ children living in Direct Provision system do not have access to the Child Benefit payment given to all children habitually resident in the State. Given this, they also did not receive the two payments of double Child Benefit as part of recent cost of living measures.⁹⁶ The Vincentian MESL Research Centre published a working paper in May 2023 on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) costs for families in Direct Provision. This desk-based research exercise found that the income supports provided to each individual family member living in Direct Provision accommodation are inadequate to meet their estimated MESL need.⁹⁷

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

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

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

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

93 Citizen's Information, *Direct Provision System* <<http://bit.ly/3S3dydD>> accessed 13 May 2026.

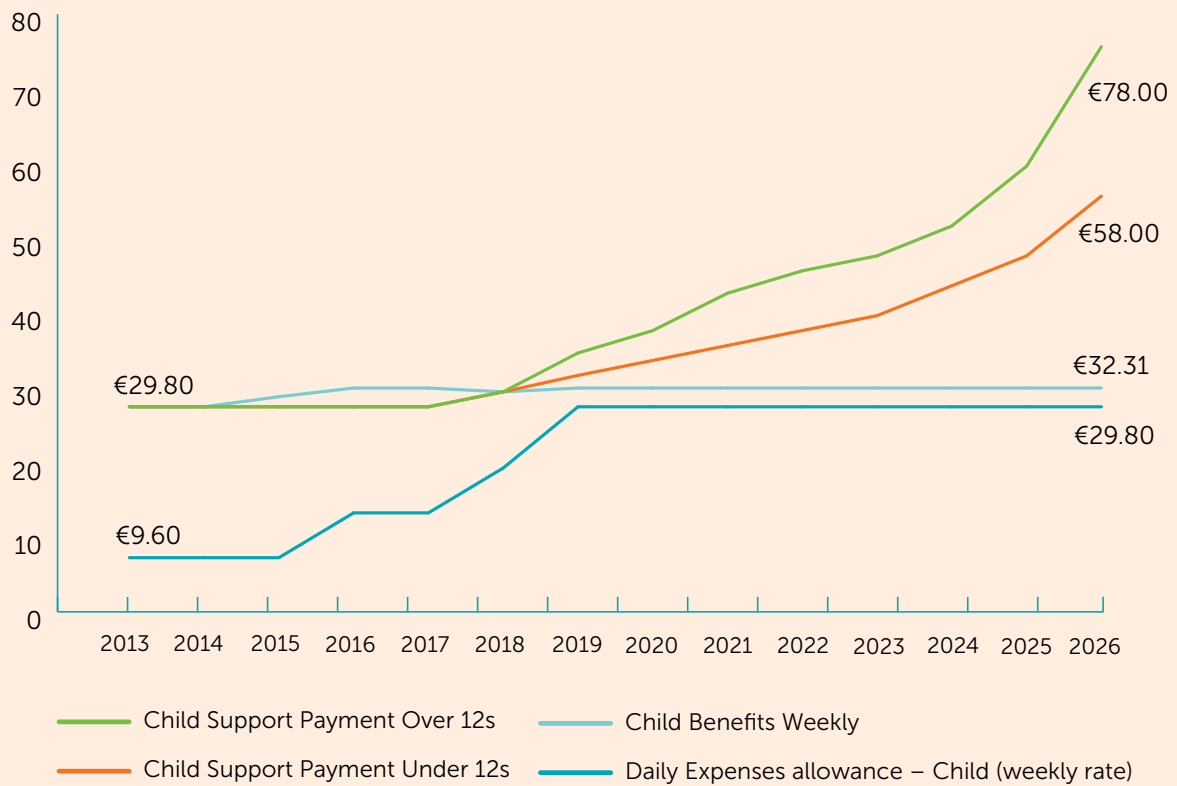
94 Data is compiled from relevant Budget documentation which is available from Citizen's Information, *Budgets* <<https://bit.ly/3LNBjdj>> accessed 13 May 2026.

95 Data is compiled from relevant Budget documentation which is available from Citizen's Information, *Budgets* <<https://bit.ly/3LNBjdj>> accessed 13 May 2026.

96 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes record €837m investment from Budget 2025' <<https://bit.ly/4fYjlpH>> accessed 13 May 2026.

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

Increases in Child Income Support Payments Budget 2013 to Budget 2026



Source: Data is compiled from relevant Budget documentation which is available from Citizen’s Information, Budgets <<https://bit.ly/3LNBjdj>> accessed 13 May 2026.

A recent research report published by Doras in March 2026 confirm this lack of adequate income. It found the most frequently reported challenge in education cited by parents living in international protection accommodation service (IPAS) accommodation was the inability of their children to attend extra-curricular activities due to lack of finances.⁹⁸ Parents also reported difficulty affording schoolbooks, uniforms, or voluntary contributions. Key stakeholders who work with families in IPAS state in the report the ‘weekly allowance is often not enough to cover groceries, particularly for families. We hear of children going to school hungry, with schools raising concerns.’⁹⁹

The continuing failure of the Government to implement the International Protection Child Payment following the allocation of funding in two successive Budgets is extremely disappointing. This is in spite of the commitment made by Government as well as the clear rationale for it provided when allocating the funding in Budget 2025 in terms of cost effectiveness and reducing child poverty.¹⁰⁰ The International Protection Child Payment must now be implemented as a matter of urgency.

98 C. Smyth, C. O’Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap: International Protection Accommodation in Ireland and Compliance with National Standards* (Doras 2026) 109.

99 C. Smyth, C. O’Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap: International Protection Accommodation in Ireland and Compliance with National Standards* (Doras 2026) 142.

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

Ensuring that one parent families have sufficient access to income supports

Investing in Children calls for Member States to ensure that means tested and targeted benefits avoid creating work disincentives for lone parents and second earners. Since 2016, nine reports on one parent families and poverty have been published, including the 2017 Joint Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland.¹⁰¹ Each of these reports paints a similar picture of children and young people growing up in the grip of poverty.

The latest poverty statistics in SILC 2025 continue to demonstrate high levels of poverty in households consisting of one adult, with children under 18 years of age, in contrast to the overall rates and those experienced by other households with children.¹⁰² Almost half of all households containing one parent families are living in deprivation (48.7 per cent).¹⁰³ This is over three times higher than the deprivation rate for the population as a whole (15.1 per cent) and four times higher than households of two adults with children (12.3 per cent).¹⁰⁴ A similar pattern is evident with regard to consistent poverty. Over one in ten one-parent households with children experience 'consistent poverty' (13.4 per cent) compared to just 4.7 per cent of the total population.¹⁰⁵ The rates for households with two adults with children, and other households with children under 18, are both significantly lower at 4.2 per cent and 7.6 per cent, respectively.¹⁰⁶ Finally, the risk of poverty for one parent families was 17.1 per cent in 2025, a decrease from the 2024 rate of 24.2 per cent.

Comparison of Poverty Rates between 1 adult and 2 adult households with children			
	At risk of poverty	Enforced Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
State	12.6	15.1	4.7
1 adult with children aged under 18	17.1	48.7	13.4
2 adults with 1-3 children aged under 18	13.6	12.3	4.2
Other households with children aged under 18	16.8	21.4	7.6

Source: CSO *Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2025* (CSO 2026).

Over the last five years, the poverty rates for one parent families have remained significantly higher than those for the entire population. While there has been a welcome decrease in the at risk of poverty rate, over 40 per cent of one parent families are recorded as experiencing deprivation each year. Furthermore, their rates of consistent poverty are significantly higher than those experienced by the general population and the population as whole.

Further insight about the lack of adequate income experienced by one parent families to meet all expenditure costs is provided in the *SILC: Enforced Deprivation 2025* report.¹⁰⁷

In 2025, 44.8 per cent of all households reported some level of difficulty in making ends meet, with 6.4 per cent reporting great difficulty.¹⁰⁸ Two adult households with one-to-three children under the age of 18 experienced a higher 'overall rate of difficulty' and a higher 'rate of great difficulty' making ends meet than the general population (49.1 per cent and 6.8 per cent respectively).¹⁰⁹

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

102 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

103 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

104 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

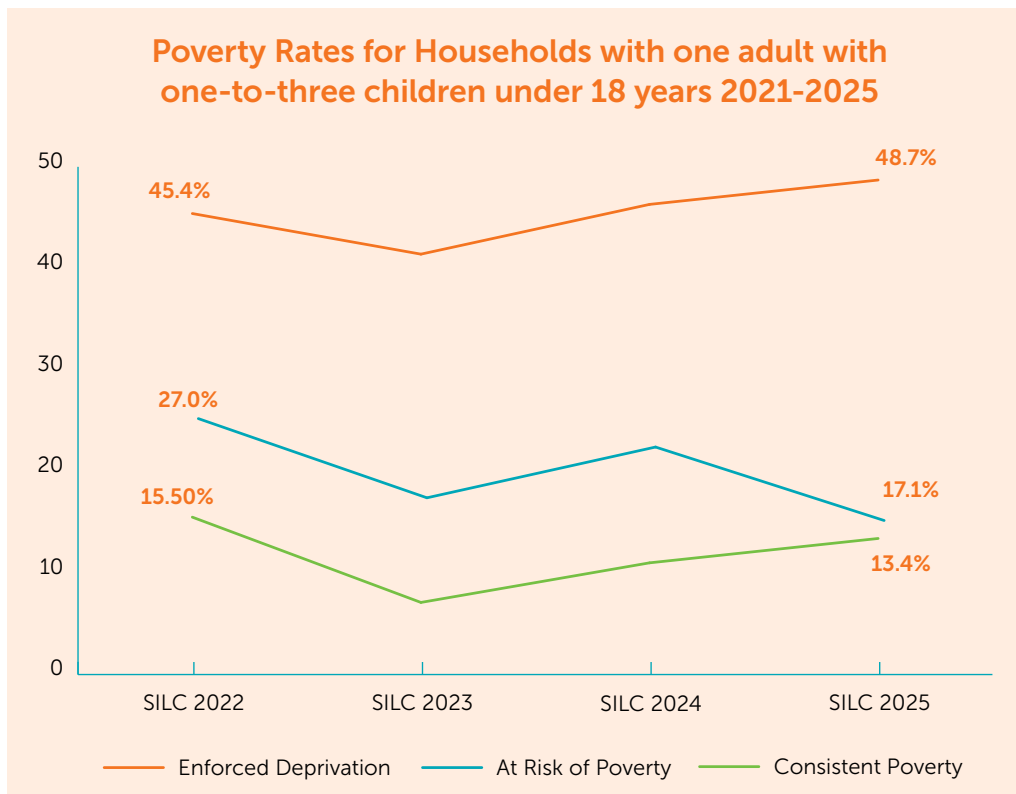
105 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

106 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO 2026).

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

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

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



Source: CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2025 (CSO 2026).

However, households comprising of one adult with children under 18 reported much higher rates across all levels of difficulty. The vast majority of one parent households reported some level of difficulty making ends meet (83.7 per cent), with one in five reporting great difficulty (19.8 per cent).¹¹⁰

In Budget 2020, the earnings disregard for the One Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's Transitional payments was increased by €15 (a weekly rate of €165), and it remained at this rate in 2025.¹¹¹ This was a significant increase given that when the One Parent Family Payment was introduced in 1997 the earnings disregard was €146.50 (or £115.38).¹¹² The increase in Budget 2020 meant a lone parent could earn up to €165 per week and may still be entitled to their full rate of the One Parent Family Payment.

However, since then, the National Minimum Wage has increased by €4.05 to €14.15.¹¹³ This means that while the disregard equated to 16.3 hours of the National Minimum Wage in 2020, it now only equals 11.7 hours.¹¹⁴ The Vincentian MESL Research Centre note that the cumulative impact of this erosion in value means a lone parent working full-time on the National Minimum Wage would qualify for €19 less per week in the partial adult One Parent Family Payment personal rate in 2025 compared to 2020.¹¹⁵ Increasing the earnings disregard in line with the National Minimum Wage would contribute to the commitment in *Investing in Children* to remove disincentives to work for lone parents, as well as ensuring targeted supports avoid stigmatisation and poverty traps.

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

111 Citizens Information, 'Budget 2020', <https://bit.ly/45BejBH> accessed 18 May 2026.

112 Indecon *Independent Review of the Amendments to the One-parent Family Payment since January 2012* (Department of Social and Family Affairs 2017) 2.

113 Citizens Information, 'Minimum Wage' <https://bit.ly/426vqm3> accessed 18 May 2026.

114 Twenty years earlier, in 2000 the National Minimum Wage was €5.58 meaning that lone parents could work for 26.25 hours before their payment was cut. Gov.ie 'The History of the Minimum Wage in Ireland' <https://bit.ly/4tPRGDQ> accessed 21 May 2026.

115 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, Budget 2026 MESL Impact Briefing, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2025) 10.

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Close the gap between the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living for a child over 12 years through targeted increases in the weekly Child Support Payment by applying a minimum of a 20 per cent increase in the over 12s rate in Budget 2027. Increase the Child Support Payment for under 12s by a minimum of 10 per cent in Budget 2027.
- Implement the €4.7 million and €8.4 million allocated to the International Protection Child Payment from Budgets 2024 and 2025, for all children living in the international protection system as a matter of urgency.
- Increase the earnings disregard of the One Parent Family Payment to €255 per week to restore its value to 2020 levels and index link future increases to the National Minimum Wage rate.
- Increase the Fuel Allowance by €4 per week and retain the additional four weeks that the payment was extended for in 2026 permanently.

Long-term

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

Food Poverty



FOOD POVERTY

The European Commission's Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (Investing in Children)* proposes three integrated strategies to address child poverty. While the Recommendation does not specifically mention the term 'food poverty', there is reference to nutrition and diet in two of its three-pillars. Under the pillar access to adequate resources, Member States are encouraged to 'provide for adequate living standard' through 'an optimal combination of cash and in-kind benefits', including in-kind benefits for nutrition.¹ As part of the pillar on affordable quality services, Member States are encouraged to improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children and tackle the 'social gradient in unhealthy lifestyles' by providing children with 'access to balanced diets.'² Furthermore, the Recommendation calls for investment 'in prevention, particularly during early childhood years, by putting in place comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures.'³

Definitions of food poverty include reference to 'an inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility' along with reference to the 'social and cultural participatory' aspects of food such as sharing a meal outside of the home with friends or family.⁴ A more recent definition has described food poverty as occurring 'when an individual or family has insufficient access to an adequate quantity and quality of food to maintain a nutritionally satisfactory and socially acceptable diet'.⁵ Crucially this definition points out that it is 'a social determinant of health and is associated with significant adverse health outcomes'.⁶ This aligns with the scope of *Investing in Children* which calls on Member States

to address issues of affordability through the access to adequate resources pillar, the incorporation of nutrition in education and social measures, and as part of health systems responsiveness to the needs of children experiencing disadvantage.⁷

Research has shown the harm caused to children who experience food poverty with literature highlighting that there are multi-dimensional impacts of food poverty on children. This includes both psychological (impacting on mental health, depression and anxiety) and physiological (including stunting, being underweight and adverse developmental consequences) effects.⁸ The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) found that children attending schools participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, located in areas of concentrated socio-economic disadvantage, have significantly higher levels of obesity than children in non-DEIS schools.⁹

Policy Context

There is currently no overarching national policy to tackle food poverty in Ireland. Under the last government, the Food Poverty Working Group was established by the then Minister of State with responsibility for social inclusion. The Working Group included representatives from across a number of government departments and from the community and voluntary sector.¹⁰ Its purpose was to advance the commitment in the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* to 'develop a comprehensive programme of work to further explore the drivers of food poverty and to identify mitigating actions'.¹¹

- 1 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.13 C(2013) 778 final) 6.
- 2 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.13 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 3 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final), 8.
- 4 C. Carney and B. Maitre *Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (Department of Social Protection 2012) 5.
- 5 Safefood *Communicating food poverty on the island of Ireland* (Safefood 2024) iii.
- 6 Safefood *Communicating food poverty on the island of Ireland* (Safefood 2024) iii.
- 7 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.13 C(2013) 778 final) 6-7.
- 8 L. Vazquez Mendoza and P. McDonagh *Child Food Poverty in Ireland: A Mapping Review of the National and International Evidence* (Dublin City University 2022) 5-6.
- 9 O Kilduff, et al., *The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) in the Republic of Ireland - Findings from 2022 and 2023* (HSE 2024) 25.
- 10 Department of Social Protection 'Minister O'Brien Announces New Working Group on Food Poverty' (Department of Social Protection 2021).
- 11 Department of Social Protection, *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (Department of Social Protection 2020) 71.

As part of its work, the Food Poverty Working Group published a report highlighting that a significant level of funding across different government departments was being provided to directly (€89 million in 2021) and in-directly (€399 million) address food poverty.¹²

In July 2024, the Working Group published an Action Plan with 21 actions across multiple government departments to tackle the issue of food poverty between 2024 and 2027.¹³ Some of these actions included;

- continue to expand the Hot School Meals scheme;¹⁴
- monitor nutritional content in the hot school meals programme;
- scope initiatives to tackle Holiday Hunger;¹⁵

The election of a new government in November 2024, and the timeline of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* drawing to a close, meant that the Working Group did not reconvene in its previous format (containing both departmental and community and voluntary sector representatives). However, work on examining the nutritional content of the hot school meals programme did advance under a separate inter-departmental group convened to address issues relating to the quality and nutritional aspects of the scheme raised by the media and parents.¹⁶

It is anticipated that the successor to the *Roadmap on Social Inclusion* will be published in the first half of 2026 and it is hoped this will include a recommendation on food poverty.

The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office refer to the issue of food poverty in their initial work plan *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme for Child Poverty and Wellbeing*, which ran up to the end of 2025. The Programme Office noted that it is an area they will provide a focus on as part of their priority focus on reducing the cost of education.¹⁷ In January 2025, a progress report on its first 18 months of work highlighted that the expansion of hot school meals to non-DEIS primary schools and increased investment in the funding available for this initiative over two Budget cycles as key measures of progress.¹⁸

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

Children in enforced deprivation

There is no official means of measuring food poverty in Ireland.¹⁹ However, in 2012, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) constructed a measurement using four food deprivation indicators captured by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC).²⁰ Three of these measures are used to calculate the rate of consistent poverty, they are:

- Unable to afford a roast once a week,
- Unable to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day,
- Unable to have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month.

The first two of these items relate to affordability while the third relates to the socialisation aspect of food.²¹

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

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

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

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

16 The Interdepartmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme *Submission to the Committee on Education and Youth on Evaluating the Impacts of the School Meals Programme* (Houses of the Oireachtas) <https://bit.ly/4ty64kP> accessed 27 April 2026.

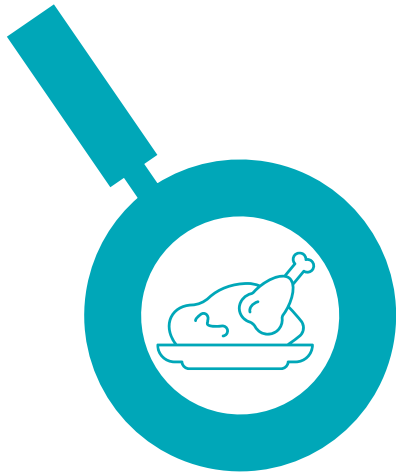
17 Department of the Taoiseach *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme for Child Poverty and Wellbeing: Initial Programme Plan July 2023 to December 2025* (Government of Ireland 2023) 15.

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

19 Department of Social Protection *Food Poverty – Government programmes, schemes and supports* (2022) 5.

20 C. Carney and B. Maitre *Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (Department of Social Protection 2012) 11-12.

21 CSO *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025* (CSO 2026).



4.8% of children were living in households that were unable to afford a roast once a week in 2025.

SILC provides insights about the proportion of the entire population experiencing these deprivation measures. According to SILC 2025, 4.8 per cent of the population as a whole indicated that they are unable to afford a roast once a week.²² This rate was slightly lower for households containing two adults and one-to-three children at 4.1 per cent. However, households with one adult and one-to-three children had a much higher rate of 14.5 per cent.²³ When examined by age group, 4.8 per cent of children were living in households that were unable to afford a roast once a week in 2025.²⁴

The second affordability indicator, the ability to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day, had a lower prevalence rate with just 1.7 per cent of the population experiencing this deprivation measure.²⁵ This rate was marginally higher for children, at 2.3 per cent, but substantially higher for households containing one adult and one-to-three children at 12.2 per cent. Households containing two adults and one-to-three children had a much lower rate of 0.5 per cent.²⁶

Finally, the third indicator shows a much higher prevalence than the two previous measures. Overall, 10 per cent of the population were unable to have family or friends over for a drink or meal once a month. While households containing two adults and one-to-three children had similar prevalence of experiencing this, the rate for one adult households with one-to-three children was significantly higher at 31.5 per cent. When broken down by age, 13.6 per cent of children were living in households unable to have friends and family over for food or drinks once a month.

SILC 2025 Statistics				
	Population	Households containing 1 adult and 1-3 children	Households containing 2 adults and 1-3 children	0-17 year olds
Unable to afford a roast once a week	4.8%	14.5%	4.1%	5.6%
Unable to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day	1.7%	12.2%	0.5%	2.3%
Unable to have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month	10%	31.5%	9.9%	13.6%

Source: CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (CSO 2026).

22 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025 (CSO 2026).

23 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025 (CSO 2026), SIA 135 <https://bit.ly/3OnEPKH> accessed 24 April 2026.

24 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025 (CSO 2026) SIA 132 <https://bit.ly/4sWKOnt> accessed 24 April 2026.

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

26 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025 (CSO 2026), SIA 135 <https://bit.ly/3OnEPKH> accessed 24 April 2026.

Food deprivation rates for individuals living in consistent poverty

SILC 2025 provides an analysis of the proportion of households and individuals living in consistent poverty and experiencing food-related deprivation. In 2025, almost one-third, 31.4 per cent, of individuals living in consistent poverty were unable to afford a roast once a week.²⁷ This is compared to just 3.5 per cent of individuals not in consistent poverty. A much higher percentage of people living in consistent poverty were unable to afford a roast dinner in 2025 compared to 2024 when the rate was 20.8 per cent.

While just 1.2 per cent of individuals not in consistent poverty were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day this rose to 12.2 per cent of individuals in consistent poverty.²⁸ The ESRI's 2012 study notes that this indicator suggests 'severe food deprivation' as the 'recommended daily allowance is to consume two servings of protein per day'.²⁹

Finally, almost two-thirds of those in consistent poverty are unable to have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month. This is compared to just 7.4 per cent of those not living in consistent poverty. This means that a large proportion of households and individuals living in consistent poverty may be restricting 'their social patterns due to not being able to afford certain products, or to participate in certain events considered a norm by society'.³⁰

The graph below captures the trends in the percentage of individuals in consistent poverty experiencing food deprivation between 2020 and 2025. There is a degree of volatility in the levels of food deprivation being experienced over this five-year period, perhaps in response to the ongoing increase in food prices and cost of living crisis and the failure of social welfare and the National Minimum Wage rates to keep pace of these price changes. However, across all three measures, between 2024 and 2025 there has been an increase in the proportion of individuals living in consistent poverty experiencing food deprivation.



SILC 2025 Statistics ³¹		
	Percentage of individuals in consistent poverty	Percentage of individuals not in consistent poverty
Unable to afford a roast once a week	31.4%	3.5%
Unable to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day	12.2%	1.2%
Unable to have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month	63.5%	7.4%

Source: Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025' (CSO 2026), SIA80 <https://bit.ly/4t0hrRz> accessed 24 April 2026.

27 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025' (CSO 2026), SIA80 <https://bit.ly/4t0hrRz> accessed 24 April 2026.

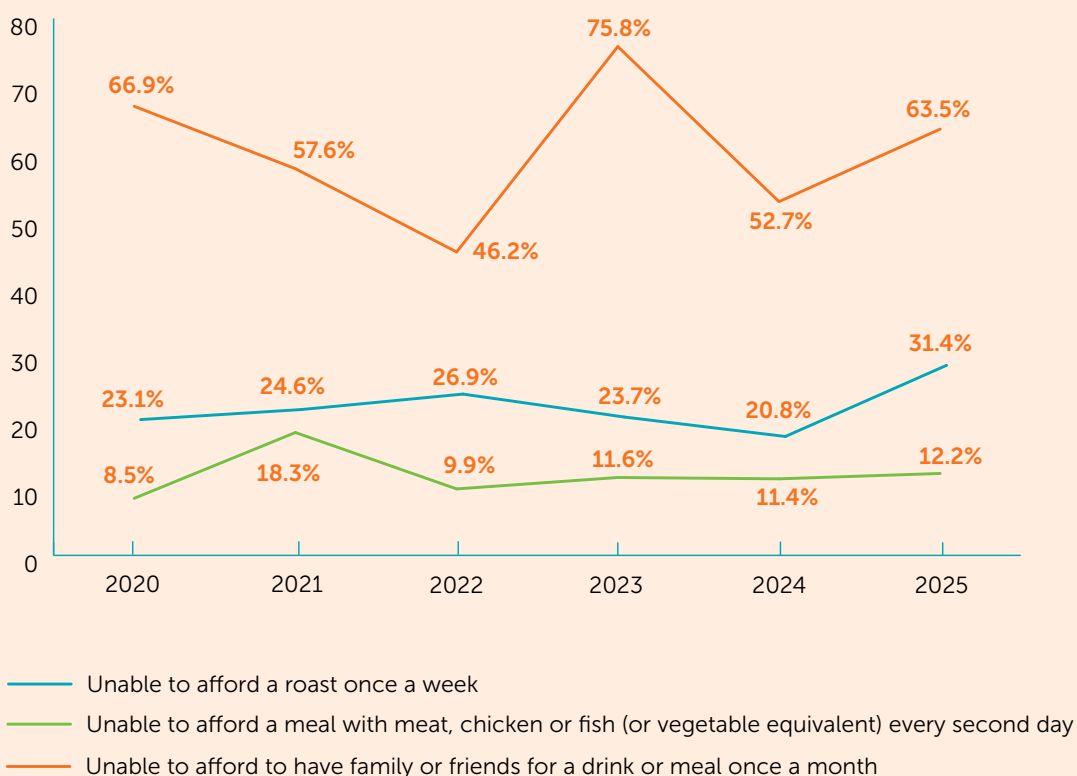
28 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025' (CSO 2026), SIA80 <https://bit.ly/4t0hrRz> accessed 24 April 2026.

29 C. Carney and B. Maitre *Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (Department of Social Protection 2012) 11.

30 C. Carney and B. Maitre *Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (Department of Social Protection 2012) 12.

31 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025' (CSO 2026), SIA80 <https://bit.ly/4t0hrRz> accessed 24 April 2026.

Percentage of Individuals in Consistent Poverty Experiencing Food Deprivation



Source: Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025' (CSO 2026), SIA80 <https://bit.ly/4t0hrRz> accessed 24 April 2026.

While the rates of food deprivation relate to 2025, difficulty in managing the costs related to food remain just as relevant in 2026. According to the Society of St Vincent de Paul the number of requests for support with food are already higher in the first four months of this year compared to last year.³²

The effects of inflation on individual food items

According to the latest data from the Consumer Price Index, between March 2025 and March 2026, the overall cost of food increased by 2.3 per cent in Ireland³³. This is lower than overall inflation at 3.6 per cent. However, a more detailed examination of specific food items shows that while some have

fallen in price, such as dried fruit (-2.0 per cent) and skimmed milk (-6.2 per cent), others have increased at a rate higher than the overall inflation rate including meat (12.9 per cent) and eggs (5.9 per cent).³⁴

Food costs make up one of the largest individual components of a household's budget for families with children. For families living in urban areas, the food budget is the largest component of households headed by two parents and comprises between 23 and 25 per cent of their weekly budget. The food budget for one parent families is the second highest weekly outgoing, social inclusion and participation is marginally higher for these families, comprising between 19 and 23 per cent of total weekly expenditure.³⁵ As children get older, the cost of a healthy food basket increases. The weekly cost for

³² Communications receive by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Society of St Vincent de Paul 21 May 2026.

³³ Central Statistics Office (CSO) *Consumer Price Index 2026; Table 4 - ECOICOP Division 01 Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages - March 2026* (CSO 2026).

³⁴ Central Statistics Office (CSO) *Consumer Price Index 2026; Table 4 - ECOICOP Division 01 Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages - March 2026* (CSO 2026).

³⁵ Vincentian MESL Research Centre *MESL 2025 Appendix* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2025) 1A.

an infant is €26.94, €21.29 for a pre-school child, €26.72 for a primary school child, and up to €50.53 per week for a young person in secondary school in an urban area.³⁶



Between March 2025 and March 2026, the overall cost of food increased by 2.3 per cent in Ireland.

Rural households have higher costs of accessing a healthy diet.³⁷ However, in nominal terms, there is only a marginal difference in the cost of the urban food budget for families of a similar size or for children of the same age. For instance, the costs of a healthy food basket for infant, pre-school, primary and second level school children is within €1 of the cost in urban areas.³⁸ In rural areas, the food budget is the second highest expenditure category for families, the highest outgoing relates to transport.³⁹ Research which explored the issue of food poverty in a rural area noted that the closest supermarkets were 10 km away with limited public transport access.⁴⁰ The MESL research takes account of the fact that families in a rural area need access to their own car for many reasons including having access to a supermarket.⁴¹ Therefore, the research assumes that households in rural areas can manage access to the supermarket

using a car as well as including provision for the top-up of essential items (such as milk and bread) from a local shop. However, this does mean the overall cost of their budget increases.

Lack of adequate income is a central issue for families experiencing food poverty. This should be addressed through the provision of adequate income through key social welfare payments. This means increasing the rates of the Child Support Payment, paid to all social welfare recipients with dependents and other supports available to families with children (Working Family Payment; One Parent Family Payment). Sustained increases in the cost of living in the last number of years means that social welfare rates have not kept pace with food prices.

Barriers to accessing healthy nutritional food

Many families with children find it difficult to afford food due to a lack of an adequate income, unable to meet increasing prices. However, this can be further compounded by an inability to access the means to purchase, prepare and store food. This can be a result of both where a family lives, and their living circumstances.

Food environments can fall into different categories. Building on the work of researchers in the UK, who described the lack of access to affordable nutritious food as food deserts,⁴² recent research in Ireland defined food deserts' as residential areas where the closest supermarket is more than 1.6 kilometres (or 1 mile) away in an urban area, or more than 16 kilometres (or 10 miles) in a rural area.⁴³ Conversely, 'food swamps' is a term developed by researchers in the United States who examined the issue of access to food in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.⁴⁴ In the Irish research these were defined as residential areas where the ratio of unhealthy food outlets (takeaway restaurants, convenience stores, petrol stations, and corner shops) to healthy food outlets (supermarkets, grocery stores, butchers, and

36 Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2025 Appendix (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2025) 3A.

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

38 Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2025: Appendix (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2025) 3A.

39 Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2025: Appendix (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2025) 1A.

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

41 Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL 2025 (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2025) 20.

42 See Beaumont, J., Lang, T., Leather, S. and Mucklow, C. *Report from the Policy Sub-group to the Nutrition Task Force: Low Income Project Team* (1995 Institute of Grocery Distribution).

43 Liffey Partnership, *Spinning Plates: Addressing Food Poverty in Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot* (Liffey Partnership, 2025) 74.

44 D. Rose, J.N. Bodor et al. *Deserts in New Orleans? Illustrations of urban food access and implications for policy* (2009 University of Michigan National Poverty Center/USDA Economic Research Service Research).

greengrocers) is over 3.89.⁴⁵ The disproportional representation of unhealthy food outlets in some communities makes it harder for families to seek out healthy food outlet options. Families may prioritise shopping in unhealthier food outlets that are within walking distance or purchasing cheaper takeaway meals due to their convenience.⁴⁶ This, combined with a lack of transport infrastructure to access cheaper supermarket or where transport exists, an inability to carry a full weekly shop along with managing children as part of the journey, makes purchasing affordable healthy food difficult.

For families living in homeless emergency accommodation and in Direct Provision, their living circumstances mean accessing a nutritional diet is particularly challenging. In a qualitative research study on families experiencing homelessness, one quarter of participants raised concerns about dietary and food needs.⁴⁷ While some families had access to a kitchen to cook this was not without its challenges regarding the quality of the facilities and time allocation to cook. However, many families needed to buy take-aways or fast-food.⁴⁸ Parents living in Direct Provision have highlighted the distress of being unable to prepare food for children and babies with specific medical needs in centres where they lived.⁴⁹ One parent said, that they were 'not allowed to cook even soup or heating the milk'.⁵⁰ In contrast, those who had access to kitchens, described the ability to cook as restoring dignity, autonomy and family life.⁵¹ Other challenges reported by Children's Rights Alliance members include the fact that the rules of accommodation centres mean children must be constantly minded until they turn 18. At the same time children may be prohibited from being in the kitchen area. This makes preparing meals physically impossible for some families headed by one parent.

Addressing food poverty through in-kind supports and by targeting supports to those experiencing disadvantage

In examining the issue of food poverty in Ireland, two systemic drivers stand out as impacting families with children:

1. Affordability which is driven by the inadequacy of income particularly for those in receipt of social welfare and dependent on low-income employment;
2. Accessibility which is driven by where and the circumstances in which many families experiencing poverty are living.

Addressing the inadequacy of income will take sustained increases in social welfare supports over multiple budget cycles so that payments reach a rate that meets a MESL. Equally, the entrenched housing crisis means that families will remain accommodated in unsuitable circumstances such as emergency accommodation or International Protection. Until these issues relating to income and housing are resolved, getting access to nutritious food outside of the home is crucial for many children. For many families with young children experiencing food poverty, the creche, school, after-school service or youth club may be the one place where they can be guaranteed one hot meal a day and responses can be tailored to meet the specific needs of individual communities.

Investing in Children calls for Member States to put in place 'comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures'.⁵² Building on the Recommendation, in June 2021, the European Child Guarantee was adopted at EU level.⁵³ It aims to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion by supporting the 27 EU Member States to make

45 Liffey Partnership, *Spinning Plates: Addressing Food Poverty in Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot* (Liffey Partnership, 2025) 74.
 46 Liffey Partnership, *Spinning Plates: Addressing Food Poverty in Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot* (Liffey Partnership, 2025) 164.
 47 O'Donnell, L., Slein, A. and Hoey, D. *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024) 26.
 48 While the study provides important insights about the families' experiences, they are not generalisable to the entire population of families experiencing homelessness. O'Donnell, L., Slein, A. and Hoey, D. *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024) 26.
 49 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap: International Protection Accommodation in Ireland and Compliance with National Standards* (Doras 2026) 106.
 50 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap: International Protection Accommodation in Ireland and Compliance with National Standards* (Doras 2026) (forthcoming) 107.
 51 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap: International Protection Accommodation in Ireland and Compliance with National Standards* (Doras 2026) (forthcoming) 108.
 52 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C (2013) 778 final), 8.
 53 European Commission, Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, Brussels, 24.3.2021 COM(2021) 137 final.

efforts to guarantee access to quality key services for children in need. The Child Guarantee calls on Member States to ensure effective and free access to a healthy meal each school day for children in need.⁵⁴

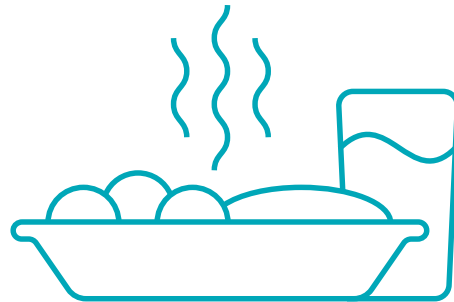
School Meals

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that providing food in school is 'desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day' and recommends that this is combined with education on nutrition and health.⁵⁵

In Ireland, the Department of Social Protection funds the School Meals Programme. The programme provides funding towards the provision of food through the allocation of a per pupil rate.⁵⁶ This includes a cold meal option for breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as a hot meal option.⁵⁷ The objective of the scheme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to enable them to take full advantage of the education provided to them.⁵⁸

Over the last number of Budgets, incremental funding increases in the School Meals Programme has meant that the provision of a hot meal has been expanded to all primary school children. The initial pilot involved 37 primary schools and benefitted 6,744 students for the 2019/2020 academic year.⁵⁹ In the current academic year, 3,200 schools and 550,000 children are eligible for hot school meals.⁶⁰ This has meant that over a six-year period, funding has increased by 452 per cent from €54.3 million in 2019, to over €300 million in 2025.⁶¹ A progressive universalist approach was used in expanding the provision of hot school meals in primary schools. This meant prioritising areas of highest need as part of an overall universal strategy to provide access to hot meals.⁶² In the rollout

of hot meals to primary schools, those attending DEIS schools were prioritised for funding first before those in non-DEIS schools. The universality of the programme, whereby all children in a school receive hot meals, helps to reduce the stigma associated with accepting meals.



In the current academic year, 3,200 schools and 550,000 children are eligible for hot school meals.

However, despite many positive aspects of the scheme there has been some concern from experts on the nutritional standards of the food provided. In December 2024, the Health Service Executive (HSE)'s Clinical Lead for Obesity called for an evaluation into the nutritional standards of the hot school meals programme, warning against providing 'ultra-processed' foods under the scheme.⁶³ These sentiments were echoed by a food policy consultant and lecturer in food policy at University College Cork, who found that some meals provided under the scheme contained additives which 'are disease-promoting and contribute to creating an

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

55 UNCRC General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24) CRC/C/GC/15, para 46.

56 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 17.

57 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 17.

58 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 14 December 2023 [55945/23].

59 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 29 July 2020 [18482/20]. All primary schools (over 3,000) were invited to apply with 506 schools registering interest, suggesting high demand for the limited pilot. The schools chosen to participate in the pilot were selected randomly, having regard to geographical spread, numbers enrolled, range of suppliers and the overall budget available.

60 Hildegarde Naughton TD, Minister for Education and Youth, Education Costs, Written Answers 23 April 2026 [29130/26].

61 Inter-departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme *Brief on the Schools Meals Programme to Joint Committee on Education and Youth* (Houses of the Oireachtas 20 November 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4cEDOHI>> accessed 29 April 2026.

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

63 C Purcell, 'Hot school meals scheme: 'We are institutionalising consumption of ultra-processed food in our children'' (The Irish Times 2025) <<https://bit.ly/42tAz0y>> accessed 04 June 2026.

[Ultra-Processed Food]-based diet for children.⁶⁴ Furthermore, media reports highlight that the Department of Social Protection has received 80 complaints or messages or feedback about school meals. This has included a letter from the Coeliac Society of Ireland who have highlighted that the current options available are limited for children who have coeliac disease.⁶⁵

In December 2024, the Department of Social Protection set up an Inter-Departmental Working Group with stakeholders from the Departments of Education and Youth, the Department of Health, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.⁶⁶ The main concentration of the group has been the development of new procurement guidelines for the Hot School Meals scheme and examining ways to look at the nutritional aspect of school meals.⁶⁷

There is limited comprehensive data or research on the quality of hot school meals with much of the evidence to date being raised in the media and through more anecdotal sources. However, the Department of Social Protection has an oversight role in relation to the School Meals Programme and carries out control inspections to determine if schools adhere to the conditions in the Service Level Agreement signed by them and the department. In 2024, there were 400 onsite inspections and 121 desk assessments undertaken of schools and organisations running the programme. Of this number, 395 were found to be compliant; 14 partially compliant and 103 non-compliant. Just 16 of the participating schools or organisations were found to not be adhering to the Nutritional Guidelines.⁶⁸ In 2025, another 400 schools/organisations were selected for onsite inspections

along with 155 desk assessments. In November 2025, 78 onsite inspections and 100 desk assessments were completed. Of this number, 92% of schools/organisations were found to be compliant and 8 per cent were non-compliant.⁶⁹

In April 2025, Minister for Social Protection, Dara Calleary T.D., announced that a review of the nutritional standards of the hot school meals will be conducted. This review will be carried out by a dietician supervised by the Department of Health and will coordinate with the Interdepartmental Group on School Meals.⁷⁰ In addition to this, the Minister announced that by September 2025, high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) foods would be removed from the Hot School Meals Programme.⁷¹ Alongside the work of the Interdepartmental Group, a CORU-registered dietician was employed to review the nutritional standards and the menus of food suppliers. Speaking at the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, a policy adviser on obesity and nutrition, and CORU-registered dietician with the Department of Health stated that they need to 'double-check that those (nutritional) standards are being met and then we will work with the food-based organisations to ensure that with clever menu design they can continue to be met'.⁷²

Given the issues that have arisen through the media, from nutritional and food experts and in complaints from parents there is a clear need for a concentrated effort to build confidence in the quality and nutritional value of the school meals programme. Implicitly connected to the issue of quality is the funding rate available for each meal. In January 2023, there was an increase in the rates of funding for school meals for the first time since 2003. The rate for breakfasts

64 C Purcell, 'Hot school meals scheme: 'We are institutionalising consumption of ultra-processed food in our children'' (The Irish Times 2025) <<https://bit.ly/42tAz0y>> accessed 04 June 2026.

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

66 Inter-departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme *Brief on the Schools Meals Programme to Joint Committee on Education and Youth* (Houses of the Oireachtas 20 November 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4cEDOHL>> accessed 29 April 2026.

67 Inter-departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme *Brief on the Schools Meals Programme to Joint Committee on Education and Youth* (Houses of the Oireachtas 20 November 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4cEDOHL>> accessed 29 April 2026.

68 Inter-departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme *Brief on the Schools Meals Programme to Joint Committee on Education and Youth* (Houses of the Oireachtas 20 November 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4cEDOHL>> accessed 29 April 2026.

69 Inter-departmental Working Group on the School Meals Programme *Brief on the Schools Meals Programme to Joint Committee on Education and Youth* (Houses of the Oireachtas 20 November 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4cEDOHL>> accessed 29 April 2026.

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

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

72 F. Ward, *Impacts of the Hot School Meals Programme: Discussion* Joint Committee on Education and Youth (Houses of the Oireachtas 20 November 2025).

increased by 15 cent, cold lunches by 30 cent, dinners by 60 cent, and hot school meals by 30 cent.⁷³ This is an average increase of 17 per cent. While these increases are welcome in the context of inflation and ongoing increases in the cost-of-living crisis, they may not be enough. There is a need to monitor the rates on an annual basis and connect their adequacy to delivering nutritional meals.

While the provision of nutritional meals is a paramount concern, consideration should be given to the type of food that children are exposed to outside of school time. Parents describe feeling anxious and guilty about the type of food they provide as feeding their child is their priority rather than the quality or content of the food.⁷⁴ They may choose unhealthy processed convenience foods so that their children will want to eat it and will not experience hunger.⁷⁵ Energy-dense foods composed of refined grains, added sugars, or fats are cheaper per calorie than healthier nutrient-dense foods. In Ireland, by age three, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have consumed energy-dense food like hamburgers and crisps, but less likely to have eaten fresh fruit or vegetables.⁷⁶

Turning the tide on eating behaviours and the consumption of food low in nutrients will take time. A balance needs to be struck between ensuring children are not going hungry and maintaining quality in the delivery of hot school meals. Therefore, children, parents, and families should be part of the process of decision making in the delivery of meals within their schools. The new DEIS Plus Plan has a welcome recommendation on working with the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to identify and progress 'collaborative community-based projects and initiatives that link healthy eating to food provenance by engaging in horticulture, cooking with fresh produce and visiting farms'.⁷⁷

The *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future*, commits to completing the roll-out to primary schools in 2025 and commencing the roll-out of the Hot School Meals Programme to all secondary schools over the lifetime of the Government.⁷⁸ This builds on the commitment in 2023 by then Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys TD, that there will be universal provision of a free hot school meal to every school-going child by 2030.⁷⁹

Considering the roll-out to primary school students is completed, the Government still have a further four years to expand the programme to all secondary school students. This is an achievable goal in the context of the successful expansion thus far. The rollout of this initiative to post-primary schools needs take a similar approach by focusing first on DEIS schools and adopting a progressive universalist approach. Consideration about the roll-out to second level should also be cognisant of the fact that the food budget for older children is substantially higher than those in primary school according the MESL research. Therefore, it is critical that the rates for hot meals in second level schools are adequate to meet the needs of older children.

The expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme through sustained and incremental investment over multiple budget cycles is a good example of how pilot initiatives to tackle child poverty can be scaled up, and one that can be mirrored by other government departments. However, the failure to address the nutritional aspects will impact negatively on child health.

73 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces plans for roll-out of Hot School Meals to all Primary Schools' Press Release, (30 March 2023) <<https://bit.ly/4hdeJTG>> accessed 27 January 2025.

74 Safefood, *Food on a low income Four households tell their story* (Safefood 2011) 5, 48, 51.

75 Safefood, *Food on a low income Four households tell their story* (Safefood 2011) 5, 48, 51.

76 James Williams, Aisling Murray, Cathal McCrory, Sinéad McNally, *Growing Up in Ireland - Development From Birth To Three Years* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2013) 37.

77 Department of Education and Youth *DEIS Plus Scheme and Implementation Plan* (2026) 34.

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

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

Providing nutritional meals in early years settings

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028 is Ireland's first ever cross-departmental strategy to support babies, young children and their families.⁸⁰ The whole of government strategy to improve children's early years commits to addressing food poverty through measures such as piloting a meals programme in Early Learning and Care (ELC) Settings, and an evaluation after one year.⁸¹

The Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme, also known as the 'Hot Meals Pilot Scheme', was completed over the course of six weeks in May 2023.⁸² As a measure under *First 5*, €150,000 was provided to support the purchase of food, kitchen equipment, and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) food safety training. During the pilot programme, 353 children across nine providers in five different counties were eligible to receive meals.⁸³ As part of the programme, providers were supported by a dietician in terms of menu options, and parents were provided with a hard copy of the *101 Square Meals* book published by Safefood.⁸⁴

Prior to the pilot programme, 80 per cent of parents sent their child to the service with at least one meal. Over the course of the pilot, this figure reduced to 23 per cent.⁸⁵ Staff in service providers noted that the implementation of the pilot allowed them to address certain situations they had in the service. One service gave the example of a child who relied on one packet of biscuits for the entire week. The staff were able to step in and ensure nutritious meals and snacks were provided for this child.⁸⁶ Overall, the pilot appears to have been successful with 94 per cent of parents reporting a positive experience, and 98 per cent in support of this programme continuing.⁸⁷

The pilot programme also had benefits beyond providing regular nutritious meals to children. The reported 94 per cent of parents who had a positive experience correlated this with observing improved behaviour and attitudes of their children during the course of the pilot.⁸⁸

Further to this, the pilot had a holistic impact on families' attitudes and behaviours towards food, helping them to create healthy eating habits. Most parents at 59 per cent said that they had started to have family meals at home because of the pilot, and 65 per cent said that they would like to explore healthy eating more because of this programme.⁸⁹ This demonstrates the positive impact on children's behaviours and attitudes, and the social and health benefits of this pilot for families.

Given the positive impact of the Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme it is welcome that the Minister for Children, Disability, and Equality, launched the *Bia Blasta (Delicious Food)* pre-school nutrition programme for services participating in Equal Start.⁹⁰ **See Section 3 on on Early Years for further details on Equal Start.** Under this programme, 25,000 young children were to benefit from nutritious food in their early years setting in 2025.⁹¹ This includes 15,000 children in Equal Start funded services participating in the free two-year Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The remaining 10,000 children will be from ECCE only services that provide services for children experiencing disadvantage. The Programme aims to tackle food poverty along with reducing the risk of children experiencing hunger or missing meals.⁹² It will have the further benefit of ensuring children 'learn about and enjoy nutritious foods' through the support of a dedicated dietician.⁹³

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- 80 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018).
- 81 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Annual Implementation Report 2021/2022* (DCEDIY 2023), 92.
- 82 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 5.
- 83 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 6.
- 84 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 12.
- 85 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 12.
- 86 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 15-16.
- 87 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 23.
- 88 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 24.
- 89 Pobal, *Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme (also known as Hot Meals Pilot Scheme) Evaluation Report* (Pobal 2023) 24.
- 90 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley launches €4.2 million Bia Blasta lunch scheme for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas', Press Release (14 August 2025).
- 91 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley launches €4.2 million Bia Blasta lunch scheme for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas', Press Release (14 August 2025).
- 92 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley launches €4.2 million Bia Blasta lunch scheme for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas', Press Release (14 August 2025).
- 93 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley launches €4.2 million Bia Blasta lunch scheme for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas', Press Release (14 August 2025).



Tackling the gaps in school meal provision during holidays

The use of the phrase 'Holiday Hunger' first appeared in the UK in 1909.⁹⁵ The phenomenon refers to a situation whereby 'economically disadvantaged households with school-aged children experience food insecurity during the school holidays'.⁹⁶ Many stakeholders are concerned about the gap in provision of meals outside of school term, particularly with regard to exam time and holiday periods and how this is compounded by other factors.⁹⁷ Although it is not a new phenomenon, thousands of children in Ireland are still at risk of Holiday Hunger.⁹⁸ This lack of school meal provision in holiday periods means that many children go hungry.⁹⁹

The impact of receiving a guaranteed hot school meal was evident when the provision halted during pandemic closures, and indeed when schools closed for holidays.¹⁰⁰ For Alliance members and community and voluntary groups, this is a pressing concern for the children and families experiencing poverty that they work with. This lack of school meal provision in holiday periods means that many children go hungry.¹⁰¹

Amongst the key findings highlighted by 2023 *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* is the issue of holiday hunger.¹⁰² The report notes that this phenomenon is compounded by external factors such as the cost of living and other challenges that disadvantaged families face in Irish society.¹⁰³ The report notes that Holiday Hunger is an issue that requires a 'broader Government response' and that any decision on how to address holiday hunger would have to 'align with the Working Group on Food Poverty'.¹⁰⁴

A total budget of €3.2 million was allocated for Bia Blasta in 2025 with €1 million made available to support services to purchase equipment, such as white goods, up to a value of €1,000 per service.

The focus on providing funding specifically for nutritious food in Equal Start settings for children attending ECCE is welcome given that these children currently bring a lunch box to their service. The addition of a learning element to the delivery of this programme means that children will benefit from developing an understanding of nutritious food from an early age. However, the programme is restricted to children participating in ECCE as all early learning and care and school-age childcare services are required to provide meals and snack depending on the service offered – for example, care provided for over 5 hours must include the provision of 2 meals and 2 snacks.⁹⁴

94 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley launches €4.2 million Bia Blasta lunch scheme for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas', Press Release (14 August 2025).

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

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

97 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (Department of Social Protection 2022) 110.

98 T Ward 'Food poverty over the Christmas period' (Irish Times 2023) < <https://bit.ly/4dFlKw8> > accessed 22 May 2026.

99 T Ward 'Food poverty over the Christmas period' (Irish Times 2023) < <https://bit.ly/4dFlKw8> > accessed 22 May 2026.

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

101 Food Cycle, 'What is Holiday Hunger?' (Food Cycle 2022) <<https://bit.ly/43kaRuK>> accessed 22 May 2026.

102 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (Department of Social Protection 2022).

103 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (Department of Social Protection 2022) 4.

104 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (Department of Social Protection 2022) 113.

Amongst the report's short-term to medium-term improvements to be delivered by 2025, there is a call to 'extend a modified version of the School Meals Programme to beyond term time to address holiday hunger'.¹⁰⁵

Budget 2025 committed €1.3 million in funding to address holiday hunger through a summer pilot programme. This pilot was implemented through cooperation between the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education using the School Meals Programme and the Summer Programme. This took place in Summer 2025, meeting the *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme's* recommendation. A further €500,000 was allocated to pilot a programme to address food poverty during the summer months among an older cohort of young people, aged 10 to 18 years, who are at risk of not having access to a hot or substantial meal during the school holidays. This was run in Summer 2025 by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and it was proposed to be carried out by the 16 Education and Training Boards and delivered through the UBU (Your Place Your Space) services.¹⁰⁶

Since 2022, and due to the generosity of our funders, the Alliance has distributed over €1.5 million in grants to support 170 projects in tackling holiday hunger. The majority of organisations funded throughout the initiatives have been family resource centres, schools, and organisations supporting children and young people more broadly. A relatively high number of services supporting families experiencing homelessness, early years services, and domestic violence services have also been funded. In total, the eight initiatives have supported 38,143 children and young people, and 17,558 families with direct food supports over the school holidays.

Analysing the evidence bank we have developed through the past four years and eight schemes, it is clear that the community and voluntary sector is an integral part of any efforts to address food poverty in Ireland. Community networks such as the Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) or the Family Resource Centres played a pivotal role in the success of our initiatives in both their ability to disseminate information, their reach into local communities and the ongoing support they can provide families where they are.



Our members hold a unique understanding of the needs of the children, young people and families in their service and can pinpoint to exact challenges or barriers different families experience. These insights have helped shape our initiatives and ensure our response was as effective as possible. Organisations and community networks are uniquely placed to ensure supports are tailored to reach and meet the children most in need.

Holiday hunger remains a serious concern for children and young people experiencing poverty who rely on school meals. Families that benefit from school meals and creche meals programmes need a supplemental food response during school holidays. Meal schemes should be extended through the summer months and other holiday periods. This is done in other jurisdictions through summer camps or making food available outside schools.

105 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (Department of Social Protection 2022) 7.

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

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Realise the commitment made in response to the publication of the evaluation of the school meals programme to fund all DEIS secondary schools to provide a hot school meal. Budget 2027 should provide funding for a pilot hot school meals programme from September 2027 in DEIS second level schools.
- Extend and expand the Additional Nutrition Pilot Programme to an increased number of early learning and childcare providers and scope the possibility of a permanent Additional Nutrition Programme for these service providers.
- Extend and expand the Holiday Hunger Pilot Programme to the Christmas Holidays 2026 and Summer 2027. Leverage the work of community and voluntary sector organisations in supporting children and families experiencing poverty as part of the roll out this initiative.

Short-term

- Introduce a targeted food support scheme for families in emergency accommodation and IPAS centres, ensuring access to nutritious, culturally appropriate meals. In line with *Investing in Children*, mobilise EU financial instruments to leverage investment from funding such as the EU structural funds to address food poverty through local community groups.

Spotlight solution

ADDRESSING FOOD POVERTY DURING SUMMER - FORÓIGE CORK

What is the problem?

Children and young people experiencing poverty have a greater likelihood of experiencing food related deprivation. Almost one-third of individuals living in consistent poverty were unable to afford a roast once a week, and more than 1 in 10 were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day. The introduction of the Hot School Meals Programme was a transformational intervention for thousands of families living below the breadline – guaranteeing a hot, nutritious meal at least once a day. However, many organisations supporting children, young people and families experiencing poverty, raised concerns about the cliff-edge school holidays presented in the provision of this support.

When schools close for holidays, families are faced with enormous pressures to put food on the table. 'Holiday Hunger' refers to the experience of food insecurity by children outside of the school term, and although not a new phenomenon, the prevalence has become increasingly apparent across the country. Food costs make up one of the largest components of the weekly budget for families. As children get older, the weekly cost of a healthy food basket increases. There are other challenges for rural families where access to supermarkets can be limited. Parents are literally going into debt or going without food themselves to ensure that their children get dinner that night. That stress and anxiety builds as they face into longer stretches of school holidays.

What is the solution?

In response to growing concerns about the level and impact of 'holiday hunger', the Government announced a pilot programme in Budget 2025 that would support the community and voluntary sector to address the issue through their services, working directly with children and young people across the summer holidays. The pilot ran in a select number of UBU Your Place Your Space Youth Services in June, July, and August 2025 as part of the Government's wider plan to end child poverty. The programme was developed by the Department of Education and Youth, working closely with the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach.

Foróige Cork was one of 41 UBU-funded youth services across 16 education and training board (ETB) areas, that signed up to take part in the pilot.



"We too have gotten good feedback from our service users with some of the kids mentioning it to our Child and Youth team"

Edel House

Foróige is Ireland's leading youth development organisation, working with over 56,000 young people aged 10-18 annually across all 26 counties. Foróige operate as a youth development organisation designed to empower young people to lead, develop skills, and actively contribute to their communities. Through their general services, Foróige works with all young people – Foróige Clubs, Foróige Juniors, Foróige Interest Clubs and Foróige Youth Cafés encourage young people to take responsibility for themselves and to be part of shaping the world around them while developing their talents, skills and abilities.

Foróige also work to address the impact of child poverty and social exclusion through targeted supports. Through the UBU – Your Place, Your Space projects, Foróige provide targeted, youth-centred supports designed to help young people aged 10-24 overcome adversity, build personal and social skills, and engage with their communities. These services include:

- One-on-One Support
- Small Group Activities
- Structured Programmes
- Open Access/Drop-in Sessions
- Specialised Activities

During the summer, many Foróige projects participate in a summer programmes focusing on outdoor activities, arts, personal development and many more.

How does it work?

Foróige operates a wide range of projects and clubs in Cork, serving young people who face various challenges that reflect broader societal issues, including mental health pressures, academic stress, financial difficulties to name a few.

To combat 'holiday hunger' while schools were closed, Foróige participated in the Summer Hot Meals initiative to provide hot, nutritious meals from June to August. The 2025 programme was delivered through participating Foróige UBU youth projects and partner homeless services across Cork City.

It served as a vital resource alongside Foróige's existing summer programming in outdoor activities, arts and personal development. The support provided by the Cork Education and Training Board (CETB) through the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme, the Department of Education and Youth, and the Child Poverty and Well-Being Office in the Department of the Taoiseach was critical in the success of the initiative in Cork.

What was the impact?

The initiative has been vital in addressing food poverty while schools were closed in an area of Cork City that is deeply impacted by deprivation. The programme successfully provided 3,029 meals across Cork City over 11 weeks from June – August 2025. This averaged over 56 children per day. In terms of addressing the impact of food poverty, the pilot was undeniably effective. It ensured children and young people who needed it most maintained consistent access to healthy

meals. At the same time, it eased the financial burden on parents which has been significant during the cost-of-living crisis and exacerbated in the cliff-edge months when the school meal provision ends.

Furthermore, Foróige observed a positive impact on the psychological well-being of the young people involved, as it helped alleviate the anxiety associated with food insecurity. Children and young people were happier, more energetic, and more engaged in summer activities as a result of accessing healthy, nutritious food. Youth workers noticed improved mood and participation.

Delivering the programme through Foróige with the support of the Cork Education and Training Board also proved to be an effective way to provide support and ongoing engagement with children, young people and families who are more vulnerable or marginalised in communities. Services like Edel House and Redclyffe Family Hub reported a *“significant positive impact”* on the children they support in emergency accommodation. The initiative fostered a sense of care, dignity, and inclusion that strengthened the position of services supporting these families.

Foróige are now in the planning stages for the 2026 Summer Hot Meals Programme and expect to provide 5,100 meals over a 12-week period this coming summer.

What are the learnings?

The community and voluntary sector is an integral part of any efforts to address food poverty in Ireland. Community networks such as youth work services, Family Resource Centres and the Child and Young Person’s Services Committees have the ability to disseminate information, reach into local communities and can provide ongoing support to young people and their families, meeting them where they are. Organisations like Foróige hold a unique understanding of the needs of the children, young people and families in their service and can pinpoint to exact challenges or barriers different families experience. These insights ensure the delivery of an effective solution. Harnessing the relationships and connections between the sector, such as the Education and Training Boards also proved very impactful in the delivery of this provision. To support services engagement and capacity to deliver similar initiatives, earlier allocation of funding would help to allow for greater preparatory work and enable more services to get involved.

“It made a significant difference to young people and families in homelessness over its duration.”
Springboard, Tusla

“It made a significant difference to young people and families in homelessness.”

“The quality, consistency – everything about the support was impeccable.”
Redclyffe Family Hub

Early Years



EARLY YEARS

The first Pillar of the EU Recommendation, *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* focuses on access to adequate resources and acknowledges the link between ‘parents’ participation in the labour market and children’s living conditions’.¹ In this context, the Recommendation identifies the provision of early childhood education and care services as a means of supporting parental participation in the labour market and access to adequate resources through income from employment. Therefore, Member States should ensure that all families, including those in vulnerable situations and living in disadvantaged areas, have ‘effective access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care’.²

The second Pillar of the Recommendation focuses on access to quality services. It calls on Member States to focus on the social inclusion and development potential of early childhood education and care, thereby recognising it as social investment and as a means to address inequality and disadvantage through early intervention.³ This can be achieved by ensuring that there are specific incentives to make sure children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in early childhood education and care in a way that doesn’t stigmatise or segregate.⁴ The Recommendation recognises that these services can act as an early warning system to identify specific child or family-related challenges that may require further intervention.⁵

The provision of early childhood education and care is of central importance to a child’s development.⁶ It is described as the ‘holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing’.⁷ While Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises parents and carers as primary caregivers,⁸ Article 18 imposes a duty on States to provide assistance, including quality childcare services.⁹ These services are defined as non-parental care provided to children before they enter the formal education system.¹⁰

In July 2023, the Department of An Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office.¹¹ The Work Plan recognises high-quality early learning and childcare as a key anti-poverty measure, both because of its direct benefits for children and its potential to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage by improving access for children experiencing socio-economic deprivation.¹² The Programme Office’s subsequent 18-month Progress Report highlighted the significant increase in public investment in the sector, particularly in relation to ensuring that children can access services ‘at no or at significantly reduced out of pocket costs to parents’.¹³ The report identified Equal Start as a central initiative to improve access and participation for children experiencing disadvantage.¹⁴

- 1 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 5.
- 2 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 5.
- 3 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 4 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 5 European Commission, Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 6 Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development *Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care*, TALIS, (OECD 2025) 3.
- 7 UNESCO ‘Early Childhood Education and Care’ 1 <https://bit.ly/44XjkFE> accessed 7 January 2026.
- 8 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 5.
- 9 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 18.
- 10 Parliamentary Budget Office, *Childcare in Ireland: An Analysis of Market Dynamics, Public Programmes and Accessibility* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019) 1.
- 11 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).
- 12 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 14-15.
- 13 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 24.
- 14 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 23.

At the end of 2025, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality published *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)*.¹⁵ The Action Plan sets out the short-term (Phase 1) actions to be delivered in 2026 along with setting out the scope of medium-term actions for the period 2027 to 2029 (Phase 2) which will form the basis of a public consultation, as outlined in the *Programme for Government*.¹⁶ Amongst the five central objectives of *Shaping the Future*, is the contribution of a high-quality, accessible system of early childhood and school aged care to the reduction of child poverty.¹⁷ In line with the *Investing in Children* recommendation, it recognises these services can contribute to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and support parents to participate in training and employment.¹⁸ This includes the continued expansion of Equal Start as the State's targeted approach to tackling disadvantage in early learning and care by combining universal and targeted supports to improve access, participation and outcomes for children most at risk of poverty and social exclusion.¹⁹

In line with the scope of *Investing in Children*; the focus of the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office and *Shaping the Future*, this section focuses on measures to make early childhood education and care more affordable and the development and implementation of Equal Start as a programme in early years which aims to increase access and participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Access to affordable early childhood education and care for all children and their families

The Recommendation calls on Member States to ensure that children and their families can access adequate resources, with access to quality and affordable childcare a key means of supporting parental employment.²⁰ In the implementation of early childhood programmes and the delivery of services, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child calls for the allocation of increased resources and the development of 'strong and equitable partnerships between the Government, public services, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and families'.²¹ Historically, Ireland's comparative expenditure on early childhood education and care has lagged behind other countries.²² Data from the Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that up to a few years ago, Ireland's public spending in this area was the second lowest when using GDP²³ as a comparator.²⁴ However, over the last seven budget cycles there has been significant growth in funding for the Early Learning and Care and School Aged Childcare sector, rising from €638 million in 2020 to €1.537 billion in 2026.²⁵ This represents a 140 per cent increase in funding over a seven-year period. At the same time, there remains a need 'for significant additional investment in order to close the gap with other EU countries'.²⁶

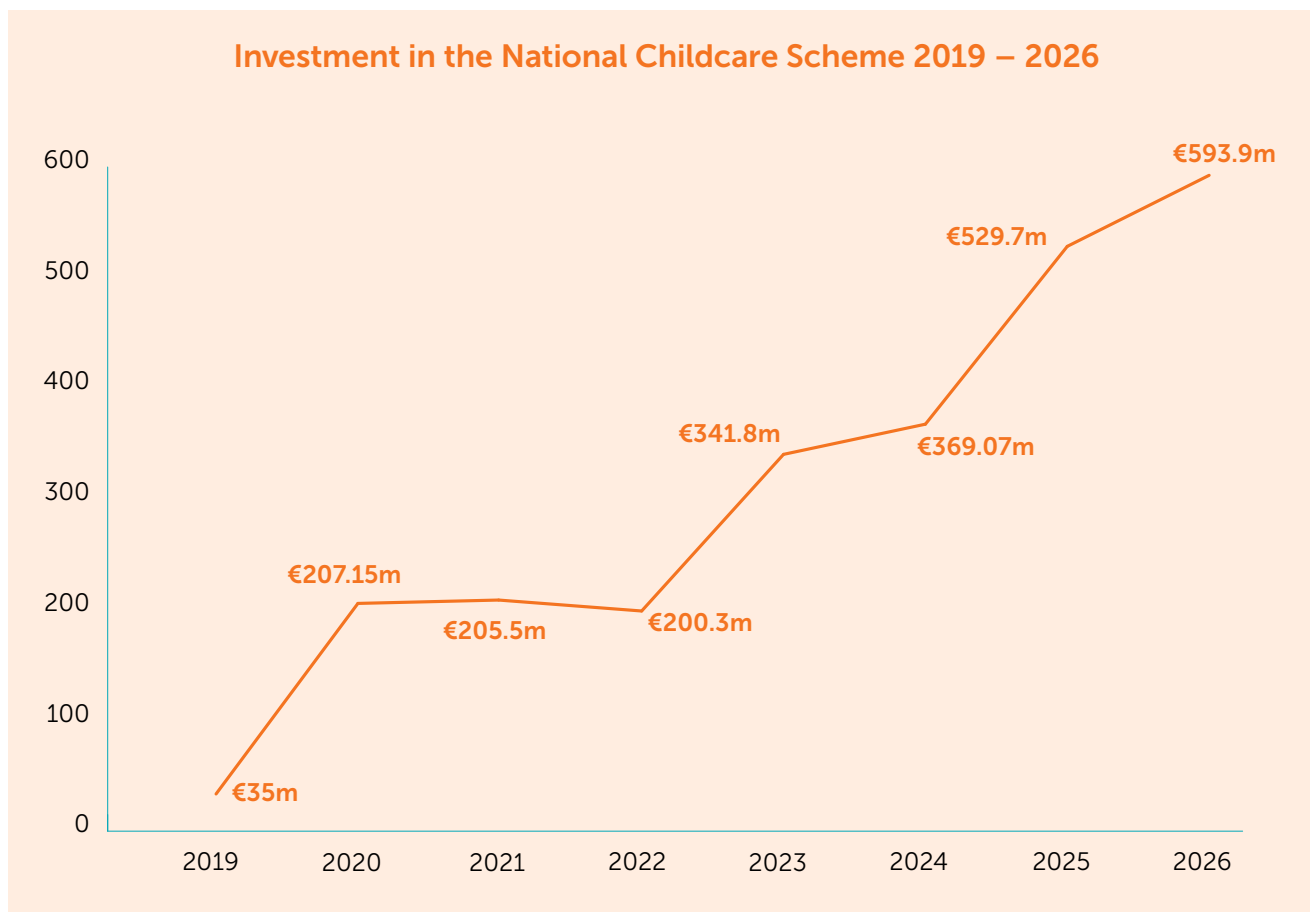
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- 15 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)* (Government of Ireland, December 2025).
- 16 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 7.
- 17 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 7.
- 18 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 33.
- 19 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 9 and 28.
- 20 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 5.
- 21 UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 38.
- 22 Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development, 'OECD Family database PF3.1: Public spending on childcare and early education' <<https://bit.ly/4jGkyLp>> accessed 8 January 2026 1.
- 23 While it is accepted that GDP is a flawed comparator by the OECD and modified GNI is a more accurate measure to use, Ireland's investment in childcare and early years remains low by international standards. Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 02 March 2026.
- 24 Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development, 'OECD Family database PF3.1: Public spending on childcare and early education' < <https://bit.ly/4jGkyLp>> accessed 8 January 2026.
- 25 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 16.
- 26 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 16.

A central part of the increased government funding has been the provision of a subsidy to parents to address the cost of childcare. The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) provides parents with support in relation to childcare costs.²⁷ In line with the principle of progressive universalism, parents with the lowest incomes receive the highest NCS subsidy rate with two main types of subsidies available under the scheme – a universal (non-means tested) subsidy and an income assessed subsidy.²⁸

- A **universal subsidy** for children between 24 weeks and 15 years old. This is not means-tested.
- An **income-assessed subsidy** for children between 24 weeks and 15 years old.²⁹ This is means tested.

Under the NCS, families with the same income and childcare needs (based on the age of their child) receive the same subsidy. However, the actual out of pocket payment made by these families could vary greatly depending on the fees charge by individual providers. This is due to how services are delivered in Ireland which is through a mix of private and community organisations who charge varying fees depending on the type of provider and their geographic location.³⁰

Investment in the NCS has increased substantially over the past seven years from €35 million in 2019 to €593.9 million in 2026.³¹ Consequently, overall uptake of the scheme continues to grow significantly, with 5,149 children benefitting in 2019 and an expected reach of 277,000 children in 2026.³²



Source: Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 02 March 2026.

27 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, ‘Minister Zappone launches communications campaign on the National Childcare Scheme’ (Press Release 23 September 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2XZJeFH>> accessed 05 January 2025.

28 Government of Ireland, ‘National Childcare Scheme: Types of Subsidy’ <<https://bit.ly/3rM6E0U>> accessed 07 February 2025.

29 Government of Ireland, ‘National Childcare Scheme: Types of Subsidy’ <<https://bit.ly/3rM6E0U>> accessed 07 February 2025.

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

31 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 02 March 2026.

32 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 02 March 2026.

Since September 2024, the NCS universal subsidy has been set at €2.14 per hour per child.³³ The income assessed subsidy is up to €5.10 per hour depending on income and personal circumstances.³⁴

While all families accessing the NCS benefitted from the increase in the universal subsidy and in adjustments to the eligibility criteria of the scheme, the income thresholds for means-tested support remained stagnant up to and including 2025. The original design of the scheme proposed that the base income threshold would be set at a rate that would ensure that all families living on incomes below the poverty line would receive the maximum subsidy rate.³⁵ In the year the National Childcare Scheme was launched, the income poverty line was €26,179 for a household containing two adults and one child,³⁶ but by 2025 this had risen to €38,036.³⁷

The call for access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care in *Investing in Children* is connected to encouraging parental employment, making sure that work ‘pays’ along with identifying and tackling ‘specific disincentives parents face when entering, remaining or progressing in the labour market’.³⁸ The failure to maintain the thresholds in line with the income poverty line may have created a disincentive to work according to post Budget analysis from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Vincentian MESL Research Centre. The impact of the effective freeze in the income threshold to receive the maximum subsidy has meant that those on the lowest incomes have effectively been receiving less support for childcare costs.³⁹ The ESRI has noted this as having a negative impact on households with lower incomes, those of whom may experience wage inflation and receive less support for childcare costs.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the post Budget 2025

impact analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre highlighted that in 2025, a one parent family with two children (one pre-school and one primary school aged) would be entitled to a lower NCS subsidy in 2025 compared to 2024.⁴¹ The reduction in the payable NCS subsidy from €214 per week at the end of 2024 (from September, when the increased universal subvention was introduced) to €208 per week in 2025 was due to the increase in the National Minimum wage and adjustments to in-work social welfare supports.⁴² Furthermore, the analysis notes that the subsidy payable in 2025 is €8 lower than in 2020 for the same household type.⁴³



It is welcome, that Budget 2026 increased the lower income threshold to €34,000 meaning all families with incomes below the income poverty line will receive the maximum subsidy available.⁴⁴ An increase to the multiple child deduction will benefit families with two children and three or more children.⁴⁵ These changes are envisaged to benefit approximately 47,000 children from low income families when they come in to effect in September 2026.⁴⁶

33 Citizens Information 'National Childcare Scheme (NCS)' <https://bit.ly/4rlx70Y> accessed 10 March 2026.

34 Citizens Information 'National Childcare Scheme (NCS)' <https://bit.ly/4rlx70Y> accessed 10 March 2026.

35 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Policy Paper on the Development of a new Single Affordable Childcare Scheme* (DCYA 2016) 8.

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

37 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2025* (SJI 2025) 3.

38 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 5.

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

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

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

42 Vincentian Research Centre *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2025* (Vincentian Research Centre 2024) 13.

43 Vincentian Research Centre *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2025* (Vincentian Research Centre 2024) 13.

44 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 38.

45 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 38.

46 Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (2025) 17.

Changes to the National Childcare Scheme from September 2026		
	Existing	From September 2026
Lower Threshold	€26,000	€34,000
Upper Threshold	€60,000	€68,000
2 children Multiple Child Discount	€4,300	€5,500
3+ children Multiple Child Discount	€8,600	€11,000

Source: Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (2025) 17.

To ensure the National Childcare Scheme continues to align with its original anti-poverty purpose, the base income threshold needs to be reviewed as part of the annual budget process so that families living below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold qualify for the maximum subsidy rate. This would help ensure that increases in wages or employment supports do not inadvertently reduce access to affordable childcare for those most at risk of poverty. This would mean raising the threshold in Budget 2027 to €38,036 in line with the latest income poverty line data.⁴⁷

A further disparity in the amount of subsidy a parent is entitled to under the NCS involves the inclusion of Child Benefit and child maintenance as part of the calculation of reckonable income. Child Benefit is not assessed as means for any other payment or service, representing a significant shift in policy and practice. Furthermore, from 4 June 2024, maintenance paid to lone parents is no longer assessed as means for social welfare payments.⁴⁸ This demonstrates a lack of policy

coherence in a context where Government wishes to support more lone parents in employment and where poverty rates among working lone parents are increasing.

Building on *Investing in Children*, the EU Child Guarantee was adopted in June 2021 and requires Member States to work towards providing free access to early childhood education and care.⁴⁹ According to analysis by the OECD, the introduction of childcare subsidies in Ireland has substantially reduced costs for low income and one parent families.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, *Shaping the Future* acknowledges that comparatively costs for average and low-income families in Ireland are higher in Ireland than the EU average. According to the data, in 2018, before the introduction of the NCS, a two-parent family on 67 per cent of the average wage, paid 22 per cent of their net income on full time childcare, and lone parents paid 23 per cent. By 2025 this fell to 14 per cent and 13 per cent respectively.⁵¹ While this is welcome progress on affordability, fees still remain substantially higher than the EU median of 5 per cent for both families.⁵²

The challenge with the provision of subsidies through the NCS is that it does not take account of the actual variance in cost due to a predominantly private market-based system of provision. The most comprehensive data on the early years sector is captured by the Annual Early Years Sector Profile, which is developed and published by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE).⁵³ The overall disparity in childcare fees is evident with the national weekly median fee for full-day care of €200, with a variation from a high of €265.93 in Dublin Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown to a low, in Leitrim, of €160.⁵⁴ Similar patterns are observed for both part-time and sessional care.⁵⁵ Therefore, families with the same income and number and age of children in Leitrim and Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown may receive the same subsidy under the NCS, but will ultimately have a different out of pocket cost of childcare.

47 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2025* (2025).

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

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

50 Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development, Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2021 (OECD 2022); Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Thousands of families to benefit from substantial reductions in early learning and childcare costs' (Press Release 2 September 2025).

51 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 19.

52 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 19.

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

54 Pobal *Early Learning and Childcare Data 2024-2025* (Pobal 2025) <https://bit.ly/4qdtsm2> accessed 13 January 2026.

55 Pobal *Early Learning and Childcare Data 2024-2025* (Pobal 2025) <https://bit.ly/4qdtsm2> accessed 13 January 2026.

	National Weekly Median Fee	Highest County Weekly Median Fee	Lowest County Weekly Median Fee
Full-day Care	€200	€265.83 ¹	€160 ³
Part-time Care	€114.50	€135 ²	€88.50 ³
Sessional	€75	€81.45 ¹	€64.50 ⁴

Source: Pobal Early Learning and Childcare Data 2024-2025 (Pobal 2025).
¹ Dublin Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown; ² Dublin-Fingal; ³ Leitrim; ⁴ Monaghan

In 2022, the government introduced a new supply-side payment to childcare providers called Core Funding.⁵⁶ In line with the scope of *Investing in Children*, which calls for both affordable and high quality childcare, Core Funding is designed 'to support the development of a high quality service for all children'.⁵⁷ It does this by ensuring that staff have better pay and conditions and supporting a graduate-led workforce.⁵⁸ Childcare providers receiving Core Funding are known as 'partner services' and as a condition of receiving funding are subject to increased management of fees.⁵⁹

Fees charged by partner services have remained at either the rate charged since 30 September 2021, or at the rate when they first signed up to the funding programme. To balance the needs of providers and parents, a fee increase assessment process was undertaken in the latter half of 2024.⁶⁰ The maximum fee increase which could be applied equated to the increase in the NCS to be introduced in September 2024.⁶¹

The setting of the cap at this rate ensured that families would not face an increase in fees compared to the previous year as it was equal to the rate by which the NCS Universal subsidy would increase by in September 2024.⁶² This resulted in 898 services receiving approval to increase at least one of their fee options (for example, sessional fee and/or full-time fee etc).⁶³ For parents accessing these services the benefit of the NCS increase was eroded if their service was awarded a maximum increase to their fees.

Further measures to manage fees for parents have included the introduction of a fee cap for new services joining Core Funding in its third programme year in 2024.⁶⁴ In June 2025, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality announced a maximum fee cap for all services participating in Core Funding effective from September 2025. The aim of this was to reduce the costs for families paying the highest childcare fees. This related to 10 per cent of providers.⁶⁵ These are welcome measures which will help to reduce childcare fees, but they are unlikely to go far enough.

56 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021).

57 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 13.

58 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 16.

59 Pobal 'Core Funding' <https://bit.ly/4dC1HhU> accessed 20 May 2026.

60 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45123/25].

61 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45123/25].

62 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45123/25].

63 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45123/25].

64 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes strong commitment from early learning and childcare services to Core Funding for third year running' (10 October 2024) <https://bit.ly/45BLXZ6> accessed 12 January 2026.

65 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley announces new maximum fee cap for early learning and childcare services alongside €390 million in State funding this year through the Core Funding Scheme' Press Release, 6 June 2025.

A more radical approach to tackling fees is contained in the *Programme for Government - Securing Ireland's Future*. The Government commits to progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child.⁶⁶ This will mean reorienting the current approach which provides subsidies based on family income rather than on what fee is being charged. In April 2025, the Minister commented that a reduction to this level of fee will take time to implement and will occur within the context of increasing the capacity of the sector, and addressing sectoral staffing issues, including pay.⁶⁷

Providing access to affordable childcare is the single most important measure in addressing child poverty based on the evidence that providing quality employment alongside quality childcare is what works the best.⁶⁸ Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most when early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are closely linked to employment, health, and social policies that promote a more equal distribution of resources across the population.⁶⁹ Moving to a flat rate of €200 per month is welcome however, this may still be out of reach for some families. It is welcome that *Shaping the Future* states that families on lower incomes will pay lower fees.⁷⁰ This could mean, for example, that families in consistent poverty or on the lowest incomes would only need to contribute a fee of no more than €10 per month. This would include those currently on welfare payments or in low-paid jobs.

Public funding (including funding to subsidise childcare) is only provided for programmes offered through providers registered with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency (Tusla). Other forms of childcare, such as that provided by relatives or unregistered childminders, are not covered by publicly funded childcare subsidies or schemes.⁷¹ Central to the reform of childminding has been the introduction of

regulations. Following a public consultation process, the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 was enacted in July 2024.⁷² New regulations for childminders and relevant parts of the Act came into effect on 30th September 2024. Following the introduction of these regulations, childminders are now able to register themselves and avail of the benefits and supports offered to other early learning and childcare providers, including being able to make subsidies available to parents of the children they are minding.⁷³

Childminders must have insurance, references, and first aid training. Once these requirements are fulfilled, the application is then assessed by Tusla before registration can be finalised and the certificate can be issued.⁷⁴ The introduction of the childminding regulations under the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 represents an important structural reform. By bringing paid, childminders into the regulated sector, the reforms are intended to expand parental choice, strengthen quality assurance and enable families using registered childminders to access subsidies through the National Childcare Scheme. Progress has been gradual. As of the end of February 2026 there were 166 childminders were registered with Tusla.⁷⁵ This reflects positive momentum but also highlights that uptake remains modest relative to the estimated number of childminders operating nationally. During the three-year transition period, which runs until September 2027, continued support and engagement will be required to encourage more childminders to register and to ensure that families can benefit from greater access to flexible, subsidised childcare options.

66 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government - Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 62.

67 Jane Mathews, "Won't happen overnight": Foley says introducing €200 monthly childcare will be 'long journey' *thejournal.ie*, 3 April 2025

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

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

70 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan (Phase 1)* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 32.

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

72 Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024.

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

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

75 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 14 April 2026 [26038/26].

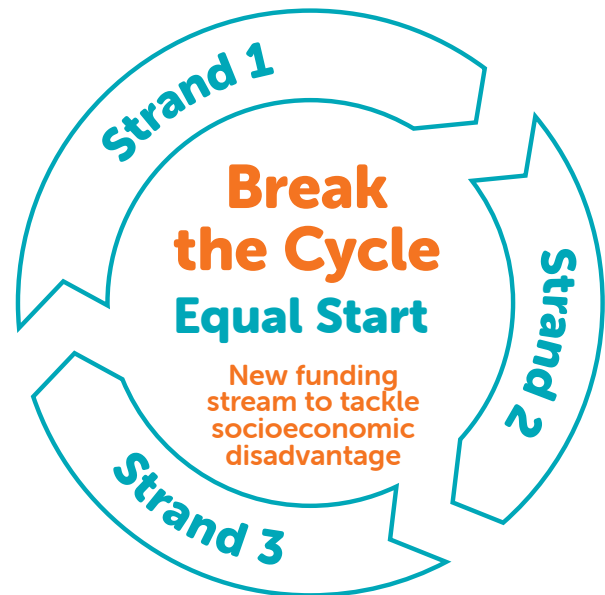
A new model to tackle disadvantage

Under the second Pillar of *Investing in Children*, Member States should ensure that children from a disadvantaged background participate in early childhood education and care in a way that doesn't stigmatise or segregate.⁷⁶ While the first Pillar of *Investing in Children* focuses on the importance of access to early childhood education and care as a means of supporting parental employment, the second Pillar emphasises that the state should 'incentivise the participation of children from a disadvantaged background...regardless of their parents' labour market situation'.⁷⁷

A review of international evidence from programmes across five countries shows that investing in early years is one of the most effective methods to break the cycle of poverty.⁷⁸ It shows that investing in specific programmes targeted at those living in poverty, along with wraparound supports, has proven to have positive impacts on children's educational attainment; long term employment opportunities; physical health; an increase in lifetime earnings; a reduction in crime and number of lifetime arrests; improved mental health; and improved socioemotional skills.⁷⁹ There is a need to provide practical supports to marginalised families, such as families from the Traveller Community, to access ECEC. The latest *First 5 Implementation Plan* includes a target to increase the participation rates of Traveller and Roma children so that they are 'more closely aligned to the national average'.⁸⁰

First 5 committed to develop a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) type model for early childhood education and care.⁸¹ The Report of the Expert Group on the Funding Model addresses this commitment by recommending the introduction of a new funding stream to tackle socioeconomic disadvantage.⁸² Equal Start, a funding model and a

set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation for children and their families who experience disadvantage, was launched in May 2024.⁸³ Supports are provided across three strands:



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

- 76 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 77 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 78 Conor Cashman, Margaret Buckley and Grainne Mulcahy, *Briefing Document on Early Interventions and Public Childcare Approaches*, (Children's Rights Alliance and UCC 2023).
- 79 Conor Cashman, Margaret Buckley and Grainne Mulcahy, *Briefing Document on Early Interventions and Public Childcare Approaches*, (Children's Rights Alliance and UCC 2023).
- 80 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023), 126.
- 81 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018) strategic action 8.3.
- 82 Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 119.
- 83 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Equal Start for children experiencing disadvantage' Press Release (20 May 2024).

- **Strand 1** provides universal measures for every child in every setting. This means that supports are provided to children from disadvantaged backgrounds regardless of the setting they are in. Supports include initiatives aimed at providing information to parents about what services are available to them in their community; supporting services to be more inclusive through Diversity, Equality and Inclusion training; and the development of an Inclusion Coordinator role, which will strengthen interagency cooperation in child welfare and protection.
- **Strand 2** provides child targeted measures for every child with a priority designation in all settings. These measures include the provision of semi-flexible funding to support the practical needs of children from priority groups in all settings and developing solutions to tackle barriers to access and participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-aged childcare (SAC) for children from priority groups.
- **Strand 3** provides targeted measures to settings with a designation status as identified through the Equal Start identification model.⁸⁴

The Equal Start identification model uses a combination of data from the NCS and Pobal's HP Deprivation Index, along with data on the location of accommodation for families experiencing homelessness or applying for international protection. This allows for the identification of the number of children in settings both from disadvantaged communities and priority groups. Priority groups include groups of children experiencing disadvantage as identified through research, the EU Child Guarantee, and national policy responses.⁸⁵

Traveller and Roma children are a key priority group under Equal Start. The participation rates for Traveller and Roma children is 76 per cent and 70 per cent respectively, compared to an overall participation rate of 96 per cent.⁸⁶ Evidence from the Central

Statistics Office and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights emphasises that these participation gaps are rooted in wider structural inequalities, including poverty, poor housing conditions, discrimination and lower levels of trust in public services.⁸⁷ Traveller organisations supporting families on the ground have found that families are often not aware of the subsidies available for ECEC or how to apply for them. Even with the information about the supports available, families often face other barriers, such as low levels of literacy, difficulties completing the necessary paperwork, as well as a lack of flexibility with regard to hours of provision. Since September 2023, an ethnic identifier has been introduced for applications to the National Childcare and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) schemes.⁸⁸

Specific targeted actions have been developed as part of Equal Start to support parents and families from these communities. These include the development of inclusive information campaigns on available supports; a review of guidance materials on inclusion policies; and specific tailored responses, which include the appointment of Family Link Workers, to support Traveller parents of young children to attend and participate in early childhood education and care.⁸⁹ These measures recognise that increasing participation requires more than financial assistance alone; it also requires trusted relationships, practical support and culturally informed engagement to address the barriers faced by families experiencing multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage.

The rollout of Equal Start began in September 2024 with an initial allocation of €4.5 million secured in Budget 2024.⁹⁰ This equated to a budget of €13.5 million in a full programme year. In September 2024, the then-Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth announced that 246 settings were designated with Tier 1 status, thus benefitting from a 15 per cent increase in staffing hours. Similarly, 375 settings were designated as Tier 2, receiving

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

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

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

87 Central Statistics Office, *Statistical Spotlight No 17: Travellers in Ireland* (CSO 2025); European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Roma and Travellers in Six Countries: Survey Findings 2026* (FRA 2026).

88 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023), 67.

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

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

an 8 per cent increase in staffing hours.⁹¹ Services with a Tier 1 status are described as being ‘Highly Disadvantaged’ while Tier 2 are ‘Disadvantaged’.⁹² These designations benefitted 11,000 and 18,000 children respectively.⁹³ These services have been objectively identified as operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage and have been given ‘priority designation’ – for a three-year period – and now receive additional supports.⁹⁴ Additional staffing hours allows services to have greater engagement with parents and families experiencing disadvantage and reduce staff-child ratios to provide greater access and participation for Equal Start priority groups.⁹⁵

In Budget 2025, an additional €12.7 million was announced for the programme, bringing investment in 2025 to €17.2 million.⁹⁶ In the first two programme years of Equal Start, a total of €25.2 million will be allocated.⁹⁷ The increased investment in Budget 2025 meant the Enhanced Nutrition Programme would begin in Equal Start setting with €1.2 million in capital funding supporting this. Other initiatives included the development of a family and community partnership coordinator role and the rollout of diversity, equality and inclusion training.⁹⁸ Some of the key achievements under Equal Start in 2025 included reaching 35,000, of which 4,700 came from priority cohorts, in 804 designated settings. A 10 per cent increase in capitation from 13 October 2025 in line with the new minimum pay rates agreed. The Traveller Parenting Support Programme has been rolled out from October 2025 in both Equal Start designated services providing the free ECCE Programme and in 17

Tusla areas. In addition, Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists have been appointed in Better Start, the Department initiative to promote quality and inclusion in early years settings.⁹⁹

Additional funding of €5.14 million in Budget 2026 represents a 30 per cent increase on the 2025 allocation.¹⁰⁰ This funding will allow for a full year delivery of Bia Blasta, the Enhanced Nutrition Programme.¹⁰¹ An overview of the ‘Bia Blásta’ programme is included in the **Food Poverty** section.

Expected key achievements in 2026 include the review of a number of key Equal Start supports such as the Inclusion Co-ordinator role and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and training. A new Family and Community role will be developed alongside appropriate training.¹⁰² Most critically, a report on the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework will be published by the second half of 2026.¹⁰³ This will be an important asset in order to ensure the programme is effectively evaluated in the coming years.

In January 2026, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality stated that 804 settings had received an Equal Start priority designation, supporting approximately 35,000 children, including 4,700 children from priority cohorts such as Traveller and Roma children, children experiencing homelessness, children in the international protection system and children accessing childcare through Sponsor Referrals under the National Childcare Scheme.¹⁰⁴ These settings have been objectively identified as operating in the context of concentrated disadvantage

91 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth ‘35,000 children experiencing disadvantage to benefit from funding boost for early learning and childcare settings’, (Press Release 23 September 2024).

92 Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Equal Start*, (DCEDIY 2025) 29.

93 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth ‘35,000 children experiencing disadvantage to benefit from funding boost for early learning and childcare settings’, (Press Release 23 September 2024).

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

95 Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) 16.

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

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

98 Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2025 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) 16.

99 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Childcare Services Written Answers 16 December 2025 [72473/25].

100 Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) 16.

101 Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) 16.

102 Government of Ireland *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach 2025) 16.

103 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Childcare Services Written Answers 16 December 2025 [72473/25].

104 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Written Answers, 27 January 2026, 6374/26.

and receive additional supports for a three-year period. Alongside increased staffing capacity, Equal Start has expanded to include Early Talk Boost to support children experiencing language delay, and specialist supports to strengthen inclusion and family engagement.¹⁰⁵ Taken together, these developments represent a significant strengthening of the State's targeted approach to addressing disadvantage in early childhood education and care. Given the strong evidence base that investment in early childhood education and care is a key measure to break the cycle of poverty, it is critical that the government maintains momentum in increasing investment in Equal Start.

The OECD highlights that children who participate in ECEC are more likely to succeed in education and access secure jobs and are less likely to be engaged in crime, meaning that investment in quality services for children's early years leads to savings later on.¹⁰⁶ *Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care*, highlights that the quality and equity of ECEC systems depend fundamentally on a well-supported workforce.¹⁰⁷ It highlights that reducing inequalities in early childhood education and care depends not only on affordable access for families, but also on a well-supported workforce and strong collaboration with parents and other services.¹⁰⁸



It identifies staff shortages, work-related stress and limited opportunities for career progression as significant challenges that can undermine the capacity of settings to deliver high-quality and inclusive provision, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage.¹⁰⁹ Together, these reports emphasise the need for Ireland to combine sustained investment in affordability and targeted measures such as Equal Start with long-term action to strengthen pay, conditions and workforce capacity.

105 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Equal Start' <https://bit.ly/4313KqW> accessed 22 May 2026.

106 OECD, *Starting Strong Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD 2025) 3.

107 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD Publishing 2025) 12-14.

108 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD Publishing 2025) 35-36.

109 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care* (OECD Publishing 2025) 18-19.

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Adjust the income thresholds under the National Childcare Scheme so that all families living below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, as updated annually by the Central Statistics Office, qualify for the maximum subsidy rate. This would mean raising the threshold in Budget 2027 to €37,904 in line with the latest income poverty line data.
- Exclude Child Benefit and child maintenance as reckonable income for the purposes of the National Childcare Scheme.
- Commence a programme of work to determine how to reduce childcare fees to €200 a month within the existing funding framework for the sector.
- Budget 2027 should continue to build on the sustained investment in early childhood education and care by investing an additional 0.15 per cent of GDP in early years and commit to increasing investment by this rate in subsequent budgets. Government should set out a plan to deliver a longer-term objective of moving closer to the world leader, Iceland, which invests 1.8 per cent of GDP in early years.
- Allocate €50 million in funding in Budget 2027 to continue to build momentum around the implementation of Equal Start.

Education



EDUCATION

Introduction and context

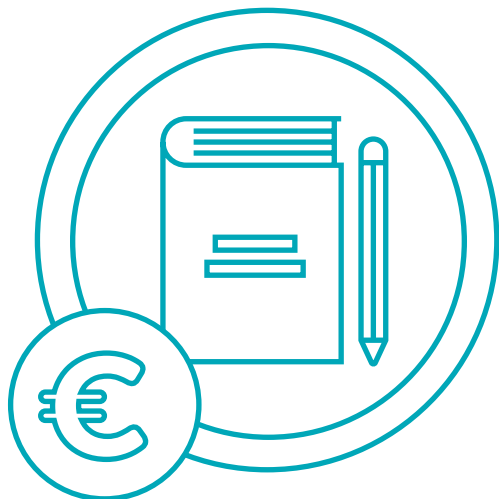
Education plays a central role in addressing child poverty and promoting equal opportunities, given its strong influence on social mobility, labour market outcomes and life chances.¹ European policy frameworks, including the Commission's Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (Investing in Children)*, emphasise the importance of education systems that actively mitigate disadvantage by ensuring access to high-quality, inclusive provision that supports children and young people's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development.² This requires sustained investment in the capacity of education systems not only to support individual progression, but to disrupt patterns of intergenerational disadvantage and inequalities.

The Recommendation highlights the need to support the inclusion of all learners by targeting resources and opportunities towards those most at risk of disadvantage, including through financial supports and targeted educational interventions.³ It also emphasises the importance of reducing early school leaving, addressing structural and financial barriers to participation, and responding effectively to social and cultural diversity within school communities.⁴

Consistent with *Investing in Children*, an equitable education system is one in which all learners can benefit from inclusive, high-quality education and where the most marginalised learners are guaranteed the basic right to receive a quality minimum qualification.⁵

Specific measures identified in the Recommendation include providing 'for the inclusion of all learners, [where necessary] by targeting resources and opportunities towards the more disadvantaged'.⁶ The Recommendation further emphasises that the State should take measures to address barriers, including financial, which hinder children and young people attending school by providing targeted educational aid.⁷ The introduction and implementation of policies to reduce early school leaving and initiatives for those at risk of early school leaving are also outlined in *Investing in Children*. The Recommendation stresses the need for responses to social diversity and the deployment of role models to support the integration of children and young people from ethnic minorities into schools. Furthermore, the Recommendation calls for strengthened equality legislation and a guarantee that learners experiencing the most marginalisation have the basic right to a quality minimum qualification.⁸

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- 1 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators* (OECD Publishing 2025).
 - 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
 - 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
 - 4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
 - 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
 - 6 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
 - 7 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.
 - 8 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.



Up to 26%

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

Education has the potential to transform life outcomes and promote social mobility.⁹ However, research shows it can also reproduce existing inequalities where access to resources, opportunities and outcomes is shaped by the unequal distribution of economic, social and cultural capital.¹⁰ Children and young people growing up in low-income households may encounter structural barriers, including financial, institutional and social factors, that can limit equitable access to, participation in, and progression through education.¹¹

Educational attainment remains strongly associated with poverty risk, with individuals with lower levels of education significantly more likely to experience poverty over the life course.¹² Those living in low-income families during childhood are less likely to access education beyond post-primary than those living in higher income families.¹³ Individuals with only primary education have an increased chance of being categorised as being 'at risk of poverty', with research indicating that this can be up to 26 per cent higher than those with third-level education.¹⁴ These patterns highlight the dual role of education systems where they can operate as both a mechanism for social mobility and, where inequities persist, where disadvantage and inequality can be reinforced and compounded. There is little evidence to suggest that different social classes view the importance of education differently, as it is seen by all classes as one of the key factors to social mobility and success.¹⁵

In 2022, the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office was established at the Department of the Taoiseach to drive cross-departmental action on addressing child poverty. Reducing the cost of education, with a particular focus on post-primary costs such as school books, materials and voluntary contributions, was one of the six priority areas identified in the initial work plan for the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office which was published in July 2023.¹⁶ The *First Progress Report*, published in January 2025, highlights significant progress in areas such as school meals, school books and transport supports, while also emphasising the need for continued action to address structural inequalities in educational access and outcomes.¹⁷

- 9 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (DEASP 2020) 48.
- 10 Kathleen Lynch and John Baker, 'Equality in Education: An Equality of Condition Perspective' (2005) 3(2) *Theory and Research in Education*; Kathleen Lynch and Margaret Crean, 'Economic Inequality and Class Privilege in Education' in Judith Harford (ed), *Education for All?* (2018); Kathleen Lynch, 'Inequality in Education: What Educators Can and Cannot Change' in Michael Connolly et al (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of School Organization* (2018); Lee Elliot Major and Stephen Machin, *Social Mobility and Its Enemies* (Penguin 2018); Lee Elliot Major and Stephen Machin, *What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Social Mobility?* (Sage 2020).
- 11 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators* (OECD Publishing, 2025); Kathleen Lynch and Margaret Crean, 'Economic Inequality and Class Privilege in Education' in Judith Harford (ed), *Education for All?* (2018).
- 12 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dM5ARk> accessed 27 May 2025.
- 13 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022) 13-14.
- 14 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022) 48.
- 15 Reay, D., *Rethinking social class: Qualitative perspectives on gender and social class*. (Sociology, Vol. 32 (2) 1998 259-275).
- 16 Department of the Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Initial Programme Plan July 2023-December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office) 5.
- 17 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025).

In the report the Programme Office called for key interventions to continue to narrow the attainment gap between Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS schools including:

- Expansion of the DEIS programme;
- Targeting resourcing under the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030; and,
- Supporting those living in poverty to access further and higher education, including alternative education and training for those who have left school early.¹⁸

Referencing the 2024 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report,¹⁹ the Programme Office identified that not all young people impacted by educational inequalities attend DEIS schools, and so the methods of allocating resources and evaluation of existing allocation must be kept under ongoing review, with capacity for refinement.²⁰

More recent policy developments have addressed some of these areas and strengthened the State's approach to addressing inequalities and educational disadvantage. The publication of the *DEIS Strategy to 2035* and the introduction of a DEIS Plus model in March 2026 represent a significant shift towards a more flexible, data-informed approach to identifying and responding to concentrated disadvantage at school level.²¹ This includes a continuum of supports across schools, alongside intensified supports for those with the highest levels of need.²² For Traveller and Roma children and young people, the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* and its first implementation plan provide an important policy framework, with actions focused on access, attendance, participation, retention, inclusion and partnership with Travellers, Roma and Traveller

organisations, groups working with Roma.²³ In parallel, policy attention has increasingly focused on school attendance, including the rollout of the Anseo attendance framework, the expansion of education welfare capacity, and the development of improved data systems to support earlier intervention.²⁴ Children and young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, Traveller and Roma children and young people and disabled children and young people are disproportionately represented in patterns of low attendance. As attendance policy develops, it must include targeted, flexible and effective supports that respond to their specific needs.

The following sections examine current policy and practice against the key education priorities identified in *Investing in Children*, including promoting inclusive education systems, addressing barriers to participation and school completion, and strengthening targeted supports for children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

Consistent with *Investing in Children*, this section focuses on key areas where barriers to educational participation, progression and attainment remain most evident. The Recommendation highlights the importance of inclusive, high-quality education, targeted supports for learners, reducing early school leaving and addressing barriers that hinder participation in education.

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- 18 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 20, 21.
- 19 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies for Education (OECD 2024) <https://bit.ly/43uS0gz> accessed 27 May 2026.
- 20 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies for Education (OECD 2024) 21 <https://bit.ly/43uS0gz> accessed 27 May 2026.
- 21 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy to 2035*, (Department of Education and Youth 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dHTTv6> accessed 27 May 2026.
- 22 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy to 2035*, (Department of Education and Youth 2026); Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy Implementation Plan 2026–2028* (Department of Education April 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dHTTv6> accessed 27 May 2026.
- 23 Department of Education, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland 2024); Department of Education, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2026: Plan for Implementation and Action* (Government of Ireland 2024).
- 24 Department of Education and Youth, 'Minister announces measures to tackle school absenteeism' (Press Release, May 2025); Department of Education and Youth, 'National school attendance campaign and Anseo framework update' (Press Release, September 2025).

Socio-economic disadvantage remains a key driver of unequal educational outcomes in Ireland. Since its establishment in 2006, the DEIS programme represents the State's primary mechanism for targeting resources and supports to schools and communities experiencing the highest levels of need at school level.²⁵ Schools in the programme have historically received a targeted range of supports, including additional classroom teaching posts, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator posts, additional grant funding and access to the School Completion Programme.

Official 2025/2026 school lists indicate 953 primary schools and 232 post-primary schools in the DEIS programme, a total of 1,185 schools.²⁶ In March 2026, the Department of Education and Youth announced that Budget 2026 provided €48 million for the new DEIS Plus scheme and related DEIS measures.²⁷ The Department stated that this is the largest full-year investment in DEIS and educational inclusion measures since the programme was first established.²⁸ The 2026 package will benefit around 700 schools overall, including 121 DEIS Plus schools and 130 additional schools receiving HSCL support.²⁹ As part of the new DEIS strategy, the identification model had been supplemented for the purposes of the new DEIS Plus scheme by a DEIS Plus identification model and technical paper, published alongside the 2026 strategy package.³⁰

The *DEIS Strategy to 2035* confirms that *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)* remains the State's core school-level mechanism for implementing targeted educational supports aimed at reducing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage, while introducing a broader continuum of supports across all schools and a new DEIS Plus layer for schools in areas with the highest concentrations of disadvantage.³¹ The *DEIS Strategy to 2035* and its first Implementation Plan 2026–2028, shifts from a static programme model towards a more flexible, evidence-led approach, with actions scheduled on DEIS Plus, resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation, attendance, family and community partnership, and supports for children and young people experiencing acute disadvantage in all schools.³²

The development of the *DEIS Strategy to 2035* and the DEIS Plus scheme was informed by extensive stakeholder engagement, including consultation with school leaders, teachers, education partners and organisations working with children and young people and young people living in communities impacted by intergenerational poverty and trauma.³³ The move towards a continuum of supports, strengthened family and community partnership, and earlier identification of need reflects the Recommendation's focus on the inclusion of all learners, targeting resources and opportunities towards the more disadvantaged, strengthening links between schools and parents, and addressing barriers that hinder participation and progression within education.

25 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy to 2035*, (Department of Education April 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dHTTv6> accessed 27 May 2026.

26 Department of Education and Youth, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS): List of DEIS Primary Schools 2025/2026*. (Department of Education and Youth 2025); Department of Education and Youth, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS): List of DEIS Post-Primary Schools 2025/2026* (Department of Education and Youth, 2025). The total is derived from the published lists.

27 Department of Education and Youth, 'Minister announces €48 million DEIS investment' (Press Release, 25 March 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dMpN9T> accessed 27 May 2026.

28 Department of Education and Youth, 'Minister announces €48 million DEIS investment' (Press Release, 25 March 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dMpN9T> accessed 27 May 2026.

29 Department of Education and Youth, 'Minister announces €48 million DEIS investment' (Press Release, 25 March 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dMpN9T> accessed 27 May 2026.

30 Department of Education, *DEIS Plus Identification Model Technical Paper*, Department of Education 2026 <https://bit.ly/494yMBy> accessed 24th April 2026.

31 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy to 2035* (Department of Education April 2026).

32 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy to 2035* (Department of Education and Youth April 2026); Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy Implementation Plan 2026–2028* (Department of Education and Youth April 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dMpN9T> accessed 27 May 2026.

33 Minister for Education and Youth, Hildegard Naughten TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 12 February 2026, [10774/26] <https://bit.ly/48BUjBD> accessed 1 May 2026.

While the DEIS programme remains the State's primary mechanism for targeting concentrated educational disadvantage, emerging evidence highlights limitations in a model that relies predominantly on school-level designation. Recent analysis by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) indicates that schools serving disadvantaged communities outside the DEIS programme can struggle to meet high levels of need, pointing to the presence of disadvantage that is not fully captured by existing targeting mechanisms.³⁴ Similarly, the OECD review of school resourcing in Ireland highlights that current allocation models may not adequately reach all students experiencing disadvantage, particularly those in non-DEIS settings, and recommends more flexible and responsive approaches to resource allocation.³⁵

The *DEIS Strategy to 2035* reflects a significant development in the State's approach to educational disadvantage, moving beyond a model based solely on school designation towards a continuum of supports that recognises disadvantage can exist across all school settings rather than solely within designated DEIS settings.³⁶ Measures such as the extension of HSCCL supports to an additional 130 schools, including non-DEIS schools, are particularly welcome³⁷ and reflect growing recognition that children and young people experiencing disadvantage are not confined to DEIS schools. This approach is consistent with the *Investing in Children* Recommendation's emphasis on targeting resources and opportunities towards those who are more disadvantaged and addressing barriers to participation in education. As implementation progresses, it will be important to ensure that mechanisms for identifying need, allocating resources and monitoring outcomes are sufficiently robust to ensure that children and young people experiencing disadvantage can access appropriate supports regardless of the school they attend.³⁸

The planned expansion of data collection, monitoring and evaluation under the Strategy provides an important opportunity to assess how effectively the continuum of supports responds to need across the education system.³⁹

Traveller and Roma Children and Young People

Traveller and Roma children and young people continue to experience significant inequalities in educational access, participation, outcomes and progression, which highlights the need for targeted, culturally appropriate approaches within the education system. One of the principles of *Investing in Children* is to ensure that Member States focus on children and young people with an increased risk of experiencing intersectional disadvantage such as those from an ethnic minority.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Recommendation emphasises the importance of inclusive high-quality education.⁴¹

According to available data, Traveller and Roma children have the lowest retention rates of any ethnic group, with 58.9 per cent of Roma children and young people and 26.5 per cent of Traveller children and young people remaining in full-time education to Leaving Certificate level compared to 90% of the general population.⁴²

34 Economic and Social Research Institute, *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland: Insights from ESRI Research* (Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 4 April 2025) <https://bit.ly/4wTchKm> accessed 27 May 2026.

35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, (OECD 2024) 55 <https://bit.ly/43uS0gz> accessed 27 May 2026.

36 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy to 2035* (Government of Ireland, 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dMpN9T> accessed 27 May 2026.

37 Department of Education and Youth, 'Minister Naughton announces €48 million investment in new DEIS Strategy and DEIS Plus Scheme' (25 March 2026).

38 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy Implementation Plan 2026–2028* (Government of Ireland, 2026) 15–18 <https://bit.ly/4dHTTv6> accessed 27 May 2026.

39 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy Implementation Plan 2026–2028* (Government of Ireland, 2026) 15–18 <https://bit.ly/4dHTTv6> accessed 27 May 2026.

40 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 4.

41 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

42 Department of Education and Skills, *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second-Level Schools: 2017 Entry Cohort* (DEY 2024) 12.

The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES), published in July 2024,⁴³ represents an important cross-government framework, providing targeted measures, to address educational inequalities experienced by Traveller and Roma children and young people. Consistent with the Investing in Children Recommendation's emphasis on supporting children experiencing multiple disadvantage and strengthening links between schools and families, the Strategy places a strong focus on partnership with Traveller and Roma communities and organisations. The Traveller and Roma Education Forum, established in November 2024, supports ongoing engagement with the lived experience of the communities, informs the implementation of subsequent action plans and strengthens accountability.

Policy responses have increasingly focused on strengthening engagement between schools, families and communities. In October 2022, €400,000 was allocated through the Dormant Accounts Fund to support ten additional HSCL coordinator posts across 14 non-DEIS post-primary schools for Traveller and Roma children and young people and their families.⁴⁴ This has been complemented by additional HSCL posts under the Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) pilot project.⁴⁵ Research indicates that many Traveller and Roma parents wish for their children to have a more positive educational experience than they had themselves.⁴⁶ It also identifies that in the absence of parents' direct experience or 'legacy knowledge' of post-primary school, parents can find it difficult to support their children and young people in the transition between primary and post-primary

schools.⁴⁷ HSCL coordinators therefore play an important role in supporting attendance, retention and school-family relationships.

The need for role models to support the participation of children and young people and those from ethnic minority groups into schools is also emphasised in the *Investing in Children* Recommendation.⁴⁸ The STAR pilot has also highlighted the value of Community Link Worker roles in strengthening engagement with Traveller and Roma families.⁴⁹ Following an initial allocation of €1.25 million in 2024 for 12 Community Link Worker roles, subsequent implementation plans expanded the ambition of the model.⁵⁰ However, 2026 progress reporting identified recruitment delays,⁵¹ highlighting the importance of sustained investment and timely implementation if community-based supports are to operate at the scale required.

Despite these developments, the Third Progress Report on the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy* indicates that significant structural inequalities persist across the education lifecycle.⁵² Gaps are evident from the earliest stages, with 76 per cent of Traveller children and young people and 65.3 per cent of Roma children and young people accessing pre-school prior to primary school, compared to 93.3 per cent of the general population.⁵³ These inequalities deepen at key transition points; while pre-pandemic transfer rates were close to the national average, the most recent data shows a marked decline to 82.7 per cent for Traveller pupils and 89.1 per cent for Roma pupils, compared to 95.6 per cent nationally.⁵⁴ Patterns of retention and progression further illustrate cumulative inequalities, with only 26.5 per cent of

43 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland, 2024) <https://bit.ly/4t9J7U7> accessed 1 May 2026. This was in response to a 2006 report on Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy and longstanding calls from Pavee Point and other Traveller organisations for the need for a comprehensive education strategy.

44 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces 2022 Dormant Accounts Funding to provide targeted supports to improve educational outcomes for Traveller and Roma Students' (Press Release 4 October 2022) <https://bit.ly/4u3fGUa> accessed 27 May 2026.

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

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

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

48 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

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

50 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces new roles to support Traveller and Roma pupils and students' (Press Release 31 October 2024) <https://bit.ly/4ei1ti8> accessed 29 April 2026.

51 Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy Progress Update* (February 2026).

52 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 3–4 <https://bit.ly/3PKY9lu> accessed 27 May 2026.

53 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 3–4 <https://bit.ly/3PKY9lu> accessed 27 May 2026.

54 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 3–4 <https://bit.ly/3PKY9lu> accessed 27 May 2026.

Traveller students completing the Leaving Certificate, compared to 90 per cent of the overall cohort, and just 4.7 per cent progressing to third level compared to 47.7 per cent nationally.⁵⁵ Although data on Roma progression to third level remains limited, overall participation patterns indicate similar structural barriers.

Traveller children and young people are disproportionately represented within DEIS schools, with 63 per cent of Traveller students attending DEIS schools compared to 25 per cent of students from the general population.⁵⁶ This reflects both the geographical concentration of disadvantage and, potentially, patterns in identification and reporting, given that Traveller ethnicity data is based on self-identification and may be underreported⁵⁷ in some school contexts. DEIS schools also continue to experience significantly higher levels of absenteeism overall. In DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools, 38 per cent of students miss 20 or more days compared to 23.7 per cent in non-DEIS schools, with similar disparities at post-primary level.⁵⁸ While some positive trends are evident, including increased participation in further education and improvements in Junior Cycle completion, the overall pattern points to persistent and intersecting barriers.

While there has been some improvement in educational attainment for Traveller children and young people over time, including increased participation in post-primary and further education, educational outcomes remain significantly below

those of the general population.⁵⁹ Persistent disparities across retention, completion and progression highlight the cumulative and structural nature of disadvantage experienced by Traveller and Roma children and young people.⁶⁰ This emphasises the need for sustained, targeted and culturally appropriate interventions that address not only access and participation, but also the wider socio-economic, environmental and institutional factors shaping engagement with education across the lifecycle.⁶¹

Strengthening Equality Legislation

Certain groups of children such as disabled, autistic and neurodivergent children and young people continue to face barriers to accessing inclusive and appropriate educational supports, despite significant increases in investment in special education provision in recent years.⁶² The Investing in Children Recommendation highlights the importance of inclusive education and calls on Member States to strengthen equality legislation and guarantee the most marginalised learners the basic right to receive a quality minimum qualification.⁶³

While Department of Education and Youth data highlights continued growth in special education expenditure, alongside increases in special education teachers, Special Needs Assistants and special classes,⁶⁴ however there are still challenges in access to supports or equitable educational experiences for all learners.⁶⁵

55 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 3-4 <https://bit.ly/3PKY9lu> accessed 27 May 2026.

56 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 4 <https://bit.ly/3PKY9lu> accessed 27 May 2026.

57 It can also be the case that sometimes children/families are not asked (Communication received by the Childrens Rights Alliance from Pavee Point received May 2026)

58 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025) 3-4 <https://bit.ly/3PKY9lu> accessed 27 May 2026.

59 Central Statistics Office, *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8: Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion* (CSO 2017); Central Statistics Office, *Census of Population 2022 – Profile 8: Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion* (CSO 2023); Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland 2024).

60 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland, 2024); Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025).

61 Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* (Government of Ireland, 2024); Department of Education and Youth, *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy: Third Progress Report* (Government of Ireland, December 2025).

62 Department of Education and Youth, *Special Education Statistical Report 2023/2024* (Government of Ireland, 2024); Department of Education and Youth, *Budget 2026: Education Expenditure Report* (Government of Ireland, 2025).

63 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

64 Department of Education and Youth, *Special Education Statistical Report 2023/2024* (Government of Ireland, 2024); Department of Education and Youth, *Budget 2026: Education Expenditure Report* (Government of Ireland, 2025).

65 AslAm, *Same Chance Report 2026* (AslAm, 2026) 9 <https://bit.ly/43yB3lo> accessed 27 May 2026; Inclusion Ireland, '45% of children and young people with support needs are being failed in accessing their right to education' (Press Release, 11 February 2024).

AsIAM's *Same Chance Report 2026* identified continuing barriers to inclusive education for Autistic children and young people, including unmet school placement needs, reduced timetables, long waiting lists for supports and ongoing financial pressures.⁶⁶ Inclusion Ireland similarly reports persistent difficulties in accessing educational supports, including delayed provision and reduced timetables.⁶⁷ Organisations including Down Syndrome Ireland, Dyslexia Ireland and Dyspraxia Ireland have also highlighted inconsistent access to assessments, supports, accommodations and appropriate learning provision across schools.⁶⁸ These barriers can be further compounded for Traveller, Roma, migrant and minority ethnic children experiencing intersecting forms of disadvantage, including poverty, racism, disability and educational exclusion.⁶⁹ Taken together, this evidence suggests that educational experiences and opportunities continue to vary significantly depending on certain grounds, geographic location, school capacity and access to support services.

Ireland has a well-established legislative framework supporting equality and inclusion in education, including the Education Act 1998,⁷⁰ the Equal Status Acts 2000–2018⁷¹ and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act.⁷² In line with the Investing in Children Recommendation's emphasis on equality and inclusion, there is a need for a comprehensive equality audit of education policy and practice to assess the experiences, participation,

attainment and progression of groups of children and young people across the education system. Such an approach would support a stronger evidence base for identifying where barriers persist, monitoring outcomes and ensuring that investment translates into meaningful equality of opportunity and educational attainment for all learners.

School Attendance, Engagement and Participation

Poverty, unmet support needs and unequal access to educational supports are closely linked to patterns of attendance, engagement and participation, which have become an increasing focus of policy and practice, particularly given higher levels of absenteeism among children and young people experiencing disadvantage and requiring additional supports.⁷³ Consistent with *Investing in Children*, effective attendance policy is not solely concerned with school presence, but with identifying and addressing the barriers that prevent children and young people from fully participating in education.

The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 remains the statutory basis for school attendance, participation and retention.⁷⁴ Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) continue to comprise the statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS), the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion

66 AsIAM, *Same Chance Report 2026* (AsIAM, 2026) 9 <https://bit.ly/43yB3lo> accessed 27 May 2026.

67 Inclusion Ireland, '45% of children and young people with support needs are being failed in accessing their right to education' (Press Release, 11 February 2024); Inclusion Ireland, *Submission to Convention on Education*, February 2026 <https://bit.ly/428YnWf> accessed 1 May 2026 1.

68 Down Syndrome Ireland, Opening Statement Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 19 March 2026 <https://bit.ly/42cp1O2> accessed 1 May 2026; Communication received by Children and young people's Rights Alliance from Dyspraxia Ireland 06 May 2026; Dyslexia Ireland, *Submission to the Convention on Education*, February 2026.

69 Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, *Intersectionality* (Briefing Paper, National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy) <https://bit.ly/4dObykK> accessed 27 May 2026; Eithne Ní Chorcora and others, *A Community Needs Analysis with Traveller and Roma Students on Their Experiences of Higher Education* (Maynooth University 2025) <https://bit.ly/4dwl6B4> accessed 27 May 2026; Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, *Submission to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality Statement of Strategy* (May 2025) <https://bit.ly/4vibvVH> accessed 27 May 2026.

70 Education Act 1998.

71 Equal Status Acts 2000–2018.

72 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004.

73 Economic and Social Research Institute, *School-level Patterns of Non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24* (ESRI 2026) <https://bit.ly/49qKDKz> accessed 27 May 2026.

74 Tusla, 'Tusla Education Support Services', <https://bit.ly/3wssOKH> accessed 1 May 2026.

Programme (SCP).⁷⁵ Recent budgets have included additional investment in attendance and retention supports aimed at reducing educational disadvantage and preventing early school leaving. Budget 2024 provided €5 million for additional Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) posts and €2 million for school retention and completion programmes targeted at children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage.⁷⁶ Budget 2025 allocated over €10 million in additional social inclusion funding for children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage and early school leaving, including supports for alternative education settings and implementation of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.⁷⁷ Budget 2026 built on earlier attendance-related investment through wider funding for DEIS Plus and educational inclusion measures, alongside continued policy focus on attendance and engagement.⁷⁸

School-attendance policy has also advanced significantly over the past year. In May 2025, the Minister for Education and Youth announced a package of measures including the Anseo attendance framework, a national attendance campaign, a real-time attendance data scoping project, continued investment in the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and School Completion Programme (SCP), and plans to amend the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 so that children and young people under six attending primary school would fall within its scope.

In September 2025, the Department confirmed that the first phase of Anseo had commenced in 60 schools.⁷⁹

Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) remain central to early intervention on school attendance. In June 2025, 153 EWOs were operating across the six Tusla regions, including 23 EWOs serving children and young people in care or homelessness and five temporary EWO posts trialling innovative attendance supports.⁸⁰ By October 2025, this had increased to 159 EWOs across the State.⁸¹

Despite these policy developments, emerging data highlights ongoing pressures in the system. Performance data continues to indicate very high demand for EWS. This reflects a broader pattern across the education system, where increased investment and policy development have not yet fully translated into reduced demand. Tusla's Quarter 4 2025 report recorded that 4,342 educational-welfare referrals were received in the first four months of the 2025/2026 academic year, 9,079 open educational-welfare cases at end-December 2025, and 3,893 cases on a waiting list for allocation.⁸² Tusla's January 2026 Performance and Activity Report recorded 6,153 educational-welfare referrals this school year to date, 9,756 open cases, 5,513 allocated cases and 4,243 cases on the waiting list at the end of January 2026.⁸³

75 The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme is a key intervention provided as part of the DEIS programme. The HSCL coordinator, normally a teacher from a relevant school without teaching duties, works closely with parents and guardians to improve children and young people's educational outcomes. The intervention is delivered primarily through home visits and the provision of courses and classes that enable parents to support a pupil's learning. All urban DEIS primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools are included in the HSCL scheme. Tusla, 'HSCL-Home School Community Liaison', <https://bit.ly/43p4Jjl> accessed 19 May 2025; The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a targeted programme of support for primary and post primary children and young people and young people who have been identified as potentially at risk of early school leaving or who are out of school and have not successfully transferred to an alternative learning site (i.e. Youthreach, Community Training Centre etc.) or employment. Interventions are provided in a number of different ways. This includes evidence based and evidence informed interventions to a whole class or school group; 8 week interventions provided to students who are identified as needing a brief intervention and targeted interventions for students needing intense supports. Tusla, 'SCP', <https://bit.ly/43AwCav> accessed 19 May 2025.

76 Department of Education, *Main features of Budget 2024: Education*, (Government of Ireland October 2023) 7 <https://bit.ly/4dAYfWg> accessed 27 May 2026.

77 Department of Education and Youth, *Main features of Budget 2025: Education*, (Government of Ireland October 2024) 5 <https://bit.ly/43wey0m> accessed 27 May 2026.

78 Department of Education and Youth, *Main features of Budget 2026: Education*, (Government of Ireland October 2025) <https://bit.ly/3PR9q3l> accessed 27 May 2026; Department of Education and Youth, *Attendance Grant Guidance 2026 (2026)* <https://bit.ly/4nPCFR8> accessed 27 May 2026.

79 Department of Education and Youth, 'Minister announces measures to tackle school absenteeism' (Press Release, May 2025) <https://bit.ly/3RxZ2P0> accessed 27 May 2026; Department of Education and Youth, 'National school attendance campaign and Anseo framework update' (Press Release, September 2025) <https://bit.ly/4nUG4Oz> accessed 27 May 2026.

80 Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 12 June 2025 [31224/25] <https://bit.ly/4vajP9E> accessed 27 May 2026.

81 Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 7 October 2025 [53659/25] <https://bit.ly/4wT5Lml> accessed 27 May 2026.

82 Tusla, *Education Support Service Performance Report Q4 2025 (2025)* 63 <https://bit.ly/49JykJF> accessed 27 May 2026.

83 Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report January 2026 (2026)* <https://bit.ly/4dOzHaS> accessed 27 May 2026.

Educational Welfare Metrics: Academic Year September 2025 – August 2026⁸⁴

4,342 referrals received during the first four months of the academic year 2025/2026.
640 cases screened out by educational welfare officers during the first four months of the academic year 2025/2026.
4,086 cases allocated to educational welfare officers during the first four months of the academic year 2025/2026.
4,153 cases closed by Educational Welfare Officers during the first four months of the academic year 2025/2026.

Note: Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) reviewed its metrics in advance of the 2025/2026 academic year. This resulted in some definitions being refined, a small number of new metrics being introduced and a small number being stood down.

Metric	Sept 2024-Dec 2024	Sept 2025-Dec 2025
Referrals Received	2, 706*	4, 342
Cases Screened Out	664*	640
Cases Allocated	1, 835*	4, 086
Cases Closed	1, 795*	4, 153

* **Tusla** notes that 2025/26 data are not directly comparable with the previous academic year due to changes in definitions of the count of referrals from referrals screened to referrals received and reporting metrics. The Service also introduced a new team (Children Missing in Education Team) and launched a school attendance campaign in September 2025.

Separately, the Department of Education and Youth's September 2025 attendance campaign cited improved 2023/2024 attendance data for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, with days lost down to 994,183 from 1,099,380 in 2022/2023. The share of students missing 20 or more days also reduced to 38 per cent from 42.9 per cent.⁸⁵ However, the Department reiterated that DEIS schools and special education settings continued to record particularly high rates of absenteeism.⁸⁶

Data from TESS in February 2026 points to sustained and intensifying demand for education welfare supports, with clear implications for children and young people experiencing disadvantage, including those in DEIS schools.⁸⁷ A total of 7,717 referrals for educational welfare have been recorded in the current school year to date, alongside 10,252 open cases; this is the highest level observed so far this year.⁸⁸

While 56 per cent (5,727) of these cases have been allocated to an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO), a significant proportion, 4,525 cases (44 per cent), remain on a waiting list for allocation. This represents an increase of 282 cases (7 per cent) since January 2026.⁸⁹

For children and young people experiencing poverty, unmet support needs, exclusionary practices and unequal access to educational supports, delays in allocation risk undermining timely and preventative intervention, with implications not only for attendance outcomes but also for broader educational equity goals. Recent evidence highlights the need for flexible, rights-based and relational responses, rather than attendance approaches that assume non-attendance is primarily a matter of choice.

84 Tusla, *Education Support Service Performance Report Q4 2025* (2025) 63 <https://bit.ly/49JykJF> accessed 27 May 2026.

85 Department of Education and Youth, 'Attendance campaign data' (Press Release, September 2025) <https://bit.ly/4sTB111> accessed 24 April 2026.

86 Department of Education and Youth, 'Attendance campaign data' (Press Release, September 2025) <https://bit.ly/4sTB111> accessed 24 April 2026.

87 Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report February 2026*, (Tusla 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dOzHaS> accessed 27 May 2026.

88 Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report February 2026*, (Tusla 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dOzHaS> accessed 27 May 2026.

89 Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report February 2026*, (Tusla 2026) <https://bit.ly/4dOzHaS> accessed 27 May 2026.

ESRI analysis of 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 attendance data found particularly high levels of chronic absenteeism in DEIS and special schools, while also noting that available school-level attendance data does not include individual characteristics such as disability, limiting the State's ability to fully identify which children and young people are most affected and why.⁹⁰ Evidence from AslAm and Inclusion Ireland similarly highlights how exclusionary practices, reduced timetables, inadequate accommodations and inconsistent access to supports can contribute to anxiety, school refusal, reduced hours and non-attendance among disabled and Autistic children and young people.⁹¹ Consistent with the *Investing in Children* Recommendation, these findings highlight the need for attendance policies that address structural barriers to participation and engagement, rather than relying primarily on compliance-based approaches. This requires targeted and flexible supports, improved data systems, and closer alignment between attendance, inclusion and equality frameworks to ensure that children and young people experiencing the greatest disadvantage are effectively supported.

Policies to reduce early school leaving and disengagement

Persistent challenges in attendance and engagement are closely associated with the risk of early school leaving and longer-term disengagement from education. Despite Ireland's comparatively high retention rates, emerging evidence highlights

increasing concern regarding children and young people, including those at primary level, experiencing difficulty attending school due to anxiety, distress and challenges associated with the school environment, although available data does not yet fully capture the scale or underlying drivers of this pattern.⁹² Research from the ESRI shows that school absence has increased since the pandemic and is associated with poorer educational and wellbeing outcomes, with chronic absence particularly concentrated among children and young people experiencing disadvantage and those with additional needs.⁹³ Sectoral evidence further suggests that school avoidance is increasingly associated with emotional distress, including anxiety, rather than disengagement alone. For example, Barnardos indicates that a notable proportion of children and young people are frequently refusing to attend school, with higher rates observed in children and young people in DEIS schools and those experiencing vulnerability.⁹⁴

Consistent evidence from practitioner reports, stakeholder submissions and qualitative research indicates that, for some children and young people, school environments can contribute to heightened anxiety, including pressures related to academic performance, social interaction and unmet additional needs.⁹⁵

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- 90 AM Ponce, E Smyth and S McCoy, *School-level Patterns of Non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24* (ESRI Research Series No 219, 2026) 16–18, 86–87 <https://bit.ly/4e5OT4S> accessed 27 May 2026; Tusla Education Support Service, *Analysis of School Attendance Data in Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2023–24* (Tusla 2025) <https://bit.ly/4dxbWFA> accessed 27 May 2026.
- 91 AslAm, *What We Wish You Knew: A Rights-Based Analysis of School Codes of Behaviour in Ireland* (AslAm 2024); Joint Committee on Disability Matters, *Report on Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 25 March 2026) 27; Inclusion Ireland, *Submission to the National Conversation on Education* (Inclusion Ireland, April 2026) 3–4.
- 92 Economic and Social Research Institute, *School Attendance and Absence in Ireland: Emerging Trends Post-COVID* (ESRI, 2024/2025); Economic and Social Research Institute, *School Attendance and Absence in Ireland: Emerging Trends Post-COVID* (ESRI, 2024/2025); Department of Education, *Attendance Data 2022/23 and 2023/24 (DEIS Urban Band 1)*; and Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision* (Department of Education, 2022); Barnardos, 'Barnardos responds to ESRI school absenteeism report' (February 2026) <https://bit.ly/4n211FN> accessed 1 May 2026; Barnardos, 'Barnardos responds to ESRI school absenteeism report' (February 2026) <https://bit.ly/4evsRt9> accessed 27 April 2026.
- 93 Economic and Social Research Institute, *The Long-Term Outcomes of School Absence* (ESRI Research Series No 220, 2026); ESRI, 'School absence leads to lower educational qualifications and poorer wellbeing' (26 February 2026).
- 94 Barnardos, 'Barnardos responds to ESRI school absenteeism report' (February 2026) <https://bit.ly/4n211FN> accessed 1 May 2026; Barnardos, 'Barnardos responds to ESRI school absenteeism report' (February 2026) <https://bit.ly/4evsRt9> accessed 27 April 2026.
- 95 Economic and Social Research Institute, *School Attendance and Absence in Ireland: Emerging Trends Post-COVID* (ESRI, 2024/2025); see also ESRI research linking absenteeism with socio-economic disadvantage and additional needs; Department of Education, *Attendance Data 2022/23 and 2023/24 (DEIS Urban Band 1)*; and Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision* (Department of Education, 2022); Barnardos, 'Barnardos responds to ESRI school absenteeism report' (February 2026) <https://bit.ly/4n211FN> accessed 1 May 2026; Barnardos, 'Barnardos responds to ESRI school absenteeism report' (February 2026) <https://bit.ly/4evsRt9> accessed 27 April 2026; AslAm, *What We Wish You Knew: A Rights-Based Analysis of School Codes of Behaviour in Ireland* (AslAm 2024).

Although patterns of early school leaving continue to differ across EU national contexts and systems of education, research consistently shows that young people who leave school early are disproportionately drawn from lower socio-economic groups, while Roma children and young people across Europe continue to experience particularly high risks of early school leaving linked to poverty, discrimination, segregation and unequal access to quality education.⁹⁶

Over half of early school leavers will continue their education in facilities such as a voluntary education settings or Youthreach, where they can receive necessary supports and continue a more participant-centred form of education.⁹⁷ In this context, alternative education provision plays a critical role in supporting re-engagement for young people for whom mainstream education is not currently meeting their needs. Alternative education provision has developed in many jurisdictions as a response to limitations within mainstream education.⁹⁸ International experience indicates that such provision is typically characterised by smaller classes, student-centred approaches and a focus on experiential learning to support the personal, professional, and emotional development of each student.⁹⁹

In Ireland, young people who leave school before the age of 16 have limited state-funded opportunities¹⁰⁰ for continuing their education. Except for Youthreach,¹⁰¹ a state-provided programme which offers young people (aged 15-to-21) who are no longer engaged in mainstream education a viable progression route on to further education, training, and/or employment, the area of alternative education is not explicitly defined or mentioned in the Irish education system.¹⁰²

In October 2022, the Department of Education and Youth published its *Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision*.¹⁰³ The Review found that despite Ireland having a high retention rate to Leaving Certificate, there is a small group of young people who find it difficult to engage in mainstream education.¹⁰⁴ Factors that may contribute to this include the young person's own needs and personal situation and/or their relationship with their school and their learning. The *Review* notes that countries with higher retention rates than Ireland place more of an emphasis on vocational education pathways.¹⁰⁵ An Implementation Group was established to oversee the fulfilment of the recommendations in the *Review*.

96 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O'Sullivan, Selina Mccoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness "Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme" (2019) Research Series Number 82; Eurochild, *Roma Children Across Europe Subreport*, (April 2025) <https://bit.ly/4nUFosL> accessed 27 May 2026.

97 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O'Sullivan, Selina Mccoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness "Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme" (2019) Research Series Number 82; Eurochild, *Roma Children Across Europe Subreport*, (April 2025) <https://bit.ly/4nUFosL> accessed 27 May 2026.

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

99 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O'Sullivan, Selina Mccoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus McGuinness "Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme" (2019) Research Series Number 82.

100 outh Encounter Projects (YEPs) provide non-residential educational facilities for children and young people who have either become involved in minor delinquency, or are at risk of becoming involved. A pupil may be referred to one of these schools by a number of agencies or by the court system. Youth Encounter Projects provide these children and young people with a lower pupil teacher ratio and a personalised education plan. Department of Education, High Support Special Schools, Youth Encounter Projects (YEP) and Children and young people Detention Schools <https://bit.ly/4uTzLO2> accessed 4 June 2026.

101 The Youthreach programme provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Youthreach <https://bit.ly/49BxMW3> 4 June 2026.

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

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

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

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

The Group engaged widely with organisations and stakeholders, including young people with lived experience of the complexity of the issues involved. Members of the Group visited all the Youth Encounter Projects¹⁰⁶ and a number of alternative providers around the country. The Department also commissioned a consultation with children and young people, with 52 young people participating.¹⁰⁷

There is a need to ensure that the implementation of the recommendations of the Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision fully recognises the continuing educational entitlement of young people aged 16 to 18. Some young people attending alternative education settings are in senior cycle and are supported to complete the Leaving Certificate and progress to further and higher education, training and employment. Evidence from Cork Life Centre illustrates the potential of this provision; 14 young people are due to sit the Leaving Certificate in June 2026, with almost all planning to progress to further education, while seven students who completed senior cycle in 2025 progressed to PLC courses or employment and all 11 students who completed in 2024 are currently in education or employment.¹⁰⁸

These outcomes demonstrate that, where appropriately resourced, alternative education can provide a highly effective pathway for young people who would otherwise be at serious risk of long-term disengagement. Cork Life Centre identifies that with sufficient financial and teaching resources it could easily double or triple the amount of senior cycle students that it accommodates and that the demand for places goes well beyond that every year.

Alternative education providers continue to be oversubscribed. One provider, iScoil,¹⁰⁹ has identified that despite its growth in student places, with more than 500 young people having accessed iScoil in the 2024/2025 academic year, more than 100 eligible home-based referrals from Tusla Education Support Service had been turned down. This is double the number from the 2023/2024 academic year.¹¹⁰ Data on referrals to iScoil over the period March 2024 to December 2025 indicates a consistently high level of demand for this type of education provision out-of-school, with acceptance rates varying significantly across intake points.¹¹¹ While a substantial proportion of eligible referrals were accommodated at certain points, the data also shows that not all eligible referrals could be accepted, with acceptance rates falling to just over half of referrals at several stages.¹¹² Ensuring that all young people can access an appropriate educational placement, including during senior cycle, is essential to preventing early school leaving and to breaking cycles of poverty and exclusion. Investment in alternative education needs to be viewed as a core component of an inclusive and equitable education system.

The Department of Education and Youth made additional funding available in 2025 for out-of-school provision, resulting in an additional €250,000 being allocated to support and provide stability to existing alternative education settings.¹¹³ This funding sits alongside other developments in the out-of-school and alternative education landscape, including continued and expanded support for iScoil, which provides a blended and home-based learning pathway for young people referred through Tusla Education Support Service (TESS).

106 Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs) provide non-residential educational facilities for children and young people, who have either become involved in minor delinquency, or are at risk of becoming involved. A pupil may be referred to one of these schools by a number of agencies or by the court system. Youth Encounter Projects provide these children and young people with a lower pupil teacher ratio and a personalised education plan.

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

108 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Cork Life Centre 12 May 2026.

109 iScoil is a non-profit service which provides young people with a pathway to learning, accreditation and progression through an online learning service. Through their service young people can re-engage with education, achieve recognised QQI certification and access further education, training and employment opportunities.

110 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from iScoil, 30 April 2025.

111 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from iScoil on 6 January 2026.

112 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from iScoil on 6 January 2026.

113 Communication received from the Department of Education and Youth by the Childrens Rights Alliance on 13 January 2026.

In 2025, the Department confirmed increased funding for iScoil to expand capacity and support additional TESS-referred learners, signalling recognition of the role that established alternative provision can play in supporting re-engagement, participation and progression for children and young people and young people who are unable to access or sustain mainstream schooling.¹¹⁴ A commitment to implement a range of actions from the review of Out-of-School Education Provision to ensure children and young people who become disengaged from mainstream school can continue in education is part of the new DEIS Implementation Plan 2026-2028, with a completion date of 2027.¹¹⁵ Together, these measures represent practical steps towards stabilising and strengthening existing out-of-school provision, and provide a foundation on which a more coherent, strategic and rights-based framework for alternative education could be developed.

Addressing the financial barriers to education

Alongside structural and systemic barriers, financial barriers continue to shape children and young people's access to, and experience of, education. *Investing in Children* calls on barriers to education to be addressed, including those related to financial costs in compulsory education.¹¹⁶ In June 2021, building on the *Investing in Children Recommendation*,¹¹⁷ the European Child Guarantee requires each State to identify and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in education along with ensuring provision of educational materials, including books and uniforms.¹¹⁸

The UNCRC calls on States to take steps to achieve the right to education on the 'basis of equal opportunity' and to 'take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need'.¹¹⁹ In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of a Child called on the Irish State, to strengthen measures to ensure all children and young people in disadvantaged groups have equal access to education. This included ensuring 'support to cover hidden costs of education'.¹²⁰

Free School Books

Recent policy developments have made significant progress in addressing one of the most visible financial barriers to education. The introduction of free schoolbooks at primary level in Budget 2023 removed core book costs for families of approximately 558,000 children across more than 3,200 schools, including special schools.¹²¹ The extension of the scheme to Junior Cycle in Budget 2024 and to all remaining post-primary students in Budget 2025 represents a substantial and sustained investment in reducing education-related costs and to tackling child poverty, with the scheme now supporting approximately 940,000 students across primary, special and post-primary schools at a cost of over €164 million annually.¹²² Evidence from Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) indicates that the introduction of free school books had an immediate and tangible impact on families, with a reported 20 per cent reduction in back-to-school support requests in the first year of implementation at primary level.¹²³ This highlights the effectiveness of universal cost-reduction measures in alleviating financial pressure on low-income households.

114 Department of Education and Youth (Ireland), *Ministers announce funding boost to iScoil to support additional places* (Press Release, 29 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4viFM6R> accessed 27 May 2026.

115 Department of Education and Youth, *DEIS Strategy Implementation Plan 2026-2028* (Department of Education and Youth April 2026) 32.

116 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 7.

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

118 Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee [2021] OJ L223/14.

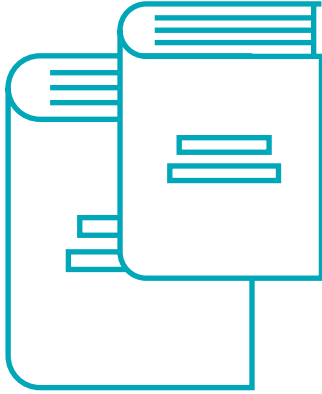
119 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 28(1).

120 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, paras 4 and 37.

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

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

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



The Free School Book Scheme will now support approximately 940,000 students across primary, special and post-primary schools at a cost of over €164 million annually.

Both SVP and Barnardos have raised concerns about the broader cost burden associated with education and how it can impact access and participation. Families continue to face significant expenses related to uniforms, digital devices, transport, mock exam corrections, transition year costs and extracurricular activities, pointing to the persistence of “hidden costs” within the education system.¹²⁴

Voluntary Contributions

Despite the efforts to reduce education costs, voluntary contributions and school-related charges remain a significant pressure for many families. Research commissioned by the SVP highlights that so-called “voluntary contributions” are frequently experienced by parents as effectively mandatory, with many reporting that they feel compelled to pay

in order to ensure their child’s full participation in school life.¹²⁵ Parent responses clearly showed that these contributions are generally not communicated as being optional, that they place a significant amount of stress on some families, and that many of the respondents made sacrifices in other areas in order to pay the voluntary contribution asked by the school.¹²⁶

More recent sectoral reporting suggests some easing of pressure in specific areas, including a slight reduction in the average level of voluntary contributions requested in 2024.¹²⁷ This is likely linked to increases in school funding, including enhancements to the Capitation Grant in Budget 2024 and a further €30 million increase in Budget 2025, representing a 12 per cent rise in capitation rates.¹²⁸ These measures are intended to reduce reliance on parental contributions by supporting schools with core operating costs. However, wider cost-of-living pressures continue to impact both schools and families, with schools seeking to manage rising operating costs and many parents experiencing ongoing financial strain, increasing the risk that educational costs continue to be transferred to households through voluntary contributions and related charges.

Evidence from both SVP and Barnardos indicates that these increases have not fully offset the rising costs faced by schools or the broader financial pressures on families. Barnardos’ 2025 Back-to-School Survey revealed that families continue to face significant costs associated with uniforms, digital devices, transport and extracurricular activities, while SVP reports ongoing demand for back-to-school supports, particularly among low-income households.¹²⁹

124 Barnardos, *Back to School Survey 2025* (Barnardos 2025); Niamh Dalziel, “‘Voluntary’ contributions, digital devices and other costs make education anything but free” *The Irish Examiner* (8 August 2025) <https://bit.ly/4vUFRi1> accessed 27 April 2026.

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

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

127 Barnardos, *Back to School Survey 2024* (Barnardos 2024) 15 <https://bit.ly/4wRn7QX> accessed 27 May 2026.

128 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2024* (2023); Government of Ireland, *Budget 2025* (2024).

129 Barnardos, *Back to School Costs Survey 2025* (Barnardos, 2025); Society of St Vincent de Paul, *Back to School Costs Report 2024* (SVP, 2024); Niamh Dalziel, “‘Voluntary’ contributions, digital devices and other costs make education anything but free” *The Irish Examiner* (8 August 2025) <https://bit.ly/4vUFRi1> accessed 27 April 2026.

School management and representative bodies have also highlighted ongoing pressures on school finances and the need for sustained investment in core school funding to reduce reliance on fundraising and voluntary contributions and support the delivery of educational provision.¹³⁰ While recent increases in capitation funding have been widely welcomed, education stakeholders continue to caution that many schools remain reliant on fundraising and voluntary contributions to meet day-to-day expenditure.¹³¹ This highlights the dual challenge facing policymakers; reducing the financial burden on families while ensuring that schools have sufficient core funding to deliver educational provision without transferring costs to parents.

The impact of education-related costs on participation has also been highlighted directly by children and young people. Through the EU Children's Participation Platform consultation involving more than 41,000 children across the European Union, children identified the cost of school trips, activities, equipment and learning materials as barriers to participation.¹³² Children called for school activities to be made free or more affordable and for schools to provide clear information about the full costs associated with participation, including additional charges for materials, trips and equipment.¹³³

The consultation also highlighted concerns regarding access to educational supports, bullying and discrimination, and the effectiveness of supports for children with disabilities in everyday school life.¹³⁴ These findings reinforce the importance of addressing both the direct and indirect costs of education and ensuring that all children can participate fully in school.

There is a need for sustained and responsive funding increases, alongside continued monitoring of school costs, to ensure that financial pressures are not transferred to families, particularly those already experiencing poverty.

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- 130 Irish Primary Principals' Network, *Letter to Minister McEntee re School Funding* (23 September 2025) <https://bit.ly/4ufgkhq> accessed 05 June 2026; Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, 'Budget Fails to Address Worsening Teacher Supply Crisis' (8 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/4atSqrk> accessed 05 June 2026.
- 131 Irish Primary Principals' Network, *Letter to Minister McEntee re School Funding* (23 September 2025) <https://bit.ly/4ufgkhq> accessed 05 June 2026; Carl O'Brien, 'We're in a Dire Situation: Parents Fundraising an Average of €10,000 per Primary School' *The Irish Times* (16 July 2025) <https://bit.ly/3RLJQOs> accessed 05 June 2026.
- 132 European Commission, *EU Children's Participation Platform: Fourth Consultation Report Summary* (European Commission 2026) 2-5.
- 133 European Commission, *EU Children's Participation Platform: Fourth Consultation Report Summary* (European Commission 2026) 2-5.
- 134 European Commission, *EU Children's Participation Platform: Fourth Consultation Report Summary* (European Commission 2026) 2-5.

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Increase capitation grants in Budget 2027 and undertake a review of school funding adequacy to ensure schools can meet core operating costs without relying on parental contributions, fundraising or other charges that may create barriers to participation for children experiencing poverty.
- Provide an additional payment of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to parents of young people in Transition Year.
- Budget 2027 should ensure that the *DEIS Implementation Plan* and the *DEIS Plus Implementation Plan* are adequately funded to achieve the actions identified for completion in 2027. Particularly in relation to the action to implement a range of actions from the review of Out of School Education Provision to ensure children and young people who become disengaged from mainstream school can continue in education.
- Ensure sustained implementation of the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy* through mainstreamed inclusion measures, targeted interventions and clear monitoring against agreed targets and timelines.
- Budget 2027 should allocate dedicated funding to significantly increase Educational Welfare Officer capacity and strengthen flexible, and rights based early intervention pathways within Tusla Education Support Service, with a specific focus on eliminating waiting lists and prioritising children and young people at highest risk of chronic absence.

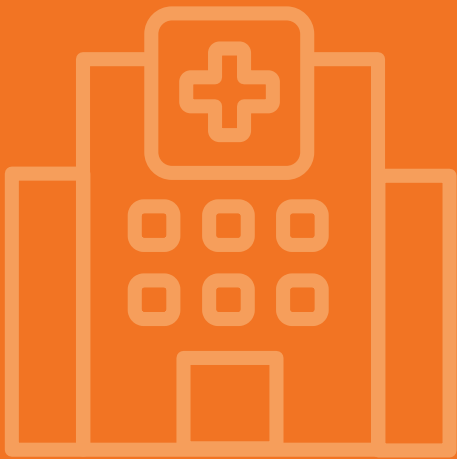
Medium-term

- Conduct a comprehensive equality audit of educational participation, attainment, progression and school experience for disabled, Autistic and neurodivergent children and young people to identify barriers, monitor outcomes and inform future policy and resource allocation.
- Explore and evaluate how best to extend targeted supports to schools and students experiencing disadvantage outside current DEIS designations, including the further rollout of Home School Community Liaison and school-based supports based on need rather than school classification.
- Embed robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within Traveller and Roma education policy to assess the impact of STAR and related initiatives, support mainstreaming of effective practice and identify where additional targeted provision is required.

Long-term

- Address the intersectionality of poverty, disability, racism, ethnicity, unmet need, school environment or family circumstance in a child rights and equality proofed Inclusive Education Action Plan as part of the long-term strategy development of the Department of Education and Youth.

Health



Access to Quality Health Services

The second Pillar of *Investing in Children* focuses on access to quality services and includes measures that urge Member States to 'improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children'.¹ To do this they must ensure that all children realise their universal right to health care including 'through disease prevention and health promotion as well as access to quality health services'.² Member States must address barriers to healthcare access experienced by 'children and families in vulnerable situations, including costs, cultural and linguistic barriers, lack of information'.³ To address these barriers, Member States should 'improve the training of health care providers'.⁴ Special attention should be given to disabled children or those with mental health problems, children who are undocumented or non-registered as well as pregnant teenagers or those from families with experience of substance abuse.⁵ The Recommendation calls on Member States to 'invest in prevention particularly during early childhood by putting in place comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures'.⁶ *Investing in Children* also calls for Member States to ensure that they address the social gradient in unhealthy lifestyles by providing access to balanced diets and physical activities.⁷

According to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the provision of primary health-care services should be closely situated to where children and families live with a particular focus on community settings.⁸ The Committee recognises that a number of determinants need to be considered for the realisation of children's right to health including socioeconomic status and factors related to where you live.⁹ The Committee acknowledges that the health of children is also dependent on the health and behaviours of parents and other significant adults. Universal coverage of primary health services should include access to prevention and health promotion services along with ensuring an adequate response to the underlying determinants of children's health.¹⁰

The impact of poverty on children's health and future health is borne out in the research and evidence available in Ireland. Low birth weight has a social gradient with the percentage of babies born in the low-birth-weight category second highest among unemployed mothers (9.1 per cent) and lowest amongst those who are salaried (4.3 per cent).¹¹ Recent analysis using the Census and the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, shows that for children and young people (0 to 24 years) the rate of disability in the most disadvantaged areas is equal to older adults (65 years and over) living in the most affluent areas.¹² Childhood experiences of poverty can also have a lasting effect on health and wellbeing.¹³

- 1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 6 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 7 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 8 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child *General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health* (art. 24) CRC/c/GC/15, 6.
- 9 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child *General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health* (art. 24) CRC/c/GC/15, 6.
- 10 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child *General comment No. 15 (2013) on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health* (art. 24) CRC/c/GC/15, 6.
- 11 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *State of the Nation's Children: Part 3 Children's Outcomes* (2025) 20 <https://bit.ly/4uTsFcu> accessed 3 June 2026.
- 12 Pobal *Disability and Deprivation* (2024) 3.
- 13 CSO *SILC Module on the Impact of Childhood Poverty Experiences on Adult Life 2023* (CSO 2024).

Those who grew up with bad financial circumstances were almost twice as likely to report their health as being bad or very bad (6.6 per cent) in adulthood versus those growing up in good financial circumstances (3.4 per cent).¹⁴ Individuals living in areas with the highest levels of disadvantage are four and a half time more likely to report not having good health compared to those in the most well-off areas.¹⁵

Access to Primary Health Care

Investing in Children emphasises the importance of both disease prevention and health promotion measures as a means of ensuring that children experiencing poverty and disadvantage can access their universal right to health care.¹⁶ Tracking the longer term effect of child poverty throughout childhood, *Growing up in Ireland* indicates that exposure to economic vulnerability, a measure of poverty that combines low income, deprivation and an inability to make ends meet, has an impact on children's physical and mental health outcomes.¹⁷ Children who experience economic vulnerability are more likely to be obese or overweight, and they have a greater likelihood of having a chronic illness or disability.¹⁸ Measurement of self-concept – which includes attributes such as happiness and freedom from anxiety – found that those with long exposure to economic vulnerability have a poorer self-concept.¹⁹

Given the increased prevalence of chronic conditions and disability amongst children experiencing poverty it is critical that primary care services are readily available to children and their families. These services represent the first point of contact in health care along with providing important preventative interventions (such as vaccinations and screenings).

Sláintecare identifies the importance of these services noting that 'investment in health promotion and primary care is a wise investment' that not only leads to better outcomes but also results in 'lower healthcare spending'.²⁰

Investing in Children calls for member states to address the barriers to healthcare including those related to cost.²¹ To address the cost of accessing a GP, families on a low income can apply for a Full Medical Card. The full Medical Card is a targeted support and recipients generally must satisfy a means test.²² Families whose income is derived solely from social welfare will normally qualify for the Medical Card.²³ However, those on low incomes from a combination of work and social welfare may not meet the criteria for qualification. This is due to the inadequacy of the income thresholds which form part of the means test. The current Medical Card income threshold for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week.²⁴ The poverty line for this household in 2025 was calculated by Social Justice Ireland to have been €849.81 per week.²⁵ A comparison of the proportion of children and young people with a Full Medical Card shows that a lower percentage qualified for this support in 2020 versus 2024. For instance, while 23 per cent of 0- to 4-year-olds had a Full Medical Card in 2020, this fell to 20.5 per cent in 2024. Amongst adolescents aged 12 to 15 years the rates were 36 per cent and 32.2 per cent respectively.²⁶

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

15 Pobal *Disability and Deprivation* (2024) 3.

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

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

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

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

20 Houses of the Oireachtas *Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report* (2017) 33.

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

22 Citizens Information 'Services for medical card and GP visit card holders' <https://bit.ly/4vhD1Tf> accessed 26 May 2026.

23 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <https://bit.ly/43uedvd> accessed 26 May 2026.

24 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <https://bit.ly/43uedvd> accessed 26 May 2026.

25 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2025* (Social Justice Ireland 2025) 3.

26 Department of Health 'Health in Ireland : Key Trends - Primary Care and Community Service' <https://bit.ly/4wT1PCC> accessed 27 May 2026.

Without access to free healthcare those on lower incomes are less likely to access health care and their health needs remain unmet. This is evident in research published in 2020 which examined self-reported data on unmet health needs due to factors such as cost, distance and waiting time.²⁷ During the period of the economic recession 2008 to 2012 there was a sharp increase in unmet health needs. This occurred in the context of cut backs in public spending resulting in a reduction in dental benefits and an increase in out of pocket prescription charges.²⁸ The gap in unmet need widened between those on the lowest and the highest incomes during this time, although when incomes recovered in 2015 and 2026, unmet need decreased but the gap remained.²⁹

Using educational attainment as a proxy for socioeconomic status also emphasises a stark inequality in unmet health need.³⁰ A review of the Medical Card thresholds is needed if coverage is to be more comprehensive for those that need it. The Full Medical Card ensures access to more extensive primary care services such as optical and aural services, prescriptions, and out-patient health services and medical appliances.³¹ Therefore, the Full Medical Card is an important intervention in terms of addressing the cost barriers related to accessing healthcare services as set out in *Investing in Children*.

Arising from its work, *Sláintecare* recommends not only the expansion of primary care services, but universal access to free GP care.³² In 2020, the government introduced legislation to expand access to GP care for children under the age of 13 through the provision of a GP visit card.³³ The expansion of

universal GP care has been limited to date. While a commitment was contained in Budget 2022 to fund the expansion of GP care to six- and seven-year-olds,³⁴ it was not until August 2023 that the GP visit card was introduced for this age group.³⁵ Subsequent Budgets have not included any further measures to expand access to older age groups of children. However, the current *Programme of Government Securing Ireland's Future* commits to expanding care to children under 12 along with keeping further expansion under review.³⁶ The Minister reaffirmed this commitment in Dáil Éireann in May 2026. In response to a parliamentary question, the Minister indicated that at a cost of €29.32 million per annum, 196,000 8-to-12 year olds would become eligible for free GP visits.³⁷ The Initial Work Plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office identifies expansion of free GP care to children as a key action as part of its work to consolidate and integrate public health, family and parental assistance and well-being services.³⁸

State funding allocated to GP services in Ireland is based on an agreement between the Department of Health, HSE and the Irish Medical Organisation.³⁹ A capitation fee is paid in respect of patients in receipt of a medical card, however, while the rate paid varies based on patient age and gender, it does not take account of the patient's needs.⁴⁰ Funding is flatly distributed and GPs in more affluent areas receive the same allocation as those working in areas of deprivation. This is despite, as outlined earlier in this section, research and evidence showing that there is a greater intensity of need for those experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

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- 27 B. Johnston S.Thomas and S. Burke *Can people afford to pay for health care? New evidence on financial protection in Ireland* (World Health Organisation 2020).
- 28 B. Johnston S.Thomas and S. Burke *Can people afford to pay for health care? New evidence on financial protection in Ireland* (World Health Organisation 2020).
- 29 B. Johnston S.Thomas and S. Burke *Can people afford to pay for health care? New evidence on financial protection in Ireland* (World Health Organisation 2020) 21.
- 30 B. Johnston S.Thomas and S. Burke *Can people afford to pay for health care? New evidence on financial protection in Ireland* (World Health Organisation 2020) 21.
- 31 Citizens Information 'Services for medical card and GP visit card holders' <https://bit.ly/4vhD1Tf> accessed 26 May 2026.
- 32 Houses of the Oireachtas *Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report* (2017) 18.
- 33 Health (General Practitioner and Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020.
- 34 Department of Health, 'Budget 2022: Minister Donnelly announces €21 billion, the biggest ever investment in Ireland's health and social care services' (Press Release 14 October 2021).
- 35 Department of Health, 'Minister for Health encourages families to register for free GP care for children aged 6 and 7' (Press Release, 11 August 2023).
- 36 Government of Ireland *Programme of Government Securing Ireland's Future* (2025) 86.
- 37 Jennifer Carroll MacNeill TD, Minister for Health, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, General Practitioners Services 6 May 2026 [31963/26].
- 38 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025* (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).
- 39 Department of Health, HSE and Irish Medical Organisation, *GP Agreement - Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO* <https://bit.ly/435qJRT> accessed 02 June 2026.
- 40 Department of Health, HSE and Irish Medical Organisation, *GP Agreement - Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO* <https://bit.ly/435qJRT> accessed 02 June 2026, 6.

Investing in Children calls for an improvement in the responsiveness of health systems to meet the needs of children living in areas of disadvantage.⁴¹ The flat distribution of funding to GP services is not responsive to the increased care needs of children and families experiencing poverty.

A group of GPs working in the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland came together in 2012 and formed Deep End Ireland.⁴² Similar to the approach advocated by The Marmot Review, Deep End has called for increased resources for GPs working in areas of disadvantage to address 'the inverse care law'.⁴³ Coined by Julian Tudor Hart in an article in *The Lancet* in 1971,⁴⁴ the inverse care law 'states that people who most need good quality health care are often the least likely to receive it'.⁴⁵ GPs who are part of Deep End have highlighted the increased complexity of their work in disadvantaged communities, yet the payment they receive is the same as GPs who may not face the similar challenges. For example, engaging with patients who are experiencing homelessness or who require interpretation services can mean GPs spend more time with these patients.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the fact that multimorbidity can occur in patients living in deprived areas 10-15 years earlier,⁴⁷ means that these GPs are providing more intense patient care to patients in their 50s and 60s before the increased funding rate is applied at 70 years of age.⁴⁸

As there are fewer GPs working in areas of high deprivation, Deep End advocate for the adoption of a similar approach to the DEIS school model to attract more GPs to work in these communities.⁴⁹ This could increase doctor-patient ratios, allow for longer appointment times and increase the viability of General Practice in these areas.⁵⁰ This would ensure that patients receive more intensive supports from GPs. In the 2019 GP contract, agreed between the HSE, Department of Health and the Irish Medical Organisation an allocation of €2m was provided to 'support and maintain GP services for communities with a high degree of social deprivation'.⁵¹ An annual grant of between €7,500 and €12,500 is provided for GPs working in disadvantaged areas based on the proportion of their patients living in areas categorised as disadvantaged by the Pobal deprivation maps.⁵² The grant is to be used to provide additional services. The latest available data indicates that €3.075 million in funding was made available under this scheme in 2024.⁵³

Annual Funding provided under the Social Deprivation Practice Grant Support

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Social Deprivation Grant	€2,905,000	€79,500	€2,542,500	€3,105,000	€3,075,000

Source: HSE Primary Care Reimbursement Service Statistical Analysis of Claims and Payments 2024; 2023; 2022; 2021 and 2020 (HSE various years)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

51 Department of Health, HSE and Irish Medical Organisation, *Terms of Agreement between the Department of Health, the HSE and the IMO regarding GP Contractual Reform and Service Development* <https://bit.ly/435qJRT> accessed 03 June 2026.

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

53 Health Service Executive, *Primary Care Reimbursement Service Statistical Analysis of Claims and Payments* (2025).

Research with 25 practices awarded this funding found that many (17 out of the 25 respondents) used the additional funding for more doctor hours.⁵⁴ The funding was also used for increased nursing hours, counselling, addiction counselling and interpreter services.⁵⁵ While this was a small scale research study, GPs who were consulted commented that the funding allowed GPs to provide longer consultations and the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive to health issues for vulnerable populations.⁵⁶ Further research on the impact of the grant should be undertaken in order to identify the potential that increased investment in this area may have.

Preventative supports in early childhood

The Public Health Nursing (PHN) service provides one-to-one support for parents of all babies and is seen as having a key role in ensuring that babies and young children have access to primary, preventative and specialist healthcare.⁵⁷ Services provided by the PHN include the performance of child development assessments, visits to newborn babies, provision of advice on breastfeeding and the co-ordination with other services along with providing support around maternal mental health and transitions to other community services.⁵⁸ The PHN is an integral primary health care role who can provide early intervention such as referring parents to more specialised health and social services early before any issues or problems for families become more complex and costly to address.

Traditionally, the role of public health nurses in Ireland is generalist in nature, with public health nurses providing care and advice for all age groups and all circumstances. The generalist character of the responsibilities of PHNs is viewed as a positive, in that they provide 'cradle to grave' care for all of the population and must have ongoing training to inform the changing nature of their work, including cultural competence and awareness.⁵⁹ Alongside access to GPs, the Public Health Nursing (PHN) service has a key role in ensuring that babies and young children have access to primary, preventative and specialist healthcare.⁶⁰ *Investing in Children* calls for investment in prevention for children's early years which includes measures that combine nutrition, health education and social measures PHNs are vital aspect of ensuring this.⁶¹

A systematic review of international models of public health highlights the important role that public health nurses play in providing child specific health support to address early childhood development milestones and early intervention.⁶² The review looked at models in four countries – Norway, Italy, United States and the United Kingdom.⁶³ Some of the impacts captured in the literature include the development of good interpersonal relationships between families and PHNs in Norway; a demonstrated reduction in child abuse and neglect in the United States and evidence that intensive home visiting in the United Kingdom supports children's language development.⁶⁴

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

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

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

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

58 Health Service Executive (2024) *A Vision for the Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Ireland*, Dublin: HSE.

59 Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland *Public Health Nursing Education Programme Standards and Requirements* (2023).

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

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

62 Jeffers, B. Buckley M. and Mulcahy, G. *An exploration of the development of a dedicated public health nurse service for children* (Children's Rights Alliance 2025).

63 Jeffers, B. Buckley M. and Mulcahy, G. *An exploration of the development of a dedicated public health nurse service for children* (Children's Rights Alliance 2025).

64 Jeffers, B. Buckley M. and Mulcahy, G. *An exploration of the development of a dedicated public health nurse service for children* (Children's Rights Alliance 2025).

Public health nursing remains under pressure with the number of Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) posts yet to return to their pre-pandemic levels. The latest figures indicate that there continues to be a lower number in the workforce with 1,537 WTE pre-pandemic in December 2019⁶⁵ and just 1,534 WTE in December 2025.⁶⁶ In 2020 and 2021, the redirection of Public Health Nurses to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic meant there was a reduced level of contact between PHNs and newborn babies and their parents. In 2021 just 53.6 per cent of babies received their developmental screening within their first 12 months.⁶⁷ While there has been significant improvements since then, the rates still fall below the HSE target of 95 per cent. The latest data, for December 2025, shows that overall 86 per cent of babies received their developmental check within 12 months in 2025. However, there was a variance across the Health Regions of 76.3 in HSE Dublin and Midlands to 94.9 per cent in HSE South-West.⁶⁸ Parents continue to raise in the media and amongst public representatives the impact that the lack of contact with PHNs in their community is having.⁶⁹

Sláintecare recommends investing in child health and well-being services by putting in place Public Health Nurses that are dedicated to child health work. *Sláintecare* also recommends the hiring of 900 community registered nurses to free up Public Health Nurses with specialist child training to carry out their child health work.⁷⁰ *First 5: The Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, contains a related commitment along with reference in the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office.⁷¹

The Programme Office's progress report notes that a steering group has been established and this is exploring a range of existing practice and models. A Project Officer was due to be appointed to support this work in January 2025.⁷² Recommendations from the Steering Group have been made to the Ministers for Health and Children and the Department of Health is currently working on implementing these.⁷³ In the absence of the establishment of a dedicated PHN service for children and families in Ireland there area primary healthcare initiatives targeting the needs of those experiencing disadvantage. The work of Kidscope – a consultant-led, multi-stakeholder paediatric clinic based in the Northwest of Cork City – highlights how routine check-ups conducted by a Public Health Nurse can act as a means of referring children with developmental concerns to wider health services.⁷⁴

65 Health Service Executive Performance Profile July – September 2021 (2021) 104.

66 Health Service Executive, Written Answers, *Health Services Staff*, 4 February 2026 [8134/26].

67 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2021* (HSE 2021) 5.

68 Health Service Executive, *National Performance Report – December 2025* (February 2026) 9.

69 C. Hunt, 'Babies missing out on health checks due to nursing shortage', *rte.ie* (24 November 2025) <https://bit.ly/3RL74Ec> accessed 27 May 2026.

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

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

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

73 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 33. Children's Rights Alliance *Breaking the Cycle: Developing a public model of early years and a child-health workforce* (2 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4uJKxpV> accessed 3 June 2026.

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

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum these should be set above the poverty thresholds.
- Expand access to the GP visit card to children aged 8 and 9 years in order to progress meeting the commitment in the Programme for Government.
- Increase investment in the social deprivation grant awarded to GPs working in areas of social disadvantage by €1 million. As part of the increased funding commission a comprehensive research study on the impact of the grant funding to date and future expenditure needed to have a real impact on reducing health inequalities.
- Invest in creating a dedicated public health nurse service for children and develop a strategy for 'home visits' to ensure every child has access to the prevention and early intervention supports they deserve in their own community.

Short-term

- Set out a timeline for the rollout of the GP visit card for all children under the age of 13.

Medium-term

- In the medium term realise the commitment to extend the GP Medical Card to under 12s.

Long-term Sustainable Solutions

- Expand GP Medical Card to all children under the age of 18.
- Fully implement the commitments contained in Sláintecare.

Spotlight solution

ADDRESSING HEALTH INEQUALITIES AT A LOCAL LEVEL – A MARMOT PLACE IN LIMERICK



What is the issue?

The area of South and North Limerick City covers a population of 75,986. Of this population, 36.4 per cent experience disadvantage. That means more than a third are going without the basic essentials needed to maintain the minimum standard of living. In Ireland, the degree of disadvantage is determined by education, employment, housing, and family status. Those living in extreme disadvantage has nearly tripled between 2016 and 2022 in the mid-west region overall.

The vast majority of Limerick's population that experience disadvantage lies between these areas. Within this relatively small geographical area are the only two electoral districts in Ireland that are considered "extremely disadvantaged". This cycle of intergenerational poverty and deprivation perpetuates inequalities across all aspects of children's lives including their education, their mental health and wellbeing and their physical health. The longer a child stays in poverty, the greater risk to their current and future health outcomes. Leading academic on health inequality, Prof Sir Michael Marmot's research in the area found that as well as impacting on health outcomes as a child grows up, socioeconomic position directly affects children's health and there is a social gradient in children's health. The most deprived 10 percent of children are nearly twice as like to die (5.3 per 1,000) as the most advantaged 10 percent of children (3.1 per 1,000), and children in more deprived areas are more likely to face a serious illness during childhood and to have a long-term disability.¹

What is the solution?

Limerick City and County Council and HSE Mid-West established an interagency Oversight Group aiming to tackle health inequalities in Limerick's most disadvantaged areas. The Limerick Health Equity Region Oversight Group comprises key state and community agencies working towards a shared long-term vision to create a fairer, healthier Limerick by focusing on addressing the social determinants including housing, employment and education – an approach recognised and supported by the World Health Organisation.

What is a Marmot Place?

A Marmot Place recognises that health and health inequalities are shaped by the social determinants of health and takes action on these social determinants. These are the conditions in which children are born, live, grow up, work and age including factors such as education, employment and housing and they can lead to wide differences in people's health and in their life expectancy.

1 Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On

The University College London's Institute of Health Equity works with places to reduce inequalities in health by:

- Assessing the extent of inequalities in health and the social determinants of health locally, reviewing actions already happening and scoping the local context.
- Identifying where places can go further to reduce inequalities and spot where there are gaps in existing actions.
- Evaluating how partners within a place can work together more effectively to achieve greater impact and make the needed changes; even in the challenging financial and resource context.
- Strengthening the health equity system in a place.
- Implementing new approaches and interventions to tackle health inequalities and inequalities in the social determinants of health.

The 'Marmot Eight' Principles: To address the main social determinants of health, recommended actions have been developed in the following areas:

1. Give every child the best start in life.
2. Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.
3. Create fair employment and good work for all.
4. Ensure a healthy standard of living for all.
5. Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities.
6. Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention.
7. Tackle racism, discrimination and their outcomes.
8. Pursue environmental sustainability and health equity together.

Based on these eight principles, Marmot Places develop and deliver interventions and policies to improve health equity; embedding these approaches in local systems and take a long-term, whole-system approach to improving health equity.

How does it work?

Places commit to improve health equity over the short, medium and long term by:

- Developing and delivering approaches, interventions and policies to improve health equity.
- Strengthening their health equity systems.
- Involving communities in the identification of the drivers of poor health and in the design and implementation of actions to reduce them.
- Broadening advocacy on health equity and engaging with other Marmot Places to share knowledge, roll out best practice alongside partners in local regions and nationally.



How each local area takes these commitments and principles forward, differs depending on their unique local context. Social determinants present differently in specific areas so while most places seek internal ownership of a work plan or implementation plan, the emphasis with each place can differ. Some ensure most programmes are shaped by the Marmot approach. Others take a less visible but nevertheless embedded Marmot approach, driving from within rather than leading from the front.

What are the learnings²

There is no direct funding to support areas becoming a Marmot Place, so the success in the UK and the effectiveness of a Marmot Place approach in Ireland depends on leadership within local councils or local authorities and interagency cooperation to reinforce the principles and ensure they are embedded across organisations and services.

Learnings from Coventry, the first Marmot City³

Coventry became the first Marmot City in 2013 and over the past 13 years has remained committed to reducing health inequalities in the city despite challenges of reduced local government funding, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. This work is maintained through 30 different partners. In 2013, there was no established framework beyond the Marmot Principles, so leadership from Coventry Council adopted an asset-based approach that sought to leverage partnerships across the public, community and voluntary sectors to form a steering group. The three-year plan drawn up by the steering group laid the groundwork for Coventry's long-term commitment to health equity. The collaborative and constructive partnership work has created a cultural shift that ensures that all policies and services that are commissioned – from planning, housing and transport to licensing and regulation, consider the impact on health equity first. In 2026, the programme was reviewed and indicators were adjusted to provide clearer focus. This included a focus on, tackling inequalities disproportionately impacting young people. In 2020, the city produced an evaluation report that determined that between 2015 and 2029, the number of Coventry neighbourhoods that were among the 10% most deprived in England reduced from 18.5 per cent to 14.4 per cent and life expectancy remained relatively stable, despite increases at a national level during the same period.

² Building fairer towns, cities and regions: Insights from Marmot Places | Local Government Association
³ Coventry City Council: over a decade of commitment to the Marmot principles | Local Government Association

Learnings from Cheshire and Merseyside, home to the second most deprived borough in England⁴

The Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that Knowsley is the second most deprived borough in England, followed by Liverpool. Life expectancy in the region is below the average for England, except in Cheshire West and Chester. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the mortality rate in Cheshire and Merseyside was 5% higher than the national average.

The journey to become a Marmot Place took Cheshire and Merseyside nearly two years and brought together 9 boroughs, health service (NHS) organisations, housing associations and local community and voluntary groups. Workshops were held to identify priority actions with each regional council developing its own Marmot data pack working alongside their Health and Wellbeing Boards. Political leadership played a critical role in bringing the almost 100 stakeholders together. A shared framework (All Together Fairer) enables collaboration and an integrated approach between political and professional leaders with two specific strategies drawn up since 2024 to guide implementation.

For Ireland, there is ample evidence and learnings to be drawn from the Marmot Places across the UK that could help inform the development and implementation of similar approaches here that would effectively address health inequity. In Limerick, Phase One is already underway and there will be an assessment of current needs of South and North Limerick City, with particular focus on children and young people. What is evident from other cities, political leadership at local government level and increased funding and support for interagency and partnership work at a national level could increase the effectiveness of the model.

“Both the North and South of Limerick city have been shaped by inequality for too long. Health begins in our homes, schools, and communities. By tackling the root causes of ill health - poverty, housing, education, and employment - we’re building a Limerick where everyone, no matter their Eircode, can thrive.”

John Moran, Mayor of Limerick,

Housing and Homelessness



HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

The second Pillar of *Investing in Children* focuses on access to affordable quality services and calls on Member States to ensure that children have 'a safe adequate housing and living environment'.¹ This should 'allow children to live and grow up in a safe, healthy and child-friendly environment that supports their development and learning needs'.² To address child poverty Member States need to ensure that families with children can 'live in affordable, quality housing (including social housing)' and address issues related to 'environmental hazards, overcrowding and energy poverty'.³ Families and children should be prevented from experiencing homelessness through the avoidance of evictions and for those that do, long-term solutions are needed alongside the provision of temporary shelter that meets the immediate needs of children and families.⁴ Exposure to deteriorating living and social environments should be reduced to ensure children do not fall victim to violence and abuse.⁵

The housing crisis in Ireland is having a profound and disproportionate impact on children and families experiencing poverty in Ireland. The official poverty statistics show that the rates of income poverty are much higher for children, one parent families and those renting from local authorities and with other forms of social housing supports.⁶ The data on individuals on Emergency Homeless Accommodation shows that children and families are becoming trapped for years in unsuitable living conditions impacting their ability to access nutritious food, their development and their participation in education. This section provides an analysis of the failure of the government to realise key measures contained in *Investing in Children* for children in poverty including access to affordable quality housing, the

impact of overcrowding and energy poverty and the lack of long-term solutions for those in temporary accommodation.

In November 2025, the Government published its new housing plan *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness*.⁷ The plan has two pillars – Activating Supply and Supporting People. The first pillar, Activating Supply, focuses on how the Government will activate the supply of 300,000 homes through ensuring a strong pipeline of appropriate land, creating the conditions to attract investment, increasing skills in the residential construction sector, and working towards ending dereliction and vacancy.⁸

The second pillar of the Plan, Supporting People, focuses on ending homelessness, supporting affordability and addressing the housing needs of people as they progress through life. This will be done by delivering an average of 12,000 new social homes every year and promoting affordable home ownership, protecting renters and making buying and renting homes more affordable.⁹ The Government will invest in the built environment of towns, villages and cities to enhance community wellbeing.

The initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office at the Department of Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, identified family homelessness as one of its six priority areas.¹⁰

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- 1 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 2 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 3 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 4 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 5 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 6 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026).
 - 7 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025 2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025).
 - 8 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025 2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 9.
 - 9 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025 2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 9.
 - 10 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).

Amongst the key issues that the Programme Office committed to focus on are:

- Actions to prevent and reduce the impact of homelessness for children;
- The identification of the causes of, and an initiation of preventative strategies on, family homelessness;
- The role of family support services in helping families experiencing homelessness to transition to stable accommodation and promoting innovative solutions to tackle family homelessness.¹¹

While the timeline for the plan has drawn to a close, the Programme Office has begun working with the Department of Housing on a new action plan on child and family homelessness which was committed to under the new housing plan *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*.¹²

The Government has approved the development of a dashboard of indicators to assist in realising their new child poverty target of three percent. One of the indicators is family homelessness.¹³ The indicator data is hosted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) on their Children and Young Person's Hub, and will be used by the Programme Office to monitor progress in relation to improving children's lives.¹⁴



Affordability

Investing in Children calls for Member States to take actions to address affordability in relation to accommodation.¹⁵ The Housing Act 1988 requires housing authorities (local authorities) to provide housing to individuals unable to access it from their own resources.¹⁶ Households who are on their local authority's housing list can qualify for help with their rent through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).¹⁷ In November 2024, of all households identified as on the housing list and in need of housing supports, 32 per cent (19,088) included children.¹⁸ This was a decrease of 1,844 households based on the 2023 figures.¹⁹

The issue of housing affordability in Ireland is highlighted in the *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey*. The survey rates middle-income housing affordability by dividing the median house prices by median household income.²⁰ The latest edition of the Survey examines 95 major markets in eight countries, including the Dublin market in Ireland.²¹ In the last two years of available data, affordability in Ireland has trended downwards being categorised as 'Seriously Unaffordable' in 2023²² and 'Severely Unaffordable' in 2024.²³

11 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023) 16.
 12 An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD, Child Poverty, Oral Answers 21 April 2026 [7895/26].
 13 Government of Ireland, *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2025) 10.
 14 Government of Ireland, *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Government of Ireland 2025) 10.
 15 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 16 Housing Act 1988, S.9.
 17 Citizens Information 'Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)' <<https://bit.ly/2L3Qxqj>> accessed 28 April 2026.
 18 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024– Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.
 19 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024– Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.
 20 Wendall Cox *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2025).
 21 Wendall Cox *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2025).
 22 Wendall Cox *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2024) 8.
 23 Wendall Cox *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2025) 10.

At the end of December 2025 house prices in Ireland were 50 per cent above their pre-covid levels and 92 per cent higher than a decade ago.²⁴ The latest Daft.ie Rental Report highlights the challenges with affordability for private renters, with the average rent of a two bedroom apartment being €2,086 per month nationally.²⁵ The average rent for a two bedroom apartment in Dublin is higher, ranging from €2,302 in Dublin North County to €2,481 in Dublin South County and €2,696 in the City Centre.²⁶

Housing costs often comprise the largest proportion of expenditure in household budgets.²⁷ The percentage of income that goes on housing can impact on a household's consumption of other goods and services, and, subsequently, economic growth.²⁸ Households who have particular challenges with affordability include those renting privately and those on low incomes.²⁹ Low-income households pay between two-fifths and half of their income on housing, in comparison to just one-fifth for the general population.³⁰

The impact that housing costs are having on low-income households is evident in the results of the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). The data from SILC shows that many households are being pulled into poverty due to the burden of housing costs. For instance, while the overall at risk of poverty rate (or the proportion of the population living on an income 60 per cent below the median) was 12.6 per cent in SILC 2025, this rose to 19.7 per cent after housing costs.³¹ Increases in the at risk of poverty rate are evident across a range of household characteristics and are most pronounced for one parent families, those renting and in receipt of social housing support.³²

At risk of poverty after rent and mortgage interest versus at risk of poverty rate SILC 2025

	At risk of poverty rate	At risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest
State	12.6	19.7
0-17	16.9	27.9
1 adult with children aged under 18	17.1	55.6
2 adults with 1-3 children aged under 18	13.6	22.6
Owner-occupied	7.4	8.3
Rented: from Local Authority	29.0	40.6
Rented: other forms of social housing support	20.5	58.0
Rented: without housing supports	22.6	42.6

Source: Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026).

24 Daft.ie 2025 Q4 – *The Year in Review Daft.ie Sales Report* (Daft.ie, January 2026) 11.

25 Daft.ie 2025 Q4 – *Year in Review Daft.ie Rental Report* (Daft.ie, February 2026) 11.

26 Daft.ie 2025 Q4 – *Year in Review Daft.ie Rental Report* (Daft.ie, February 2026) 11.

27 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1) 120.

28 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157; 120.

29 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157; 120.

30 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157; 122.

31 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026).

32 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026).

The provision of HAP has increasingly become a primary means to support low-income households address affordability in the private rental sector.³³ In certain other circumstances, such as families who have been victims of domestic violence, have lost a job or experiencing illness, Rent Supplement is available as a short-term support.³⁴ However, rent limits for both Rent Supplement and HAP have not kept pace with market value, and the standard limits for each have not been reviewed since 2016 and 2017, respectively.³⁵ Data from the Rental Tenancies Board (RTB) / Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) rent index shows that the standardised rent on new tenancies increased by almost 75 per cent between Quarter 3 2016 and Quarter 3 2025.³⁶ It is welcome that the Minister for Housing has indicated that a review of HAP limits is currently underway and it is expected that this will be concluded by the end of June 2026.³⁷

With rents higher than the available support through HAP, vulnerable families are often left with no option but to pay a 'top-up' directly to their landlord in addition to their differential rent contribution to the local authorities.³⁸ The payment of a 'top-up' is permitted if the local authority deems the payment affordable for the household and as long as they are not spending more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.³⁹ Almost 70 per cent of the 58,313 active HAP tenancies in 2023 were making top-up payments to landlords, with the average payment €200 per month.⁴⁰ Given that the discretionary rent that HAP tenants pay to the local authority is the same as other social housing tenants, an additional payment of on average €200 per month means it is unsurprising that these families may experience income adequacy and a greater risk of poverty. Households renting with such forms of social housing support have an

at risk of poverty rate of 20.5 per cent but this rises to 58 per cent after rent or mortgage interest.⁴¹ The corresponding figures for those in owner occupied housing are much lower at 7.4 per cent and 8.3 per cent respectively.⁴²

In the absence of an increase in HAP rates to date, local authorities have had the 'discretion' to increase standard rent limits (available under HAP) by 20 per cent to secure accommodation. From July 2022, this was increased to 35 per cent⁴³ and an uplift to 50 per cent is allowed in the Dublin region for households who qualify for Homeless HAP.⁴⁴ This level of discretion expands the number of properties available to prospective HAP tenants. In March 2026, while only two properties were available within the standard HAP limits, the number available increased to 14 when the discretionary rates are applied.⁴⁵ However, this is still simply not enough supply with HAP properties making up just one per cent of the availability in the private rental market in March 2026. This is lower than 2024 and 2025's average of 3 per cent.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the use of these increased limits is only discretionary practice that has not been legislated for.

It is critical that the review of HAP limits being carried out by the Minister future proofs any further increases in the market cost of rent. One such way of doing this, proposed by Focus Ireland, would be to set the HAP limits at a rate that makes 40 per cent of private rental market affordable without any tenant top-ups. This is calculated on the basis that about one-third of renters are supported by social housing supports.⁴⁷ This would make the bottom 40 per cent of the private rental sector affordable to renters in receipt of social housing supports. In order for the limits to keep apace of changes in the private rental market, the thresholds for could be reviewed using the data captured by RTB

33 Michael Doolan et al *Low Income Renters and Housing Supports* (ESRI 2022) 15.

34 Citizens Information 'Rent Supplement' <<https://bit.ly/311PHGv>> accessed 28 April 2026.

35 Department of Social Protection, 'Maximum Rent Limits' <<https://bit.ly/3NEjSFj>> accessed 28 April 2026; S.I. No. 56/2017 – Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017.

36 RTB / ESRI 'Rent Index data set' <https://bit.ly/4di1AYJ> accessed 8 May 2026.

37 Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage James Browne TD, Social Welfare Benefits, Written Answers 25 March 2026 [22731/26].

38 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16

39 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16

40 Ombudsman *Investigation of the HAP scheme* (Ombudsman 2025) 54.

41 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026).

42 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025* (CSO, 2026).

43 Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2022, S.I. No. 342 of 2022.

44 Citizens Information 'What is Homeless HAP' <https://bit.ly/3R1psZa> accessed 8 May 2026.

45 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* – March 2026 (Simon Communities 2026) 5.

46 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* – March 2026 (Simon Communities 2026) 5.

47 Focus Ireland *Submission to Inform the Review of HAP Rent Limits* (2026) 8.

and ESRI every two years. Focus Ireland also make important recommendations for existing HAP tenants who may be exposed to increases in their rent through national rent controls. Currently any legal rent increase applied to a household who is already receiving the maximum HAP rent limit would need to be covered by the tenant via a top up to the landlord. Focus Ireland recommend that the local authority should increase the HAP payment to the landlord where the normal process of a rent increase has been followed.⁴⁸

Ensuring access to quality housing

Investing in Children calls on Member States to ensure that children and their families can live in 'quality housing' and address 'situations of exposure to environmental hazards, overcrowding and energy poverty'.⁴⁹ In-depth research on adequate housing in Ireland examined a collective measure of housing quality based on the age profile of the housing stock in Ireland along with a number of individual indicators relating to housing quality, including overcrowding and the ability to heat the home.⁵⁰ A further individual measure established a housing quality index taking account of issues such as dampness, dark rooms, lack of central heating, and poor insulation.⁵¹

In general, a large proportion of the housing stock in Ireland was built post 1980.⁵² However, for the 40 per cent of dwellings built before this time, occupiers may incur extra costs such as needing to replace windows or spend more money on adequately heating their home.⁵³ Analysis of SILC data in 2018 indicated that almost one quarter of homes built before 1940 'had two or more quality problems compared to 5 to 6 per cent of those built in 1991'.⁵⁴

Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 set out the minimum standards that must be met for rental properties.⁵⁵ The standards relate to things like structural conditions, food preparation, availability of adequate heating, lighting and ventilation, and fire safety. Inspections are carried out by local authorities to assess compliance under these regulations. There has been a welcome increase in the level of inspections that local authorities have carried out in the last number of years. In 2019, there were 40,308 inspections undertaken and in 2025, this had increased to 82,784.⁵⁶ However, 60 per cent of dwellings inspected failed to meet the regulatory requirements on their first inspection.⁵⁷ While prohibition notices (i.e. a dwelling cannot be re-let until all matters are remediated) are comparatively low, at 296 notices, there has been a trend of accommodation not meeting the requirements of the regulations.⁵⁸ Since 2012, at least 50 per cent of dwellings inspected have failed to meet the requirements.⁵⁹



Investing in Children calls for Member States to address situations of overcrowding as part of measures to ensure that children have a safe housing and living environment'.⁶⁰ E

48 Focus Ireland Submission to Inform the Review of HAP Rent Limits (2026) 7.

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

50 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

51 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 125.

52 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 127.

53 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 127.

54 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021) 126.

55 S.I. No. 137/2019 - Housing (Standards For Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

56 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2025' <https://bit.ly/3QN5uRJ> accessed 28 April 2026.

57 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2025' <https://bit.ly/3QN5uRJ> accessed 28 April 2026.

58 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2024' <https://bit.ly/3QN5uRJ> accessed 28 April 2026.

59 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Private Rental Inspections 2010-2024' <https://bit.ly/3QN5uRJ> accessed 28 April 2026.

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

urostat captures data on the proportion of the population living in overcrowded housing.⁶¹ It defines a household as being overcrowded if, for example, each single person over the age of 18 does not have their own room, if individuals between the age 12 and 17 of the same gender do not have their own room or if a pair of children under the age of 12 do not have their own room.⁶² This definition of overcrowding is not dissimilar to that contained in the Housing Act 1966. The Act refers to overcrowding as including situations whereby any two persons over ten years of age of opposite sexes who must sleep in the same room.⁶³

Comparatively, Ireland has a much lower overall rate of overcrowding at 5.4 per cent in 2025 versus an average of 16.8 per cent in the Europe Union.⁶⁴ However, further analysis shows that children (i.e. those under the age of 18) in households on incomes below 60 per cent of the median equivalised income (i.e. at risk of poverty) in Ireland have a much higher overcrowding rate of 21.2 per cent.⁶⁵



1 in 5 children at risk of poverty are living in overcrowded housing.

This means that over one in five children at risk of poverty are living in overcrowded households. While this is substantially lower than the EU average of 44.4 per cent, the data shows a pronounced rise in the proportion of children at risk of poverty living in overcrowded accommodation in the last number of years.⁶⁶ Effectively the rate of overcrowding experienced by children living in income poverty in Ireland has almost doubled between 2021 and 2025, from 11.9 per cent to 21.2 per cent respectively.⁶⁷ Further evidence in relation to overcrowding is noted in the social housing needs assessment which highlights that 36.6 per cent of those on the housing list were living with their parents, relatives, and/or friends.⁶⁸

There is limited insight into the effect that living in overcrowded accommodation is having on children and young people. A 2024 ESRI report on housing inadequacy and its impact on parental and child wellbeing includes reference to overcrowding. However, it does not disaggregate out the impact of this specific aspect of housing inadequacy but rather includes it as part of a collective measure of housing inadequacy. Overall, this research points to how inadequate housing is linked to poorer outcomes for parental and child wellbeing along with reports of 'greater conflict and less closeness'.⁶⁹ In terms of the impact on education, analysis of data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey has found lower reading scores are prevalent amongst those who live in social housing or in multi-generational households (i.e. living with grandparents).⁷⁰ Overall, inadequate housing is linked with poorer wellbeing outcomes among both parents and children.⁷¹ Children growing up in homes that are too small or inadequately heated and who live in areas that are disorderly with fewer local supports have much poorer socio-emotional wellbeing. In addition, longer periods spent experiencing inadequate housing are associated with more negative wellbeing outcomes than shorter periods.⁷²

61 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 6 May 2026.

62 Eurostat 'Glossary: Overcrowding rate' <https://bit.ly/4kSpVGJ> accessed 6 May 2026.

63 Housing Act 1966, Part IV (63).

64 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 6 May 2026.

65 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 6 May 2026.

66 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 6 May 2026.

67 Eurostat 'Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status - total population' <https://bit.ly/3FDJW4S> accessed 6 May 2026.

68 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024* (Government of Ireland 2025)

69 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth Housing, *Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing* (ESRI 2024) vi.

70 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023) 54.

71 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing* (ESRI 2024) vi.

72 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing* (ESRI 2024) vi.

The overall impact on children as a result of living in overcrowded accommodation is only emerging. With growing numbers exposed to such living conditions there is a need to conduct further research exploring the impact on children and their families. This could include developing a means to capture data through Tusla's notification system of children referred to them who are living in such circumstances.

Traveller and Roma Families

According to the latest Census, there were 32,949 members of the Traveller community in 2022. Of this number 47 per cent were under the age of 19 years.⁷³ This is compared to 26 per cent of the general population. While overall just 8 per cent of Travellers living in private households were accommodated in caravans, mobile homes or other temporary accommodation, this rose to 18 per cent of Travellers living in temporary accommodation in Fingal.⁷⁴ The average number of persons in Traveller households was 4 compared to 2.7 in the general population.⁷⁵

Ethnicity has been identified as a strong variable in terms of overcrowding.⁷⁶ A 2024 survey by the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights found that 63 per cent of Travellers and a staggering 92 per cent of Roma in Ireland live in overcrowded accommodation.⁷⁷ The same survey also highlighted that 42 per cent of Travellers and 34 per cent of Roma live in housing deprivation.⁷⁸ In 2023, 23 per cent of all those under 18 years were living in homes that had issues with leaks, damp, and rot.⁷⁹ Such measures of poor quality are evident amongst Traveller and Roma groups. Many

Roma families live in accommodation without basic facilities such as a kitchen, cooker, running water, or heat, and some Roma children live in overcrowded housing with rats, damp, and sewerage.⁸⁰

Latest figures from 2024 show that 1,710 Traveller families are living in inadequate and unsafe conditions on unauthorised sites or sharing.⁸¹ The poor quality of Traveller housing is particularly apparent in Local Authority halting sites where 952 families were living in 2019 (the latest available data).⁸² Of this number, 350 families had particularly low-quality accommodation with only an outside cold tap, no electricity and shared access with other families to a port-a-loo or outside toilet.⁸³ In addition, 311 families were living on unauthorised sites, and 218 of these families had no access to any services at all.⁸⁴



73 CSO Census 2022: Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion (2023).

74 CSO Census 2022: Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion (2023).

75 CSO Census 2022: Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion (2023).

76 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021), 128-130.

77 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries, Perspectives from the Roma Survey in 2024* (FRA 2025) 59. FRA uses the Eurostat definition of overcrowding: a person is considered to live in an overcrowded household if the household does not have at its disposal a minimum number of rooms equal to one room for the household, one room per couple, one room per single person aged 18 or over, one room per pair of single people of the same gender aged 12-17, one room per single person aged 12-17 not included in the previous category and one room per pair of children aged under 12.

78 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries, Perspectives from the Roma Survey in 2024* (FRA 2025) 58. FRA uses the Eurostat definition of housing deprivation: Housing deprivation is considered to exist when at least one of the following is present, the accommodation is too dark, has problems with humidity, has no indoor shower/bathroom or has no indoor toilet.

79 Eurostat, 'Children (aged 0 to 17) living in a dwelling with a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundation, or rot in window frames or floor - EU-SILC survey' <<https://bit.ly/3y4WPgE>> 29 April 2026.

80 Pavee Point & DJE, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 10.

81 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Annual Count 2024 Total Number of Traveller Families in all categories of Accommodation* <https://bit.ly/49iyRSx> accessed 22 May 2026.

82 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RChA/IRL/18; 3.

83 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RChA/IRL/18; 3.

84 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RChA/IRL/18; 3.

Independent human rights bodies have called out the inadequate and poor-quality accommodation that many Traveller children and their families are exposed to. In 2021, the Ombudsman for Children's Office's (OCO) highlighted the conditions that 66 children were living in which included extremely overcrowded and rodent-infested accommodation without adequate heat, sanitation, or safe play areas.⁸⁵ Engagement between the OCO, the local authority with responsibility for the halting site and other stakeholders in the three years following the publication of the report resulted in significant improvement of the living conditions for these children. The OCO commented that this 'could act as a blueprint for other local authority areas to promote equal access to safe, secure and quality accommodation for Traveller children and their families'.⁸⁶

In May 2024, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) published accounts of seven local authority Equality Action Plans dealing with the provision of Traveller accommodation and services. IHREC noted that the publication of these plans highlights the significant barriers that members of the Traveller community face in accessing accommodation including: poor consultation processes, lack of meaningful engagement, inaccessibility of services including homeless services, lack of understanding on the use of the ethnic self-identifier in social housing application forms and, blockages in the delivery of Traveller-specific accommodation.⁸⁷ Alongside these challenges, individual plans identified good practice such as supporting events celebrating Traveller culture; pro-active engagement with stakeholders on the preparation of the plan and; initiation of actions such as an equine project in response to the practical implication of Traveller culture.⁸⁸

Both the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023, and Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2024 included specific recommendations for Ireland to address the housing needs of children from ethnic minority backgrounds. The latter in particular noted the absence of 'culturally appropriate housing for Travellers and Roma'.⁸⁹ Roma families face similar barriers, and their particular housing needs must receive careful consideration as well. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, there had been reports that it was increasingly difficult to accommodate homeless Roma families in emergency accommodation if they were not already registered in the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS). This has only exacerbated with time.⁹⁰ Furthermore, one of the qualifying criteria for the allocation of social housing is employment,⁹¹ but given that national needs assessments suggest that just 17 per cent of Roma are employed,⁹² most Roma will be ineligible for social housing support. Census 2022 highlighted that 652 Roma, or 4 per cent of the entire Roma population in Ireland, identified as homeless.⁹³

There are some positive developments, with the allocated funding provided for Traveller-specific accommodation in 2020 fully drawn-down for the first time since 2014.⁹⁴ Since then, the budget allocations have also continued to rise, with €34 million in funding allocated in Budget 2026.⁹⁵ In the five-year period from 2020 to 2024, over €100 million in capital funding has been drawn down by local authorities for Traveller-specific accommodation.⁹⁶ It is important to view this in the context of the Expert Review of Traveller Accommodation, which recommends a review to consider restoring funding to levels prior to 2008, when the yearly Traveller accommodation budget was €40 million.⁹⁷

85 Ombudsman for Children, *No End in Site* (OCO 2021).

86 Ombudsman for Children, *No End in Site* (OCO 2021) 1.

87 IHREC 'Commission publish Equality Action Plans from seven local authorities on Traveller accommodation' [Press Release, 26 June 2024].

88 IHREC 'Commission publish Equality Action Plans from seven local authorities on Traveller accommodation' [Press Release, 26 June 2024].

89 UNCESCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 40.

90 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from Pavee Point on 16 October 2020.

91 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Circular Housing 41/2012 - Access to Social Housing Supports for non-Irish nationals' <<https://bit.ly/42boPP5>> accessed 30 April 2026.

92 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

93 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *Statistical Spotlight #14 Roma in Ireland* (DCEDIY 2025) 24.

94 *ibid*; Kitty Holland, 'Almost €15m spent on Traveller housing, the largest annual spend in decades' *The Irish Times*, 23 December 2020.

95 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Budget 2026: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage announces record budget package of over €11 billion', Press Release, 7 October 2025.

96 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 3 February 2025.

97 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Irish Traveller Movement on 12 November 2022.

The government still has a way to go in terms of returning funding to this level. While it is positive to see follow-through on the issues raised through the Ombudsman for Children's investigation and the full draw down of Traveller Accommodation funding at a local authority level, progress in this area is lagging behind other areas of social housing.

Energy Poverty

The inability to heat one's home is another measure of quality of housing, and is often referred to as energy poverty; a concept which encompasses 'household income, energy costs and the energy efficiency of a home'.⁹⁸ Overall, a small percentage of households report being unable to heat their home, however, the issue of fuel poverty is very pronounced amongst one-parent households compared to all other household types. SILC 2025 reveals that one parent families are the most likely family composition to be unable to keep the home adequately warm (at 12.5 per cent).⁹⁹ Housing tenure is also an important factor with just 3.5 per cent of owner occupiers going without heating at some point in the last year compared to 16.5 per cent in the rent, or rent-free, sector.¹⁰⁰

A 2026 ESRI report on energy poverty and affordability reinforces this data. It finds that low-income households, those living in rented accommodation, female headed households and single adult families are among the vulnerable groups that experience energy poverty.¹⁰¹ Children experiencing energy poverty are predominantly living in the social housing and private rented sectors, with over three-quarters of those impacted living in these tenures.¹⁰²

Under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, the government is mandated to 'support persons and communities that may be negatively affected by the transition' to a climate neutral economy.¹⁰³ Pobal have highlighted that households living in disadvantaged areas are five times less likely to be using renewable energy than those in affluent communities.¹⁰⁴ Lower levels of adoption in disadvantaged communities are observed across urban and rural areas.¹⁰⁵ Renewable energy provides a buffer against higher utility bills for households. Therefore, the lower take up in these areas is further exacerbating the issue of energy poverty for low-income families. In order to address this, Pobal calls for future retrofit programmes to prioritise place-based initiatives in areas containing the most disadvantaged families. This could include increased subsidies and simplified applications processes and choices which incur no cost. To tackle energy poverty for those living in private rented accommodation, incentivised schemes that also provide security of tenure should be developed to target landlords.¹⁰⁶

The impact of energy poverty extends beyond a financial cost. Living in bad housing conditions are associated with more instances of wheezing and poorer health amongst children, while those living in disorderly neighbourhoods have more frequent visits to the hospital.¹⁰⁷ The consequences of living in energy poverty impacts on children's health with an increased likelihood that they will have asthma, and two or more courses of antibiotics in a 12-month period.¹⁰⁸

98 Society of St Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) 2 <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 30 April 2026.

99 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025*, (CSO 2026).

100 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2024*, (CSO 2025).

101 Andrés Estévez and Miguel Tovar Reañós, *Energy Poverty and Affordability in Ireland* (ESRI, 2026) ix. xii

102 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 30 April 2026.

103 Just Transition Commission of Ireland, *Introductory Report of the Just Transition Commission of Ireland 2025* (2025)12.

104 Pobal Renewable Energy and Deprivation Investigating the Relationship between Area-Level Deprivation and Household Renewable Energy Usage using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index (2025) 24.

105 Pobal Renewable Energy and Deprivation Investigating the Relationship between Area-Level Deprivation and Household Renewable Energy Usage using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index (2025) 26.

106 Pobal Renewable Energy and Deprivation Investigating the Relationship between Area-Level Deprivation and Household Renewable Energy Usage using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index (2025) 31.

107 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023) 62.

108 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) 6.



Furthermore, energy poverty has been linked to a higher level of poor parental mental health, particularly amongst mothers.¹⁰⁹ This further reinforces the importance of investment in measures that tackle the impact of energy poverty.

A National Energy Affordability Taskforce was set up in June 2025.¹¹⁰ Its purpose is to facilitate collaboration among Government departments to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses.¹¹¹ The Taskforce is due to publish an Energy Affordability Action Plan in Q3 2026¹¹² which will identify both relevant cost drivers and measures to enhance energy affordability for households and businesses.¹¹³

Prevention of Evictions

Investing in children calls on Member States to 'support families and children at risk of homelessness by avoiding evictions, unnecessary moves'.¹¹⁴ On 1 March 2026, new legislation for the private rented sector was introduced which strengthened protections in respect of new tenancies through the amending of the rules under which a landlord could end a tenancy.¹¹⁵ Under the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026, a private rented tenancy can be terminated if a tenant is in breach of their obligations or if the property is no longer suitable for the tenant's needs.¹¹⁶ These are the only reasons that a larger landlord, an individual or a company, with four or more tenancies, can terminate a tenancy.¹¹⁷ Smaller landlords, those with 1 to 3 tenancies, can also end a tenancy if they need to sell the property to avoid financial hardship or if they or a close family member needs to live in the property.¹¹⁸ These new rules apply to tenancies created after the 1 March 2026. Existing tenancies, regardless of the size of the landlord, can end the tenancy for the reasons mentioned earlier in this paragraph and if they wish to substantially refurbish or change the use of the property.¹¹⁹

Number of families presenting to and prevented from entering homeless services 2023 - 2025

	2025	2024
Presented to emergency accommodation	3,471	4,026
Prevented from entering homeless services	1,584	2,262
Percentage of families prevented from entering emergency accommodation	45%	56%
Net number of families experiencing homelessness	1,887	1,764

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024; Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2025 and 2026).

109 Greta Mohan, "The impact of household energy poverty on the mental health of parents of young children." *Journal of Public Health* 44, no. 1 (2022): 121-128.

110 Government of Ireland, *National Energy Affordability Taskforce Terms of Reference* (Government of Ireland 2025).

111 Government of Ireland, *National Energy Affordability Taskforce Terms of Reference* (Government of Ireland 2025) 2.

112 Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment Daragh O'Brien, TD, Dáil Debates Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 23 April 2026 [29234/26]

113 Government of Ireland, *National Energy Affordability Taskforce Terms of Reference* (Government of Ireland 2025) 2.

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

115 Residential Tenancies Board 'Rental law changes from 1 March 2026' <https://bit.ly/4uG5a6b> accessed 8 May 2026.

116 Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026; Residential Tenancies Board 'Rental law changes from 1 March 2026' <https://bit.ly/4uG5a6b> accessed 8 May 2026.

117 Residential Tenancies Board 'Rental law changes from 1 March 2026' <https://bit.ly/4uG5a6b> accessed 8 May 2026.

118 Residential Tenancies Board 'Rental law changes from 1 March 2026' <https://bit.ly/4uG5a6b> accessed 8 May 2026.

119 Residential Tenancies Board 'Rental law changes from 1 March 2026' <https://bit.ly/4uG5a6b> accessed 8 May 2026.

It is not yet apparent how these changes will impact on the number of families experiencing homelessness. Receiving a Notice of Termination has been the main driver for families presenting to homeless services in the last number of years. Comparative data captured in the Homeless Quarterly Progress Report shows that 42 per cent of the 1,749 families presenting to homeless services had been given a Notice of Termination in the private rental sector in 2024.¹²⁰ In 2025, 38 per cent of the 1,887 families presenting to homeless services had been given a Notice of Termination.¹²¹ In the first Quarter of 2026, the RTB reported that they received 7,062 Notices of Termination, an increase of up 51 per cent from Quarter 1 2025.¹²²

Data captured by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage highlights that there is a significant resourcing of homeless prevention work. Reported expenditure for *Homeless Prevention, Tenancy Sustainment Resettlement Supports* shows that the actual funding allocation has risen almost four-fold, from €5.7 million in 2013 to €21.4 million in 2024.¹²³ In 2024, there were 4,026 families presenting to homeless services with 56 per cent of these prevented from entering emergency accommodation.¹²⁴ This meant 1,764 families became homeless. In 2025, the number of families presenting to homeless services fell to 3,471 and 45 per cent were prevented from entering emergency accommodation.¹²⁵ Overall the number of families becoming homeless was 1,887. Therefore, despite a lower number of overall presentations in 2025, prevention actions at this point had a lower impact compared to 2024. This decrease in impact is in part due to the increased scale of the issue of family homelessness driven by the ongoing increase in the cost of rent, a continued contraction in the private rental sector and an increase in the number of notices of terminations from landlords to families.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 commits to developing a framework for homelessness prevention.¹²⁶ The housing action plan provides an overarching structure for the forthcoming framework and includes the identification of five main types of homelessness prevention:

- **Universal** which includes the provisions of general support to reduce the risk of homelessness for everyone.
- **Upstream** which is focused on providing early assistances to people who are showing signs of housing difficulty.
- **Crisis-Stage** which supports people currently at an immediate risk of losing their home.
- **Emergency Stage** which provides support for people experiencing homelessness to ensure they avoid rough sleeping.
- **Repeat Prevention** which focuses on providing support to stop people from becoming homeless again.¹²⁷

The adoption of this approach is welcome as it uses a typology developed by academics working in this field¹²⁸ and is advocated for by Focus Ireland who emphasise its 'potential to change how we view homelessness and its causes, as well as integrating other arms and agencies of the State into homeless prevention'.¹²⁹ It will look at particular areas to address including those losing their tenancies in the private rental sector, people leaving Direct Provision, domestic violence victims and those in need of support in relation to mental health or addiction.¹³⁰

120 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports Q1-Q4 2024* (2024 & 2025).

121 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports Q1-Q4 2025* (2025 & 2026).

122 RTB *Director's Quarterly Update* (May 2026) <https://bit.ly/4nBC5q9> accessed 18 May 2026.

123 Eoin O'Sullivan, Emma Byrne & Mike Allen *Focus on Homelessness* (Focus Ireland 2025) 9.

124 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025) 10.

125 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026) 10.

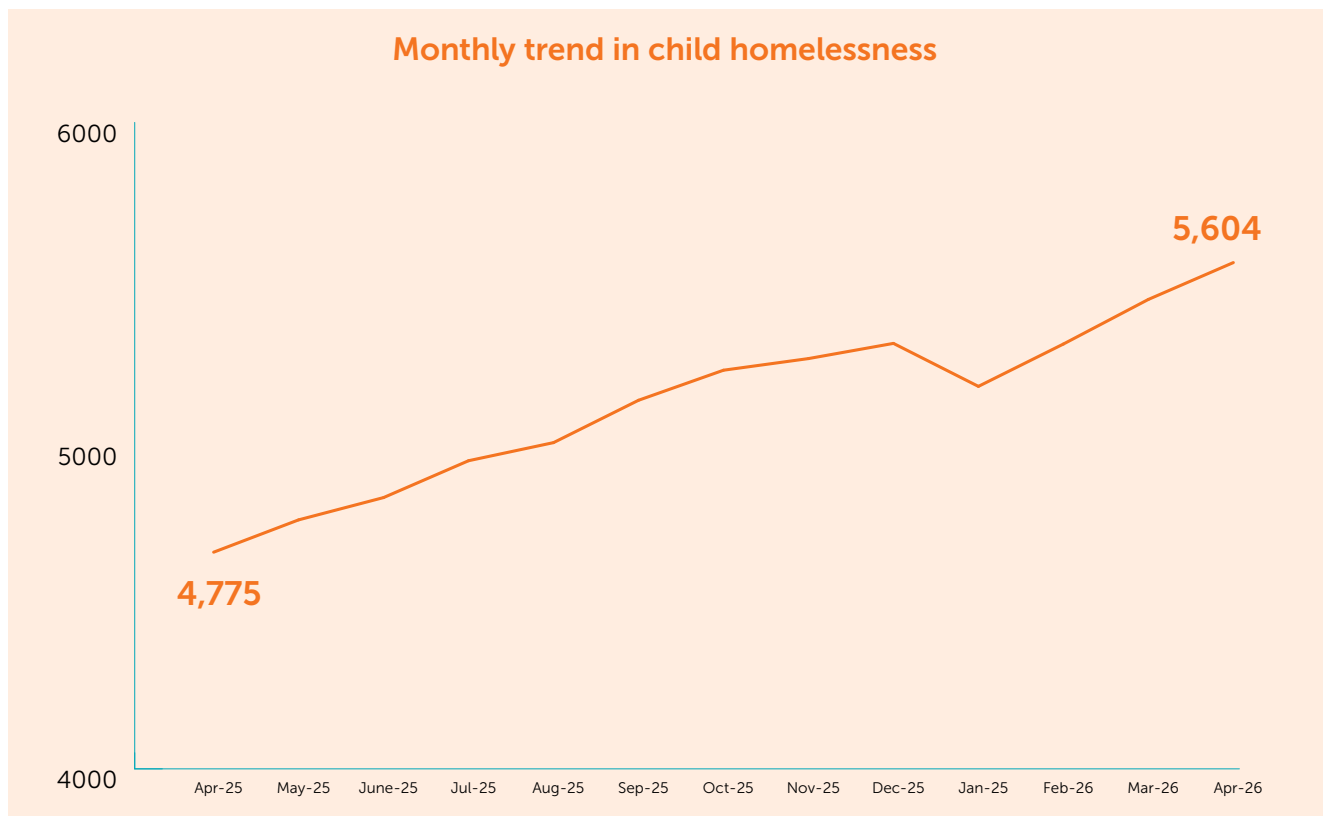
126 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 63.

127 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 63.

128 Fitzpatrick, P. Mackie, & J. Wood, 'Advancing a Five-Stage Typology of Homelessness Prevention', *International Journal on Homelessness*, (2021) vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 79-97.

129 Focus Ireland *Submission to inform the development of the National Homelessness Prevention Framework* (2026) 2.

130 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 63 and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Homelessness Prevention Framework' <https://bit.ly/4diQN0p> accessed 8 May 2026.



Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homeless Data* (2025 and 2026).

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 states that the prevention framework will draw on the expertise and the involvement of a number of different actors including government departments, state agencies, local authorities and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).¹³¹ In order for the prevention framework to be successful political buy-in across government departments and the relevant statutory agencies and local authorities is essential. However, NGOs delivering frontline services have an equally important role to play in decision-making, oversight and governance of the framework.¹³² To date NGOs have not been included in the development or oversight of the framework and this represents a missed opportunity to ensure the framework is robust and deliverable.

The National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC) includes NGO members which could nominate representatives from their sector to be included in governance structures.

Providing Temporary Shelter

Investing in Children calls on Member States to provide temporary shelter as well as long-term housing solutions.¹³³ *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030* commits to preventing homelessness, providing immediate support to those in crisis, and facilitating long-term solutions.¹³⁴

131 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 63.

132 Focus Ireland *Submission to inform the development of the National Homelessness Prevention Framework* (2026) 21.

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

134 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 10.

The number of children living in emergency accommodation is at the highest level since records began over eleven years ago. Since the publication of the first edition of the Child Poverty Monitor, there has been an additional 2,576 children living in emergency homeless accommodation between May 2022 and April 2026.¹³⁵ The number of children in emergency accommodation has increased over the past twelve months from 4,775 in April 2025¹³⁶ to 5,604 in April 2026.¹³⁷ This is an extra 896 children.

In a review of 21 journal articles on family homelessness, it is apparent that the ripple effect spreads across different domains of a child's life, including their relationship with their parent(s), their educational attainment and their mental health.¹³⁸ Most profoundly, homelessness impacts on a child's world – their friendships, their connections with community, the loss of their toys and pets along with a lack of privacy and their own personal space.¹³⁹ These findings are echoed in Irish based research. A 2024 ESRI report points to how inadequate housing is linked to poorer outcomes for parental and child well-being, along with reports of 'greater conflict and less closeness'.¹⁴⁰

Organisations working with families experiencing homelessness have identified a need for targeted interventions for children and young people living in emergency accommodation. This has included calls from charities working directly with children and families experiencing homelessness¹⁴¹ and the Ombudsman for Children.¹⁴² Notably, in 2019, two Joint Committees in the Houses of the

Oireachtas have also called for increased supports for children living in such circumstances, including the appointment of child support workers.¹⁴³ These interventions could provide tailored support to help children and their families deal with the trauma of homelessness and/or the challenges that they faced before becoming homeless, or in some instances both of these contexts.¹⁴⁴ Such interventions can help children and young people to address some of the negative impacts of homelessness along with helping to reduce the pressure and stress on parents.¹⁴⁵

Access to a Child Support Worker needs to be available to all children who need the support they provided. In addition, an estimated 10-to-20 percent of families engaged in Focus Ireland services have more complex support needs, as such these children will require more intensive and wider supports to help them navigate their journey in homeless services and more importantly, their exit out of homelessness.¹⁴⁶ To date there has been limited resources provided to ensure supports such as those provided by Child Support Workers and others can be put in place.

135 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, May 2022* (DHLGH 2022); Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2026* (DHLGH 2026).

136 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2025* (DHLGH 2025).

137 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2026* (DHLGH 2026).

138 S Muran and E Brady 'How does family homelessness impact on children's development? A critical review of the literature' (2023) *Child and Family Social Work* 360-371; 363.

139 S Muran and E Brady 'How does family homelessness impact on children's development? A critical review of the literature' (2023) *Child and Family Social Work* 360-371; 363.

140 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth *Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing* (ESRI 2024) vi.

141 Barnardos, Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of homelessness on children (Barnardos 2019) <https://bit.ly/49bKVm1> accessed 29 January 2025; Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' (Focus Ireland 2022) <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 29 January 2025.

142 Ombudsman for Children's Office *No Place Like Home Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs* (OCO 2019); Ombudsman for Children 'Opening Statement Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage' (24th June 2025) <https://bit.ly/4r1OP9T> accessed 21 January 2026.

143 Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 'Report on the Impact of Homelessness on Children' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019) and Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Family and Child Homelessness' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019).

144 Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 1 May 2026.

145 Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 1 May 2026 3.

146 Focus Ireland *Pre-Budget Submission 2025* (Focus Ireland 2024) 20.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 reiterates the government's commitment to the Lisbon Declaration to end homelessness by 2030.¹⁴⁷ As part of a commitment to focus on ending child and family homelessness, the plan outlines a number of key priorities, including:

- The development of a cross-departmental and agency-led Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This plan will include enhance supports for children and measures to speed up exits and reduce the time spent in homeless emergency accommodation. It will also address issues around education and nutrition which many children face while living in emergency accommodation and provide supports for parents (including those expecting babies) to ensure there is holistic support for the whole family.
- The introduction of legislation to ensure the best interest of the child are central to decision-making on homeless accommodation.
- The introduction of measures to support victims of domestic violence such as allowing them to remain in or return to their home, where the household is living in a local authority tenancy. Recognition of time spent on the social housing waiting list in another local authority will also be allowed and where qualification for social housing support is recognised by a new local authority, they will have access to the suite of social housing supports including HAP to help them to relocate.
- The plan also commits to improved data collection which will include capturing the number of children and families supported to exit homelessness each quarter along with data on families that spend the longest in homeless emergency accommodation.¹⁴⁸

The focus on developing an action plan specifically to address child and family homelessness is welcome. The cross-departmental and agency nature of this plan acknowledges that the impact of this crisis is not

just about bricks and mortar, it is also about building supports around children and families experiencing homelessness in communities across Ireland. In December 2025, a Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage official noted that they are working closely with the Department of the Taoiseach on the development of the plan given its links to child poverty and it is envisaged that the plan will be prepared by June 2026.¹⁴⁹



In April 2026, almost 60% of families experiencing homelessness were one parent families

Further action is also needed in related policy domains such as providing access to adequate social welfare supports and affordable childcare. One-parent families make up a disproportionate number of homeless families. In April 2026, almost 60 per cent of families experiencing homelessness were one parent families.¹⁵⁰ Lone parents have a lower rate of homeownership, and a higher rate of occupancy in both the private rental and local authority sectors.¹⁵¹ Recent research about lone parents' experience of homelessness highlighted the financial insecurity experienced by this group of families and the dominant impact it has on all aspects of their lives including constraining housing stability.¹⁵²

147 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 60.

148 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 61-62.

149 Kieran O'Donnell TD Minister of State for Housing, *Topical Issue Debate: Homeless Persons Supports* 4 March 2026 Dail Debates Houses of the Oireachtas.

150 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2026* (DHLGH 2026) 11.

151 H Russell et al, *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

152 S. Sheridan *Lone Parents and Homelessness in Ireland Experiences and Interactions with Public Services Executive Summary* (Focus Ireland 2025).

Financial insecurity for these parents was exacerbated by the lack of affordable childcare or employment opportunities which would allow them to increase their income through employment.¹⁵³ The research identified a ‘policy vacuum with regards to lone parents and homelessness’ with a need to give greater attention to ‘actions and service delivery to rapidly facilitate lone parents exit routes into housing and to prevent their homelessness from occurring in the first place’.¹⁵⁴

Addressing the specific needs of families trapped in emergency accommodation

While *Investing in Children* calls for the provision of temporary accommodation, many families, particularly larger families, have become trapped in emergency accommodation for a significant amount of time. There is no legal definition of long-term homelessness in Ireland, however, it is generally understood as being defined as households who have been homeless for 6 months continuously or in some instances 6 months over the last two years.¹⁵⁵

At the end of Quarter 1 2024, there were 2,000 families living in emergency accommodation¹⁵⁶ and by Quarter 4 2025, this had risen to 2,473 families.¹⁵⁷ An examination of the trends of the length of time families were spending in emergency accommodation shows that the majority of families over 2024 and 2025, were spending more than six-months in emergency accommodation.¹⁵⁸

At the extreme end of long-term homelessness, roughly 10 per cent of families were in homeless emergency accommodation for between 18 and 24 months. However, 20 per cent of families are at the most extreme end and spending 24 months and more in emergency accommodation. While there are consistent patterns in terms of the length of time families are spending in homelessness, the actual number of families impacted is increasing all the time. For instance, in Q1 2024 and Q4 2025 11 per cent of families were trapped in emergency accommodation for between 18-24 months. However, the sustained increase in the number families in emergency accommodation meant this amounted to 229 and 274 families respectively.¹⁵⁹ Regardless of the age of the child or young person this is a significant amount of time in their development, education and childhood.

Families living in Emergency Accommodation by Duration of Stay in 2024 and 2025								
	2024				2025			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Length of time in emergency accommodation								
Six months or more	67%	63%	63%	66%	66%	66%	70%	73%
18-24 months	11%	10%	9%	9%	10%	9%	10%	11%
24+ months	20%	19%	20%	20%	20%	21%	21%	22%

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage ‘Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports’ (DHLGH 2024-2026).

153 S. Sheridan *Lone Parents and Homelessness in Ireland Experiences and Interactions with Public Services Executive Summary* (Focus Ireland 2025).
 154 S. Sheridan *Lone Parents and Homelessness in Ireland Experiences and Interactions with Public Services Executive Summary* (Focus Ireland 2025) 26.
 155 Focus Ireland *Focus Ireland proposal to tackle long-term homelessness* (Focus Ireland 2024); Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government *The Way Home: A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland 2008 – 2013* (DEHLG 2008) and Paula Mayock, Sarah Sheridan, Sarah Parke *The Dynamics of Long-Term Homelessness Among Women in Ireland* (DRHE 2015).
 156 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report – Quarter 1 2024* (DHLGH 2024) 12.
 157 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report – Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026) 11.
 158 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports – Q1-Q4* (DHLGH 2024 and 2025).
 159 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports* (DHLGH 2024-2026).

Most families living in emergency accommodation are in the Dublin region and they are much more likely to spend the longest time in this accommodation. In 2025, there was an over-representation of families in the Dublin area in emergency accommodation for over 24 months. While overall, 71 per cent of families living in emergency accommodation were in the Dublin region, they comprised 89 per cent of those with a duration of stay greater than 24 months.¹⁶⁰

Research indicates that often larger families tend to end up staying in emergency accommodation for longer periods due to a lack of availability of suitable properties to meet their needs.¹⁶¹ Given the number of families remaining in emergency accommodation for such long periods, it is welcome that the government allocated an additional €50 million in funding in September 2025 to specifically address this issue.¹⁶² Almost 80 per cent of this funding was targeted towards the Dublin local authorities. The funding is related to housing acquisitions and was in addition to the original €325 million allocated to second-hand acquisitions to date in 2025.

Ensuring that families experiencing long-term homelessness can exit emergency accommodation is a central priority in *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*. As part of increasing supply and reducing homelessness, local authorities will develop *Housing Delivery Action Plans* with a key focus on increasing the supply of properties to match the needs of those experiencing homelessness. This includes having four-bedroom properties to meet the needs of larger families who can get trapped the longest in emergency accommodation.¹⁶³ Under action 5.7 of *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030* local authority allocation schemes will be reviewed with the aim of ensuring that sufficient allocations are made to reduce long-term family

homelessness.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, prioritising long-term homelessness is a central focus of the Second Hand Social Housing Acquisitions Programme.¹⁶⁵ The review of the local authority allocation schemes could provide an opportunity to ensure each local authority give priority to families spending the longest time in emergency accommodation.

The official statistics published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage only give a limited view of the prevalence of homelessness in Ireland.¹⁶⁶ Families who have had to leave their home and are 'couch surfing' or relying on friends or family for emergency assistance are not captured in the monthly statistics. Neither are children and families in domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers living in emergency accommodation, or people who have been granted asylum or some other form of protection but cannot find accommodation outside the Direct Provision system. Some insights on the numbers staying with families is provided in the statutory assessment undertaken each year to determine the number of households who qualify for social housing. According to the *Social Housing Assessment* there were 59,941 households on the social housing waiting list in November 2024. This was an increase of 1,117 (+ 1.9 per cent) on the 2023 figure.¹⁶⁷

Long-term solutions to homelessness

In line with *Investing in Children*, pathways to sustainable and long-term housing for those exiting homelessness are a central part of the solution to reduce and end family homelessness. In 2023, the Committee on the Rights of the Child urged Ireland to 'address the root causes of homelessness among children'.¹⁶⁸ The Committee called for the phasing

160 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports -Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026) 11.

161 Laurie O'Donnell, Aisling Stein, and Daniel Hoey *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024).

162 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister Browne announces additional €50 million in housing acquisitions funding will be targeted at removing families from long term emergency accommodation', Press Release 10 September 2025.

163 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 61.

164 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 69.

165 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 77.

166 Colette Bennett 'Rebuilding Ireland for Everyone: A review of the government's housing strategy for young and old' in Brigid Reynolds and Sean Healy (eds) *The Challenges of Success: Addressing population growth in Ireland* (Social Justice Ireland 2019).

167 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024* (Government of Ireland 2025).

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

out of emergency accommodation and an increase in the supply of long-term social housing.¹⁶⁹ The Concluding Observations on Ireland’s review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, published in March 2024, draws a further spotlight on Ireland’s failures in relation to addressing homelessness. The Committee raised concerns about the ‘persistence of homelessness’ and the lack of measures to protect tenants in poverty.¹⁷⁰

The sustained contraction in the private rental market has had a negative impact on families exiting homeless accommodation over the last number of years. In 2025, the proportion of families exiting emergency accommodation to private rented accommodation was 20 per cent or 225 households. This is a further reduction on the 2024 figures of 276 families (or 23 per cent of all exits)¹⁷¹ and the 2023 and 2022 figures where 296 and 341 families respectively exited emergency accommodation to private rented sector tenancies.

There has been an opening up of more opportunities to access local authority and AHB lettings. In 2025, the number of families exiting to this tenure type was 435 (or 38 per cent of all exits). This builds further on the number of families exiting to local authority lettings in the preceding three years – 496 in 2024;¹⁷² 371 in 2023;¹⁷³ and 311 in 2022.¹⁷⁴ A similar pattern is observed in relation to exits to AHB lettings and long-term supported accommodation.¹⁷⁵

Exits from Emergency Accommodation in 2023 and 2024 by tenure type

	2025	2024	2023	2022
Local authority lettings	435	496	371	311
AHB lettings and Long-term supported accommodation	469	441	260	228
Private rented (including HAP & RAS)	225	276	296	341
Yearly Total Exits	1,129	1,213	927	880
Percentage of exits from each tenure				
Local authority lettings	38%	41%	40%	35%
AHB & LT Supported Acc. lettings	41%	36%	28%	26%
Private rented (incl. Hap and RAS)	20%	23%	32%	39%

Table: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports* (various years).

169 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

170 UNCESCR, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 40.

171 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports 2024* (DHLGH 2024 and 2025).

172 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports Quarters 1- 4 2024* (DHLGH 2026).

173 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarters 1- 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

174 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarters 1- 4 2022* (DHLGH 2023).

175 While exits to AHB lettings and long-term supported accommodation are recorded separately since Quarter 2 2023, prior to this these categories were combined. The two categories are combined here for comparison sake.

Exits to both local authority and AHB lettings is a positive development as this tenure is more sustainable with a lower risk of returning to homeless accommodation. However, there is a need for a significant ramping up of the numbers of families provided with this option as a pathway out of emergency accommodation. Delivery on social housing targets under the last *Programme for Government*, provides an important context to the ability of the sector to deliver on the commitment contained in *Securing Ireland's Future* to build an average of 12,000 new social homes each year. Critically, while there has been an incremental increase in the target of new social housing build, this target has been missed consecutively in 2022, 2023 and 2024. In particular, Dublin City Council, where the vast majority of families being accommodated in emergency accommodation are located, only met 49 per cent of its new social housing build target.¹⁷⁶

Overall, between July 2020 and the end of 2024 an additional 48,000 units were added to the social housing stock. However, this was achieved through a combination outputs delivered through building, acquisition and leasing programmes.¹⁷⁷ A review of the delivery of new build social homes in 2022, 2023 and 2024 shows that there was a total of 23,384 units delivered. A significant proportion of these homes were delivered through the purchase of 'turnkey properties' from developers and Part V. New building programmes pursued by either local authorities or AHBs delivered just 5,047 and 1,126 homes respectively.¹⁷⁸ Overall, local authority output comprised of 40 per cent from turnkey properties, for AHBs this was substantially higher at 89 per cent.¹⁷⁹

The over-reliance on turnkey and Part V as a means of delivering new social homes is acknowledged in *Delivering Homes, Building Communities*. It states that there is a need for the expansion of 'own build' programmes to have a continuity of social housing supply.¹⁸⁰ To address this, a new performance fund will be established to incentivise local authorities to exceed their annual 'own build' social housing targets. Doing so will mean they will receive additional funding to deliver 'community and placemaking initiatives and projects, with an important role for elected members in how this funding is spent'.¹⁸¹ An alternative proposal is to establish a state company as a publicly owned building contractor to deliver social and affordable housing. Such an entity could be established by legislation and have a board of experts accountable to the Minister for Housing.¹⁸² A state construction company could ensure greater alignment with social goals around housing as opposed to leaving it to market forces driven by a profit motive.

In March 2026, the final new build social housing output figures for 2025 were published.¹⁸³ This showed that 9,089 new build social houses were delivered representing a 16 per cent increase in activity compared to 2024.¹⁸⁴ There were 2,869 houses delivered by local authorities, 4,215 units delivered through AHBs and 2,005 through Part V.¹⁸⁵ There was variable performance across local authority areas. Three local authority areas delivered less than 50 per cent of their target. Longford County Council delivered 12 new build social houses, just 15 per cent of its target of 82. There were 17 local authorities who met or exceeded their target. Laois County Council had a target of 87 new build social homes and delivered 204 units meaning they delivered 234 per cent of their target.¹⁸⁶

176 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' <https://bit.ly/4tAkBNj> accessed 17 February 2026.

177 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025).

178 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' <https://bit.ly/4tAkBNj> accessed 17 February 2026.

179 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' <https://bit.ly/4tAkBNj> accessed 17 February 2026.

180 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 72.

181 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness* (Government of Ireland 2025) 72.

182 Social Democrats 'A Proposal for a State Construction Company' <https://bit.ly/3McTxmI> accessed 17 February 2026.

183 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Minister Browne announces record number of new build social homes built in 2025' (Press Release 5 March 2026).

184 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Minister Browne announces record number of new build social homes built in 2025' (Press Release 5 March 2026).

185 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' <https://bit.ly/4rg83IH> accessed 5 March 2026.

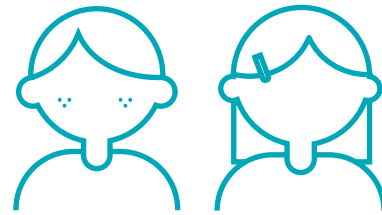
186 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' <https://bit.ly/4rg83IH> accessed 5 March 2026.

While there is positive progress in terms of delivering an increased number of new social homes in 2025, there is a lack of clarity about how these homes were delivered compared to the data from previous years. The figures show that 2,869 new social homes were delivered by local authorities in 2025, however, this data includes units delivered through Rapid, Traditional, Turnkey, Regeneration, Traveller Accommodation and the Homeless Capital Programme.¹⁸⁷ There is a need to disaggregate the first three categories of data in order to understand the level of actual building activity by local authorities versus the purchase of turnkey properties delivered by private developers.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, the inclusion of new build social homes through regeneration needs further clarification as to whether this adds more units to the local authority's overall social housing stock.

Families seeking international protection

Investing in Children calls for Member States to ensure a focus on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage including migrant or ethnic minority children.¹⁸⁹ Conditions for children and families living in International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) accommodation are particularly concerning here.

In May 2026, there were 9,878 children being accommodated by IPAS.¹⁹⁰ Of this number, 2,286 children were living in permanent IPAS accommodation centres and 7,592 were in emergency accommodation.¹⁹¹ In 2016, the Committee on the Rights of the Child made specific recommendations with respect to ensuring that "all refugee accommodation centres" were subject to independent inspection.¹⁹²



Of the 9,878 children in the International Protection system, 7,592 are living in emergency accommodation.

Since December 2023, the Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA) has the authority to carry out inspections of permanent IPAS centres and this came into operation in January 2024.¹⁹³ The centres are inspected against the *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process*.¹⁹⁴

HIQA's latest overview report on inspections it carried out across 2025 show that only 30 accommodation centres are now in its remit, a reduction from 45 in 2024. HIQA states this is primarily because there has been a change in contract between service providers and the Department from providing permanent IPAS centres to providing another type of accommodation, such as emergency centres.¹⁹⁵ This is concerning. On the inspections themselves there is a variance in standards across centres with some good practice evident. The overview report shows 96 percent of accommodation centres were either compliant or substantially compliant in relation to supporting and facilitating residents to develop and maintain personal and family relationships.¹⁹⁶ A strong majority of service

187 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' <https://bit.ly/4rg83IH> accessed 5 March 2026.

188 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' <https://bit.ly/4rg83IH> accessed 5 March 2026.

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

190 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 10 May 2026 (DJHAM May 2026) <<https://bit.ly/4fA2VwD>> accessed 22 May 2026.

191 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 10 May 2026 (DJHAM May 2026) <<https://bit.ly/4fA2VwD>> accessed 22 May 2026.

192 UNCRC 'Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Ireland' 29 January 2016 UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 66.

193 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 S.I. No. 649 of 2023.

194 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (DOJE 2019).

195 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 14.

196 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 90.

providers (91 per cent) provided adequate food preparation and dining facilities which met the needs of the residents and supported family life.¹⁹⁷ Inspection reports over the course of 2025 also show some providers are either in full compliance or substantially compliant with the *National Standards*.¹⁹⁸



However, the overview report also showed that in many accommodation centres there are still substantial areas of non-compliance with the *National Standards*. The level of compliance with the standard ensuring child friendly accommodation that respects and promotes family life and is informed by the best interests of the child reduced by 19 percent when compared to data from 2024.¹⁹⁹ Overcrowding was the central issue. Some children shared bedrooms with parents or older siblings of different genders and this impacted the privacy and dignity of these families and was not in line with the requirements of the sleeping protocols of the Housing Act 1966.²⁰⁰ The impact of these living arrangements had not been identified and assessed by the provider. A private living space was not provided to some families and available floor space was often limited which impacted on children's

opportunities to play and develop.²⁰¹ Concerns about the presence of pests and mould in accommodation was also identified in the 2025 report.²⁰² Overall significant health and safety concerns were identified in 29 percent of accommodation centres inspected.²⁰³ Providers submit compliance plans in order to improve their service and to become compliant with the *National Standards*, the implementation of which will be closely monitored by HIQA. Serious consideration needs to be given by the Government to put in place sanctions for centres that continue to be non-compliant with the *National Standards*.

Emergency accommodation centres accommodate the vast majority of children in the International Protection system but are not subject to the *National Standards* and critically, HIQA does not have the authority to carry out inspections on these centres. The latest evidence on standards in emergency centres from research commissioned by Doras, in the latter half of 2025, is very concerning for children and families. Survey findings demonstrate problems with overcrowding, with the vast majority of respondents who indicated that they currently live with children reporting that all family members shared a single bedroom²⁰⁴ with access to dedicated family living space beyond bedrooms being very limited.²⁰⁵ The majority of respondents who indicated that they currently live with children also did not live in own-door accommodation.²⁰⁶

Parents highlighted the distress of being unable to prepare food for children and babies with specific medical needs in centres where they lived.²⁰⁷ One parent said about cooking for their children, that they were 'not allowed to cook even soup or heating

197 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 86.

198 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 2–3 April 2025 (2025); HIQA Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 30 April–1 May 2025 (2025); HIQA Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 26–27 March 2025 (2025) and HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 28–29 January 2025 (2025).

199 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 80.

200 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 80.

201 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 81.

202 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 79.

203 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025* (HIQA March 2026) 79.

204 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 92.

205 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 92.

206 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 92.

207 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 106.

the milk'.²⁰⁸ In contrast, those who had access to kitchens, described the ability to cook as restoring dignity, autonomy and family life.²⁰⁹ Parents described being required to share a single room with multiple family members for prolonged periods, often exceeding one or two years.²¹⁰ Overall, for families and children, participants described how cramped living arrangements, the absence of safe play and study spaces, limited autonomy over cooking and often rigid institutional rules negatively impact parenting, education and children's development.²¹¹

Key stakeholders who work across all IPAS accommodation settings commented on the difference between state-run and emergency centres. One stated: 'In longer-established, state-funded centres, even newer staff receive proper induction and work alongside experienced colleagues, and you can see the difference. They're not perfect, but the contrast with many emergency centres is stark ... In emergency settings, staff are often dropped into former hotels or nursing homes with little training, sometimes with no security or consistent staff presence at all, and that is simply not acceptable.'²¹² The researchers themselves stated it became clear that conditions in emergency accommodation can be quite dire and are reminiscent of conditions that characterised Direct Provision in its first decade- and-a-half.²¹³

Emergency accommodation centres accommodate the vast majority of children in the international protection system and continues to increase year on year.²¹⁴ The centres are not subject to the *National Standards* and HIQA does not have the authority

to inspect these centres, contrary to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.²¹⁵ Emergency accommodation centres are an unsuitable form of accommodation for those seeking international protection, particularly children, especially given the length of time children remain in them. The conditions in the centres and the effect they have on children is a long-standing chronic problem in the system. The Government must commit to the permanent phasing-out of emergency accommodation centres, supported by increased resources and system capacity and in the interim, develop a set of guidelines and standards for emergency centres.

The reforms taking place under the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum²¹⁶ presents an opportunity for the Government to ensure that all accommodation centres, including emergency centres, adhere to rights-based standards and are inspected by an independent authority. The *National Standards* or, if required, newly drafted standards should apply to all international protection accommodation centres. If new standards are to be drafted, all relevant stakeholders, including child rights experts, should be consulted. This will be crucial if the Government is to deliver a fair, efficient, sustainable model of accommodation that meets the needs of children and families.

In February 2021, the Government published *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service*.²¹⁷ The White Paper was informed by the work of the Dr Catherine Day Advisory Group, which demonstrated how the current model could be ended and replaced with a

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- 208 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 107.
- 209 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 108.
- 210 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 109.
- 211 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 120.
- 212 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 126.
- 213 C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap, A Report on Permanent International Protection Accommodation versus Emergency Accommodation* (Doras 2026) 150.
- 214 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 10 May 2026 (DJHAM May 2026) <<https://bit.ly/4fA2VwD>> accessed 22 May 2026.
- 215 Committee on the Rights of the Child and Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers Joint General Comment No. 4 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return CMW/C/GC/4-CRC/C/GC/23 para 50 and UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4, para 66.
- 216 The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum contains the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation, the Asylum Procedure Regulation, the Return Border Procedure Regulation, the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation, the Eurodac Regulation, the Screening Regulation, the Qualification Regulation, the Revised Reception Conditions Directive and the Union Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Framework (Union Framework) Regulation. Many provisions of the EU Pact have been transposed into Irish law through the International Protection Act 2026. The EU Pact is due to be implemented in June 2026.
- 217 Government of Ireland, *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Government Publications 2021).

new, more cost-effective not-for-profit model.²¹⁸ The underlying assumption in the *White Paper* was based on 3,500 new arrivals each year.²¹⁹ Given the large disparity in numbers, a review of the implementation approach for the *White Paper*.²²⁰

As a result of this review, in March 2024 the Department published a *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants (Accommodation Strategy)*.²²¹ The Accommodation Strategy seeks to address the current accommodation shortfall and maintain the fundamental principles of the *White Paper* while reforming the system over time to ensure the State will always be able to meet its international commitments.²²² It is projected that the system will need to have capacity for up to 35,000 by the end of 2028.²²³

The *Accommodation Strategy* proposes to build and contract 14,000 state-owned permanent beds.²²⁴ The delivery of this will be crucial in building a sustainable model of accommodating international protection applicants. On publication of the *Accommodation Strategy* in March 2024 there were 1,184 state-owned beds in the system.²²⁵ In December 2025 this had risen to over 4,000 state-owned beds.²²⁶ This is welcome. Contingency accommodation of up to 11,000, with commercial providers, will also be provided under the *Accommodation Strategy*.²²⁷ This,

along with the 14,000 state-owned accommodation beds, will comply with the *National Standards*.²²⁸ This is welcome as the standards provide an important framework to safeguard the rights of children and young people.

The proposal to cap in-community or own-door accommodation to accommodate 1,000 vulnerable persons is, however, too low, given that the population of people seeking protection includes a significant number of vulnerable people. At the end of July 2025 there were only 37 in-community properties owned by the State and approximately ten residential properties contracted to IPAS to provide accommodation in communities.²²⁹ Children are recognised as vulnerable by the Government²³⁰ and yet it will not be possible to provide own-door accommodation to all children and families as envisaged in the *White Paper* with the current or proposed allocation.

Own-door accommodation is crucial for children and families, as it respects and promotes family life and ensures they have the appropriate space and surroundings to develop and grow. Multiple reports have demonstrated the detrimental impact of lengthy institutionalised living on the welfare of children and young people.²³¹ In light of this, the Government must re-examine the targets for in-community or own-door accommodation.

218 Government of Ireland, *Report by the Advisory Group on the provision of support including accommodation to persons in the international protection process*, (Government of Ireland 2020).

219 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

220 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

221 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

222 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

223 This is assuming that an average of 13,000-16,000 persons arrive between 2024 and 2028 and that persons with status move from their accommodation after a specified time (currently one year after grant of status). Ibid 4.

224 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

225 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

226 Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Colm Brophy TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 December 2025 [68402/25].

227 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

228 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 5.

229 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Jim O'Callaghan TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 29 July 2025 [42212/25].

230 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Vulnerability Assessment Pilot Programme Policy* (2022) accessed 10 January 2025.

231 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision – An Investigation by the Ombudsman for Children's Office* (OCO 2021) 34; Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) and C. Smyth, C. O'Mahony, P. Fallon, A. Kamal, M. Ralekoala and F. Alo, *The Reception Gap: International Protection Accommodation in Ireland and Compliance with National Standards* (Doras 2026) (forthcoming).

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Ensure that every child living in homeless accommodation has a support worker to help them to navigate the challenges they face in this situation. [Cost: €2 million].
- Introduce a pilot place-based initiatives to tackle the low level of take up of renewable energy and retrofitting in areas with a high level of disadvantage. This could include increased subsidies and simplified applications processes and choices which incur no cost.

Short-term

- Set Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) limits at a rate that will enable access to 40 per cent of the private rental market using data from the RTB / ESRI rent index. Establish a process whereby rent limits are reviewed every two years to ensure that limits keep up with market rates.
- Monitor the impact of the new rent legislation on tenancies created prior to 1 March 2026. Consider using the Tenant-in-Situ programme as an intervention to prevent families becoming homeless who receive a Notice of Termination under these conditions.
- Include two appropriate nominations from the NGO groups on The National Homeless Action
- Committee (NHAC) to the governance structures of the homeless prevention framework.
- Explore the development of a retrofitting scheme for the private rental sector that ensures security of tenure for tenants and incentivises landlords to improve low energy efficient properties.
- NHAC should establish a 'Data, Research and Monitoring' sub-group with an independent chair, comprising relevant sectoral expert and local authority and NGO nominees.
- Appoint a National Accommodation Lead (at Senior Level) for Travellers and Roma given the disproportionate rates of homelessness/accommodation inequality.

Recommendations

Medium-term

- Prioritise the acquisition and new build of four-bedroom houses in the Dublin region in order to reduce the number of families spending the longest time in emergency accommodation.
- Increase the use of own-door accommodation for children and families in international protection accommodation to greater than 1,000 beds.
- Commit to introducing standards and inspections for International Protection Emergency Accommodation Centres.
- When implementing the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, ensure that the National Standards or, if required, newly drafted rights-based standards apply to all international protection accommodation, including emergency centres.
- Provide HIQA with the authority to inspect all international protection accommodation, including emergency centres against relevant rights-based standards.
- In 2026, the government needs to prioritise the development of an enabling environment, by prioritising actions from Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 to expedite the delivery of new build social housing.

Long-term

- Prioritise building social housing and meeting the target of building an average of 12,000 homes each year. Increase new build local authority housing activity and decrease reliance on the market as a means of delivering output.
- Expedite establishment of the National Traveller Accommodation Authority recommended by the Expert Group on Traveller Accommodation.

Spotlight solution

ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON CHILDREN – FOCUS IRELAND CHILD SUPPORT WORKERS



What is the problem?

As of the end of April 2026, there were 5,604 children homeless in Ireland. There is considerable evidence to show that any period in homeless emergency accommodation can be damaging to the wellbeing of children and their families. Focus Ireland research found that families in emergency accommodation often experience substandard living conditions, including overcrowding, a lack of privacy safety and, unsanitary conditions for children.¹ This damage is further exacerbated where families spend prolonged or extensive periods of time trapped in homelessness. Focus Ireland has long advocated that every child in homelessness who needs one, should have access to a Child Support Worker (CSW), to help to reduce the detrimental impacts of homelessness and mitigate against the long-term effect of adverse childhood experiences. The CSW also offers key support to parents which can give them the space to engage more fully, both with supporting their children and on taking the necessary steps to find a new home.

What is the solution?

The work of a Child Support Worker is varied and complex. Extended periods living in emergency accommodation cause a range of problems for children, from developmental delays in younger children to emotional and psychological difficulties. Child Support Workers are professionally trained to identify the needs of these children and to provide direct supports and make referrals where necessary. They also offer a crucial support for parents of children living in emergency accommodation as they navigate the often-complicated path from homelessness to a stable and secure home.

How does it work?

Meet 11-year-old twins, Jack and Aisling²

Focus Ireland's Child Support Worker supports 11-year-old twins, Jack and Aisling, who have been living in emergency accommodation with their parents for three long years. Referred by their Family Case Manager, the CSW has been supporting both children and their parents since March 2024 due to the high level of support needs associated individually for both children.

1 Focus Ireland's Insights into Family Homelessness series

2 Names and identifying features have been changed to protect the anonymity of the people involved.



Jack was on the waiting list for an Assessment of Need for a number of years and the CSW advocated for private funding to try to expedite this assessment. Due to both parent's significant literacy issues, the CSW supported them to refer Jack for primary care psychology and attended initial appointments with his Mam. Due to the severity of his mental health needs, he has since been referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for more specialised support.

Aisling did not present with any previous behavioural or mental health needs prior to entering emergency accommodation, but when their living circumstances changed, both her parents and her school reported a significant and increasingly severe decline in her mental health and, subsequently, behaviour and overall wellbeing. On recommendation from the primary care psychologist, the CSW supported her Mam to also refer Aisling for primary care psychology too and attended initial appointments to support the family.

Both children were having significant issues in school which resulted in reduced school days and suspensions but, through meeting with the school to advocate with the parents, the Child Support Worker has together with the family, come up with a plan to promote full school participation for both children through support plans and regular reviews.

The home-school and home-community links are an integral part of what Child Support Workers do to promote integration of children living in homelessness into their school and community, ensuring positive links to support their education, social, psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing.

Through a professional link between the Family Centre and First Fortnight, a charity offering creative therapy free of charge to children and adults living in homelessness, Focus Ireland has brokered with the emergency accommodation staff for both twins, along with other children in need, to access this vital therapeutic support on-site in the accommodation on a weekly basis.

The Child Support Worker also attends the twins' emergency accommodation on a weekly basis to do afterschool therapeutic play sessions with both children, sometimes individually and sometimes together, to further support their holistic wellbeing and ensure they are provided with opportunities to relieve the stress of emergency accommodation through play and laughter. The family has often highlighted the importance of the opportunities of activities, trips and play sessions to get their children out of their shared family room during long evenings and school holidays in emergency accommodation.

The Child Support Worker meets with Jack and Aisling's Mam weekly and provides phone support in between these sessions to support parenting children with challenging behaviours while also providing emotional support for the unique challenges that come with parenting while in homelessness for a prolonged period.

What is the impact?

Over the course of 2025, Child Support Workers in Focus Ireland's Family Centre supported 156 children on a one-to-one basis. Each child was assigned a dedicated Child Support Worker. During the same period, Child Support Workers engaged with 547 children across a range of social and educational activities and group sessions. These activities included homework club, Lego club and visits to – Dublin Zoo, Aquazone, Jumpzone, Gaiety Panto, DreamWorks, Cinemas, local farms, and an annual Christmas party.

What are the learnings?

Focus Ireland is currently developing an Evaluation Framework with Frontier Economics for the Focus Ireland Child support Worker services, which will ensure the service is evidenced based and working towards the needs of the children and families they work with.

Early intervention is crucial in terms of securing the best possible outcomes for children. For children and young people growing up in emergency accommodation, that early intervention is essential in order to mitigate the worst impacts of the trauma and marginalisation of homelessness. Focus Ireland has been campaigning for years for additional resources to support and expand the work of their Child Support Workers. The positive impact this role has on the wellbeing of vulnerable children experiencing homelessness is demonstrated through Jack and Aisling's story.

Focus Ireland currently employs 15 Child Support Workers, who are specially trained to deliver the one-to-one support children living in homeless emergency accommodation need. Focus Ireland estimates that there are 1,000 children attached to families engaging with its services. With only 15 CSWs we know we are only meeting the needs of a fraction of these children. With the number of children experiencing homelessness increasing month-on-month, there is a need for greater investment to ensure that this impactful service can increase its capacity to meet the unique needs of children, as and when they need further support.

"We are lucky to be in a position to help children and their families when they need it most, and as so many are homeless, and some for long periods of time, its really important that we able to step in and help. We can assess the needs of the children and quickly deploy our supports to help them, sometimes through one-to-one work, and at other times through group work like afterschool clubs, lego clubs, summer camps. And we're also trained to provide courses in parenting, like Circle of Security. At the same time, we have staff in case management and Advice & Information who are doing everything to help our families find a home. We are always trying to work in a trauma informed way, because we know how tough it is for these kids who are experiencing homelessness"

Dearbhla, CSW in the Focus Ireland Family Centre

Spotlight solution



Dídean
PARTNERSHIP | INTEGRATION | INCLUSION

PROVIDING OWN-DOOR ACCOMMODATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES – DÍDEAN

What is the problem?

The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) accommodates 33,081 international protection applicants, of whom 9,878 are children. Of these children, 7,592 are living in emergency accommodation.¹ While HIQA inspection reports of permanent centres highlighted areas of good practice including self-catering accommodation so families can cook their own food, and the provision of dedicated child-friendly, play and recreation facilities, it also found that less than half of the accommodation inspected was ‘own-door’ – the recommended accommodation for families to ensure they have their own private space. The provision of own-door accommodation is critical as we know living in congregated settings for long periods of time risks institutionalisation and has serious adverse effects on children and families. For example, incidences of children sharing bedrooms with their parents or siblings of the opposite gender over the age of 10 years old were identified in many accommodation centres. There is further concern about quality in emergency accommodation as they are not subject to HIQA inspections.

Ensuring the provision of safe and appropriate accommodation to children and families in the international protection system (IP system) is critically important given the vulnerability and needs of these children and families. Many children have experienced significant trauma, including displacement, instability, disrupted attachments, and prolonged uncertainty. These experiences often manifest as emotional and behavioural regulation difficulties, alongside challenges in forming secure relationships and engaging in education. There are also high levels of medical need and disability, requiring coordinated, multi-agency responses. Families in the IP system frequently experience poverty, deprivation, and social isolation, limiting access to essential supports. For children and young people, educational disruption is common, and the transient nature of emergency accommodation can impact continuity and development having a knock-on effect on children’s development and wellbeing.

What is the solution?

Dídean provides trauma-informed, rights-based, own-door, community-based emergency accommodation and supports to children and families within the International Protection Accommodation Service system. While emergency in nature, the model prioritises stability, privacy, and continuity of care, offering a progressive alternative to traditional centre-based provision. This approach supports improved outcomes in child wellbeing, education, and social inclusion.

¹ Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 10 May 2026 (DJHAM May 2026) <<https://bit.ly/4fA2VwD>> accessed 22 May 2026.

Children supported within Dídean present with complex and interrelated needs within the context of the International Protection process. Dídean responds through a trauma-informed, community-based, multidisciplinary model, prioritising own-door, community-based emergency accommodation that promotes stability, privacy, and family life. Dídean also provide support for normal family routines and consistency and work to ensure the delivery of relationship-based social care support and coordinated access to healthcare, therapeutic, and educational services as part of their child-centred approach. This approach is effective in providing structured scaffolding that enhances stability, privacy, and continuity, enabling improved outcomes through consistent family routines and sustained access to essential services.

"It is great job satisfaction to see the children smiling, feeling at home, trusting staff and wanting to be involved."

Tatianna (Staff member)

The service is designed to address both immediate and longer-term needs, ensuring children's wellbeing while promoting security, routine, and belonging. Through tailored supports addressing emotional, developmental, health, and social needs, Dídean actively supports recovery and resilience.

Providing a high-quality service is a core priority within Dídean. Responsibility for quality is embedded across all levels of the service, ensuring a consistent, accountable, and person-centred approach. Dídean maintains a strong focus on continuous quality improvement, demonstrated through robust internal audit systems and positive external inspections throughout 2025. A dedicated quality framework supports ongoing evaluation and enhancement of service delivery.

A culture of shared learning and continuous improvement is actively promoted. Feedback from children, families, and staff is systematically gathered and used to drive measurable improvements. Structured governance and review mechanisms ensure practice remains evidence-based and responsive.

Throughout 2025, Dídean has demonstrated strong regulatory compliance and delivery of high-quality, person-centred care and remains committed to maintaining and strengthening these standards. The service is underpinned by a child-centred, rights-based practice, strong governance and oversight, robust safeguarding systems, ongoing auditing and quality assurance monitoring. The service is also equally committed to the delivery of individualised support planning, staff training and supervision and effective interagency collaboration.

"The best part of our job is watching the children growing up happy and feeling part of our community."

Sharon (Staff member)

"I was nervous starting school, but I had nothing to worry about. I have made great friends."

Pride (Resident)

How does it work?

Dídean's service operates across Carlow, Laois and Offaly, supporting integration into society while maintaining strong local community connections. Children and families are actively supported to engage in meaningful activities, education, and training opportunities to build life skills, knowledge, and experiences that promote independence and active participation in their communities. From admission, comprehensive assessments are completed to identify needs and ensure appropriate, timely supports are in place. Support includes trauma-informed emotional support; healthcare and disability coordination; education support (enrolment, attendance, and engagement); community inclusion opportunities; parenting and family support; progression towards independence. Dídean's social care team ensures safeguarding, and risk management are top priorities and provide support to families in navigating what are complex systems. The social care team maintains a coordinated, multidisciplinary intervention as well as ensuring advocacy for the needs of children needs who engage in the service.

**"My son is calm and happy
in his new home and school.**

We feel safe."
Natia (Resident)

Dídean embeds children's voice within service delivery through structured, accessible, and age-appropriate mechanisms, ensuring participation is meaningful and ongoing. Key measures include:

- **Child-friendly induction process:** A child-friendly induction video is provided to all child residents and translated where required. This ensures accessibility and supports understanding of the service, available supports, and how to seek help or raise concerns.
- **Accessible information:** Easy-to-read materials are provided to support an understanding of rights, supports, and service processes, ensuring accessibility for children with additional needs and those for whom English is an additional language.
- **Structured feedback systems:** Children and teenager-specific surveys capture feedback on wellbeing, safety, and service experience.
- **Anonymous participation mechanisms:** Suggestion boxes are available across all locations, supporting confidential and inclusive feedback.
- **Ongoing engagement and responsiveness:** Feedback is actively reviewed and used to inform service improvements, ensuring children's views influence decision-making and service development. This approach reflects a child-centred, rights-based framework, ensuring children's voices are heard, respected, and acted upon.

What is the impact?

Dídean currently supports 274 children and young people in 118 families, across 100 locations. Dídean addresses child poverty by reducing barriers to accommodation, education, healthcare, and social inclusion. By stabilising families and improving access to services, the model mitigates both immediate and long-term impacts of poverty and child development and wellbeing.

Dídean places a strong emphasis on ensuring children have access to meaningful play, recreation, and community participation, recognising this as critical to wellbeing and development. Through partnerships and targeted funding (including through the Children and Young People's Services Committees - CYPSC), children and families have accessed swimming lessons, weekly family outings, gym membership for teenagers and, summer camps and sports programmes.

The service goes beyond accommodation, fostering and nurturing community engagement. In collaboration with local partners, Dídean has facilitated family days at Birr Castle, Castlecomer Adventure Park, and local pet farms, seasonal events including Halloween, Easter, and Christmas celebrations and Africa Day and Integration Week events, supporting cultural inclusion and community engagement.

Dídean has developed strong interagency links to enhance outcomes for children and families, including collaboration with:

- Health Service Executive Vaccination Team supporting access to immunisation programmes
- CYPSC (Children and Young People's Services Committees) securing funding to enhance recreational and developmental opportunities
- Barnardos, in the delivery of online safety workshops
- Parents First Laois Offaly, providing parenting support and capacity building
- Carlow, Laois and Offaly Childcare Committee providing early years and family supports
- Meitheal, coordinated multi-agency family support planning
- Carlow, Laois and Offaly Libraries, focusing on literacy, educational programmes, and community engagement
- Music Generation (Laois and Offaly) that provide access to music education and creative development
- Carlow, Laois and Offaly Parenting Support Programme, strengthening parenting skills and family resilience
- Talking Buddies Workshops, communication and language development supports
- Community Connect Workshops enhancing social inclusion and integration
- Tusla and Health Service Executive, providing initiatives for early years play supports
- Distribution of age-appropriate toys through national donations (e.g. Toy Show appeal)

This partnership approach has enabled improved access to healthcare and preventative services as well as enhanced early intervention and multidisciplinary support.

**"Staff supported us
in every way and made life
much easier for us all."**
Resident

The interagency collaboration also helps deliver targeted parenting and family supports and increase children's and families' participation in education, arts and recreation all of which have proven positive impacts on health and wellbeing and addressing social exclusion and marginalisation.

Dídean also works closely with specialist services, including children's disability network teams (CDNTs), special schools, and disability services, ensuring children with additional needs receive appropriate supports and interventions.

The service is a best practice example of a model that meets the needs of children and families in the IP system, with impact demonstrated in:

- Improved emotional wellbeing and stability
- Increased engagement in education
- Improved access to healthcare
- Greater social inclusion
- Reduced exposure to risk

What are the learnings?

Dídean is an example of best practice that demonstrates the delivery of child-centred, safe, appropriate accommodation for children and families in the IP system is possible. Given the concerning deterioration of standards across other emergency accommodation settings, there are key learnings from Dídean's approach that could inform similar approaches in other settings. It is clear that a trauma-informed approach to care and accommodation is essential given the unique experiences and complex needs of the children and families in the IP system. With consideration of this, ensuring access to early intervention and parent supports helps reduce the long-term risk and improve outcomes. Providing stability is critical in the delivery of the service and community integration plays a key role in this regard, ensuring access and engagement to wider support services that can help provide continuity of care.



**"We would not be
where we are today
without the support from
Dídean staff."**
Resident

Spotlight solution

ACCESS TO PLAY FOR CHILDREN IN INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION ACCOMMODATION CENTRE – NATIONAL CHILDHOOD NETWORK AND MONAGHAN CYPSC



What is the problem?

For many children experiencing poverty, displacement, and institutional living, access to safe, meaningful play opportunities is severely constrained. Children living in the International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) system experience a unique and compounded form of disadvantage. Many reside in 'bed and board' settings characterised by overcrowding, lack of privacy, and minimal access to recreational infrastructure. Within these environments, opportunities for spontaneous, child-led play are limited or entirely absent. Research commissioned through Tusla and the Children's Right Alliance highlighted the lack of indoor play spaces and the insufficient value placed on play within Direct Provision contexts. This gap is not merely logistical but reflects a broader systemic issue where play is often deprioritised in favour of basic care provision, overlooking its critical role in child development and wellbeing. For children returning from school to environments devoid of structured or unstructured recreational opportunities, the absence of play exacerbates stress, isolation, and developmental challenges. In this context, play becomes not only a right but a protective factor essential for emotional regulation, social connection, and resilience-building.

What is the solution?

The development of the Play Hub at St Patrick's IPAS Accommodation Centre in Monaghan emerged from a clearly identified gap in provision and represents a significant, rights-based intervention led by Monaghan Children and Young People's Services Committee and the National Childhood Network (NCN). This initiative directly addresses structural inequalities in access to play and recreation. Central to this initiative is the concept of *Ceart chun Súgartha* -the Right to Play -framed by NCN as a core component of children's rights and wellbeing.

From its inception, the project adopted a trauma-informed lens, recognising play as a primary mechanism through which children process experiences and regain a sense of control. Children in IPAS settings often experience displacement, uncertainty, and, in some cases, prior trauma. These experiences can lead to heightened stress responses and difficulties with emotional regulation. Play, particularly in a safe and predictable environment, acts as a critical buffer against these stressors.

The Play Hub was designed to:

- Provide emotional safety through calm, structured environments
- Support sensory regulation via dedicated sensory spaces
- Encourage autonomy and choice, counteracting institutional control
- Foster social relationships through shared play experiences



How does it work?

A defining feature of the Play Hub is its commitment to meaningful child participation. Using the Lundy Model of Participation, comprising Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence, the project ensured that children were not passive recipients but active co-designers of the space.

- **Space:** Safe environments were created where children could express their views freely.
- **Voice:** Children used drawing, conversation, and play to communicate their preferences.
- **Audience:** Their feedback was actively listened to by decision-makers within the Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC).
- **Influence:** Crucially, children's ideas were implemented in the final design.

Consultations involved children across multiple age groups, as well as parents, ensuring inclusivity. The feedback revealed a strong demand for both creative play (arts, crafts, sensory activities) and physical play (sports, active games), highlighting the need for a diverse and flexible play environment. This participatory approach does more than improve service design, it reinforces children's sense of agency and belonging. In contexts where children often feel invisible or powerless, being heard and seeing tangible outcomes from their input is transformative.

The physical environment of the Play Hub reflects the diverse needs identified through consultation. Located in a repurposed canteen space within the IPAS centre, the hub was strategically designed to include multiple play zones:

- **Creative Areas** (Supporting arts, crafts, and imaginative play),
- **Sensory Spaces** (Facilitating regulation and calm for children with additional needs or trauma responses),
- **Physical Play Zones** (Enabling movement, energy release, and group interaction),
- **Quiet/Relaxation Areas** (Offering reading and downtime opportunities).

This zoning approach allows children to exercise choice and independence, key elements often restricted in institutional settings. It also accommodates different developmental stages and preferences, ensuring inclusivity across age groups. The integration of sensory resources is

particularly significant. Sensory play supports neurological regulation, helping children transition from heightened states of alertness (“survival mode”) to calmer, more engaged states (“growth mode”). For children experiencing trauma or instability, this is a critical component of wellbeing.

What is the impact?

The Play Hub directly mitigates several dimensions of child poverty. In terms of **material deprivation**, the Hub removes financial barriers that prevent families from accessing recreational activities by providing high-quality play resources within the centre. NCN’s emphasis on low-cost and recycled materials further ensures sustainability and accessibility. The Hub creates a shared space where children can interact, build friendships, and develop social skills. This counters the isolation and **social exclusion** often experienced in IPAS settings. Children in poverty frequently report feeling judged or “seen as a problem” when playing in public spaces. By formalising a dedicated play environment, the Hub legitimises play as a right rather than a privilege.

One of the most powerful insights from National Childhood Network ongoing participation with children and young people was children’s request to “protect their play.” In highly regulated environments like Direct Provision, children have limited control over their daily lives. Play becomes one of the few domains where autonomy is possible. Protecting play means ensuring that it is not disrupted by institutional routines, allows for expression without criticism and is consistently available. This approach also challenges institutional norms, advocating for child-centred environments within broader systems of care.

Sustainability is a key consideration in the Play Hub model. To ensure long-term impact, the project includes the training of Play Champions and Youth Play Champions. These individuals facilitate play activities, model positive engagement, support inclusive participation, and strengthen relationships within the community. This relational approach is critical. Consistent, trusted adults and peers provide a foundation for emotional security, reinforcing the ‘connection before correction’ principle central to trauma-informed practice. Additionally, community events and ongoing play sessions ensure that the hub remains dynamic and responsive to evolving needs.

The official opening in March 2026 marked not just the launch of a physical space, but the culmination of a process that placed children’s rights and voices at its core. While still a relatively recent initiative, the Play Hub is already demonstrating significant benefits to the children who access it. Children experience agency through participation and choice and there are high levels of participation and engagement in the play activities. NCN note improved peer interaction and trust with adults, strengthening these key relationships in a child’s life and the Hub is having a positive impact on the peer-to-peer support between parents, addressing the marginalisation so often experienced by these families.



What are the learnings?

The Play Hub at St Patrick's IPAS Accommodation Centre stands as a compelling example of how targeted, rights-based interventions can address the multifaceted impacts of child poverty. By centring play as a fundamental right and embedding children's voices in every stage of development, the initiative moves beyond service provision to systemic change. For children living in conditions of uncertainty and constraint, the ability to play freely, safely, and meaningfully is transformative. It restores a sense of normality, fosters resilience, and affirms their dignity and rights.

The success of the Play Hub is underpinned by strong interagency collaboration. CYPSC's role in identifying service gaps and commissioning local responses is central to this model. The Hub is a best practice example of an integrated model with contributions from the National Childhood Network (design, implementation, training), Monaghan CYPSC (coordination, funding, oversight), IPAS Centre Management (facilitation and support), and Tusla and Child and Family IPAS Networks (strategic alignment). This integrated approach ensures that play is not treated in isolation but as part of a broader system of supports addressing child poverty and wellbeing. Adopting a trauma-informed approach is essential for the effectiveness of services for children in poverty and displacement contexts as emotional safety and regulation must be prioritised. The model could be replicated in other IPAS centres or similar settings and scaled up at a national level, utilising the Lundy Model to ensure meaningful engagement from children and develop a service or intervention that best suits their unique needs, in their unique context.



Family, Support and Alternative Care



FAMILY SUPPORT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE

The European Commission Recommendation, *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (Investing in Children)*, calls on Member States to develop integrated strategies based on three pillars:

- Access to Adequate Resources
- Access to Affordable Quality Services
- Children’s Right to Participate.¹

Under the second pillar, *Access to Affordable Quality Services*, five thematic areas are identified. Among them is a commitment to invest in measures that “enhance family support and the quality of alternative care settings”. This area is divided into three elements, which are examined in turn below.

1. **Prevention:** Strengthen child protection and social services in the field of prevention
2. **Parenting Skills:** Help families develop parenting skills in a non-stigmatising way
3. **Quality of Alternative Care:** Ensure that children removed from parental care grow up in an environment that meets their needs.²

Strengthen Child Protection and Social Services in the Field of Prevention

Investing in Children recommends Member States “[s]trengthen child protection and social services in the field of prevention”.³ The Recommendation recognises that: “Preventing the transmission of disadvantage

across generations is a crucial investment in Europe’s future [...] with long-term benefits for children, the economy and society as a whole”.⁴ It acknowledges its cost saving benefits: “Early intervention and prevention are essential for developing more effective and efficient policies, as public expenditure addressing the consequences of child poverty and social exclusion tends to be greater than that needed for intervening at an early age.”⁵

National Policy: The overarching Government policy on children and young people, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* includes two actions under the theme of ‘Prevention and Early Intervention’. Progress on its commitment to develop a system of funding services based on evidence of good outcomes⁶ is advancing through the What Works Evidence Hub and associated funding programme.⁷ The second commitment pledges to develop systems to ensure consistency of services.⁸ Progress has been made on this by Tusla through a national mapping of Tusla funded parenting support services with the aim of making these services more accessible for parents and practitioners and to highlight any gaps or duplication in service provision.⁹

Young Ireland is a broad policy framework that operates alongside a range of thematic national policies addressing specific issues affecting children and young people. In a welcome development, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality commenced the development of a National Policy Framework on Alternative Care in 2025.¹⁰ This Framework is an opportunity to place a dedicated focus on preventive actions to reduce the number of children entering care and on family support measures

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- 1 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
 - 4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 2.
 - 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 2.
 - 6 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (Government of Ireland 2023) Action 53, 98–99.
 - 7 See the website of What Works Ireland <<https://bit.ly/4tTqjSl>> accessed 26 May 2026.
 - 8 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (Government of Ireland 2023) Action 53.1 - Develop systems to ensure consistency of services, following the example of how Tusla Case Management provides clarity on child protection.
 - 9 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Performance Statement 2025: For Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, (2025) 3.1.b.1; and Child and Family Agency – Tusla, Business Plan 2026, (2026) 3.7.*
 - 10 Department of Children, Disability and Equality ‘Minister Foley launches consultation process for new plan for children in the care system’ (press release, 12 November 2025).

to enable reunification from care. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality is also preparing a national policy on informal kinship care. It is hoped this policy will address the care and legal aspects and also the financial needs of such families. In addition, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has indicated its intention to develop a national policy on prevention and early intervention and preparatory work begun.

While *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* provides a national framework for the identification and reporting of risks of harm to children, supported by associated training and compliance requirements,¹¹ there is currently no whole-of-government strategy focused specifically on preventing the abuse, neglect or exploitation of children and young people in family, community or online settings. Recognising this gap, a consortium of organisations, led by One in Four, has come together to advocate for a national strategy on the prevention of child sexual abuse, to be grounded in global best practice and adopt a public health approach, including a place-based pilot and framework. The planned national policy on prevention and early intervention also offers an opportunity to respond to some of these issues.

Institutional Framework: Tusla – the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) is the statutory body designated with responsibility for the delivery and operation of child protection, alternative care and family support services.¹² Tusla has a positive duty in relation to the prevention of harm, and the provision of child and family supports, it must “identify children who are not receiving adequate care and protection” and “support and encourage the effective functioning of families”.¹³

However, Tusla alone cannot address all of the issues that lead to child protection and welfare concerns nor can they provide all of the services a child or family may need. Responsibility for these services falls to other departments and state agencies.

Following concerns raised,¹⁴ the Government committed to strengthen inter-agency coordination.¹⁵ The Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, published the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 in December 2025 which establishes a high-level Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee.¹⁶ This is to be warmly welcomed. The Committee, comprising representatives from key Government Departments and agencies, will coordinate services for vulnerable children and families and report annually to the Oireachtas. Importantly, the Committee’s scope will enable a joined-up Government approach at national level to the planning and delivery of prevention, early intervention and family support initiatives and will identify and address barriers to service access. These are critical levers in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and will further the Recommendation’s statement that “Prevention is most effectively achieved through integrated strategies [...]”.¹⁷

Demand for Services: Rising demand for Tusla’s services is visible across key metrics. Over the past decade, there has been a surge of over 100 per cent in child protection and welfare referrals,¹⁸ with Tusla receiving 106,444 referrals during 2025,¹⁹ and this upward trend continued in early 2026.²⁰ The most common referral type received is a welfare concern (55 per cent) which usually requires a family support response, with the remaining referrals relating to child protection concerns involving emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect and sexual abuse.²¹

11 See the webpage related to *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* <<https://bit.ly/4v8f0h8>> accessed 26 May 2026.

12 Child and Family Agency Act 2013.

13 Child Care Act 1991, s 3(2)(a); and Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s 8(1)(c).

14 Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Concluding Observations on the Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Reports of Ireland’ (2023) CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 8; Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children’s Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 71.

15 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland’s Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

16 Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, s 10. This provision gives statutory footing to the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children, established on an administrative basis in 2024.

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

18 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 21 and 28.

19 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 16 March 2026.

20 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report March 2026* (Tusla, 19 May 2026) 6.

21 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

Tusla states that the complexity of cases has also increased, due to a combination of factors, including the fall-out of prolonged isolation during Covid-19 and the combined impact of cost-of-living pressures and the housing crisis on families.²²

In response to referrals received and as part of its positive duty to support families, Tusla provides a range of early intervention and prevention supports to children and families, including under its Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme.²³ During 2025, at least 50,571 children were referred to family support services, 69 per cent of whom received a service.²⁴ Some outliers such as 34 per cent in Dublin South West/Kildare/West Wicklow brought down this average.²⁵ In 2025, almost two per cent of the child population were in receipt of family support services.²⁶

Tusla provides early intervention and prevention services directly and by way of commissioning services from the community and voluntary sector. Tusla funds 136 Family Resource Centres which provide community-based services and information and 114 Child and Family Support Networks which function as local inter-agency networks designed to signpost referral pathways on a 'No Wrong Door' basis.²⁷ Operating within these networks, the Meitheal process provides a multi-agency response to children and families who require support but the situation does not meet the threshold for a social work intervention. Tusla received 2,667 Meitheal process requests in 2025, most coming from parents and schools (65 per cent), followed by social work diversion (25 per cent).²⁸

Community and voluntary organisations commissioned by Tusla or other state agencies are

vital providers of prevention and early intervention services. In responses to a question posed in the Children's Rights Alliance members survey conducted in late 2025, and through ongoing engagement with our members, non-governmental organisations have indicated that they have both the capacity and the appetite to expand their services should additional funding become available.

Tusla Reform Process: From 1 January 2026, Tusla commenced the latest phase of its Integrated Reform Programme, introducing 30 geographical Network Areas across its six regions. Each new network area is indexed using Central Statistics Office demographic data, including population size, disadvantage and deprivation. Tusla has stated that these networks are more equal in size and staffing, ensuring more equal access to services regardless of where a child or family lives.²⁹ Tusla introduced a new Case Management System providing a single child record across all services.³⁰ The reform also reconfigured staff under a Local Integrated Service Delivery (LISD) Model, creating a unified 'Front Door' for early intervention, family support and child protection services, along with multidisciplinary Local Integrated Teams and dedicated Early Support and Intervention Teams.³¹ It is hoped these reforms will strengthen Tusla's capacity to identify and provide preventive services to vulnerable children and families.

Prevention of Children Entering Care: The rate of children in care varies geographically, figures from December 2025 show the rate ranging from 10.3 per 1,000 children in Dublin North City to 2.1 per 1,000 in Dublin South East/Wicklow.³² Data on variation across Tusla's new 30 Network Areas is not yet available. The drivers of this variation remain unclear — potential factors include levels of deprivation, differences in

22 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 29.

23 See Tusla's Family and Community Support webpage <<https://bit.ly/4btMzSD>> accessed 26 May 2026.

24 In 2025, the two largest sources of referrals to family support services were parents and guardians (27 per cent) and Tusla social workers (26 per cent), together accounting for over half of all referrals, followed by schools (12 per cent) and Health Service Executive (HSE) Officers (9 per cent). Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 69 and 70.

25 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 69 and 70. The percentage who received a service ranged from 92% (Kerry) to 34% (Dublin South West/Kildare/West Wicklow). Eleven areas reported a percentage equal to or higher than the national average of 69%.

26 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 68. At least 21,391 children were in receipt of family support services at the end of 2025.

27 See Tusla's website on Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) <<https://bit.ly/4uuRuen>> accessed 26 May 2026.

28 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 71.

29 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report January 2026* (Tusla, 31 March 2026) 1.

30 Information on Tusla's new Area offices and points of contact are available at <<https://bit.ly/4bxgUzY>> accessed 26 May 2026.

31 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report 2024 Spotlight Stories* (Tusla 2025).

32 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 29.

social work practice, and the impact of long waiting lists for therapeutic services. Research is needed to identify the underlying causes of this disparity and to inform targeted measures to address it, including increasing investment in early intervention and prevention measures in Tusla Network Areas with above average rates of children in care. At a national level, the forthcoming National Policy Framework on Alternative Care presents an opportunity to adopt the child welfare inequalities approach, which recognises the association between poverty and admission to care, as a theoretical framework within the new Framework.³³

The provision of family support can play a pivotal role in not only keeping children safely at home but also in securing the timely reunification of a child in care with their parents. The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 clarifies the existing voluntary care provision of the Act by reframing it as a time-limited family support measure.³⁴

Budget Allocation: In 2024, just 18 per cent of Tusla's €1.1 billion budget went to early intervention and prevention through family support services, while 72 per cent was spent on child welfare, protection, and alternative care.³⁵ The remainder covered education support (5.5 per cent) and corporate and regulatory services (4.5 per cent). There is a need to grow the proportion directed to upstream prevention and early intervention services, through ring-fenced annual increases, to gradually shift away from downstream, crisis and demand spending on child welfare, protection, and alternative care. It is hoped this shift will over time reduce the number of complex referrals.



Budget 2026 +12.8%

In Budget 2026, Tusla was allocated €1.47 billion, an increase of 12.8 per cent (€189 million) on the previous year's allocation.³⁶ However, the budget line for family support services saw only a 4.6 per cent increase (€2.8 million).³⁷ Most of the additional funding was directed to residential care, foster care, special care and staffing.³⁸ In a positive development, Budget 2026 provided an additional €3.2 million for Family Resource Centres (FRCs), which increased the baseline funding for the centres to approximately €180,000 per centre, and funded 10 new centres to bring the total to 136 centres.³⁹ To achieve a meaningful rebalancing of overall expenditure toward early intervention and prevention, dedicated ringfenced investment in Budget 2027 is a prerequisite. Among its key functions, such funding should support the community and voluntary sector — via Tusla — to scale its capacity and extend its reach to meet increasing demand at community level.

33 See for example: Paul Bywaters and the Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, *The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report* (2020).

34 Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, s 6.

35 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026. This 18 per cent figure is somewhat higher than the 13-14 per cent identified in a 2023 departmental spending review of Tusla's expenditure on family support services over the period 2018 to 2021. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022* (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

36 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

37 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

38 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Speech by Minister for Children, Disability and Equality Norma Foley on Budget 2026' (7 October 2025) <<https://bit.ly/4fcLuX>> accessed 26 May 2026.

39 See the website of the Family Resource Centre National Forum <<https://bit.ly/4IDagNa>> accessed 26 May 2026.

Exchequer funding has been further complemented by Dormant Accounts investment. In 2025, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, allocated €330,000 across 13 community and voluntary organisations nationwide under the What Works Enhancing Quality Fund — an initiative designed to strengthen prevention and early intervention services for children, young people and families.⁴⁰

Parenting Skills

Investing in Children calls on Member States to “[h]elp families develop parenting skills in a non-stigmatising way.”⁴¹ The Government strategy, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, highlights the importance of the home environment and parenting supports in giving children the best start in life.⁴² Following a commitment in *First 5*, the Government published *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* in 2022, which aims to ensure “all parents are confident and capable in their parenting roles” through improved access to needs-led, evidence-informed parenting services.⁴³ It is hoped that this Fund will be open for applications again in 2026.

The *Work Plan 2023–2025* of the Department of An Taoiseach’s Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office prioritised consolidating and integrating public health, family support, and well-being services to advance the *Supporting Parents* model.⁴⁴ The Office’s first Progress Report notes the importance of ongoing investment in family support services and comment that:

Many respondents highlight the complexity of needs that face some families at risk of poverty and emphasised the significance of family support in developing a relational model of engagement that can support families to access the supports they need in a timely manner. Navigating complex services and supports, can be more difficult where there are multi dimensional needs or intergenerational experience of poverty.⁴⁵

Home Visiting Programmes

Home visiting is a prevention and early intervention approach that provides evidence-based, in-home support to parents from pregnancy through early childhood, focusing on child health, educational development and the prevention of abuse and neglect.⁴⁶ The findings of a review of home visiting services in Ireland, commissioned in 2022 by the then-Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, were published across a series of reports in 2024.⁴⁷ The review identified a range of positive outcomes for both parents and children.⁴⁸ Parents experienced reduced stress, increased knowledge of child development, and improved parenting practices and parent-child relationships. Children benefited from improved cognitive and language development, better diet and nutrition, and in one programme improved behaviour and social skills. Stakeholders highlighted the focus on child development and infant mental health as a key benefit.⁴⁹

40 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, ‘Minister Norma Foley Allocates Over €320,000 to Strengthen Prevention and Early Intervention Services for Children and Young People’ (press release, 28 November 2025).

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

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

43 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022) 16.

44 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023–2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023) 16–17.

45 Department of the Taoiseach, *Child Poverty and Well-Being in Transition: Learning and Adapting to Accelerate Change in Children’s Lives: First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 35.

46 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, ‘Minister Foley meets Home Visiting practitioners in Tralee to mark National Home Visiting Day 2025’ (press release, 15 October 2025).

47 See the webpage of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality <<https://bit.ly/4a9l6pr>> accessed on 26 May 2026.

48 G Hickey and others, UNITES Project: *Home Visiting: National Mapping and Review of Home Visiting Provision in Ireland - Report Number One* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024).

49 S McGilloway and others, UNITES Project: *Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future, Report Number Two* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024).

Significant gaps were identified by the review including inadequate funding affected staff salaries and programme sustainability, while fragmented funding across multiple mechanisms hindered capacity building and long-term strategic planning, reflecting an overall lack of cohesion in the sector.⁵⁰ These findings align with those of the Home Visiting Alliance's 2023 feasibility study, which similarly identified funding models that fail to reflect actual costs, an absence of sustainable funding for national programme support structures and weak data collection.⁵¹

The review examined the economic case for home visiting, evaluating ten programmes across New Zealand and America to explore Ireland's potential return on investment.⁵² It found that for every €1 spent, there is a return of at least €1.60.⁵³ The programmes with the highest benefit-to-cost ratios tended to commence at the prenatal stage, were delivered monthly and ran for the first three years of a child's life.⁵⁴ The most cost-effective programmes targeted families experiencing housing instability, lower incomes, lower levels of education, and one-parent families.⁵⁵

There are currently 16 local home visiting programmes in Ireland operating in partnership with 38 organisations.⁵⁶ They employ one of five models: Community Families, ParentChild+, Preparing for Life, Infant Mental Health Home Visiting, and Lifestart. Programmes typically last two years or more, with visit frequencies ranging from twice weekly to monthly depending on family need.

Funding for home visiting comes primarily from Tusla (83 per cent), with additional contributions from the Health Service Executive (HSE), philanthropic grants, and private donors.⁵⁷ Tusla's support for home visiting has been bolstered by the Children's Fund,⁵⁸ which is providing a ring-fenced allocation of €10 million over the five-year period from 2024 to 2028.⁵⁹ In 2024, this funding enabled Tusla to establish the National Home Visiting Programme on a five-year pilot basis, led by a National Home Visiting Manager.⁶⁰ It aims to expand home visiting, develop a consistent service delivery approach, and coordinate data collection and evidence to inform the future development of a sustainable national home visiting service.⁶¹

The need for sustainable funding for home visiting programmes was raised during an Oireachtas Committee debate on Child Poverty and Deprivation in November 2025. Preparing for Life noted that the sector had capacity to scale up programmes nationally if funding was available.⁶² Preparing for Life commented that the Children's Fund is finite and called for stable, multi-annual and cross-departmental investment to support the programme.⁶³ We support this call for a cross-government approach given the positive impact of home visiting not only in the prevention of abuse and neglect but in improved child health and educational development.

50 S McGilloway and others, UNITES Project: *Stakeholder Views and Experiences of Home Visiting in Ireland - A Vision for the Future, Report Number Two* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024) 38 and 51.

51 Susan Brockerly *Early Childhood Home Visiting in Ireland* (Home Visiting Alliance 2023) 5-7.

52 O Doyle, *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024) 2.

53 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 38.

54 O Doyle, *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024) 3.

55 O Doyle, *The Economic Case for Home visiting in Ireland* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2024) 3.

56 For more information see 'Home Visiting Alliance' <<https://hva.ie>> accessed 26 May 2023.

57 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Minister Foley meets Home Visiting practitioners in Tralee to mark National Home Visiting Day 2025' (press release, 15 October 2025).

58 See the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's webpage on the Children's Fund <<https://bit.ly/3Q2FJNh>> accessed 26 May 2026.

59 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 38.

60 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, *Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Mother and Baby Homes*, 10 July 2024 [30434-30435/24].

61 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 38.

62 Niall Sexton, Joint Committee on Children and Equality debate, 'Child Poverty and Deprivation: Discussion (Resumed)' (Thursday, 20 Nov 2025).

63 Niall Sexton, Joint Committee on Children and Equality debate, 'Child Poverty and Deprivation: Discussion (Resumed)' (Thursday, 20 Nov 2025).

Area Based Supports

The Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme is a government-funded prevention and early intervention initiative targeting areas of entrenched poverty. Working in partnership with families, communities and practitioners, it supports children from before birth to age six to promote healthy development across language, literacy, social, emotional, and wellbeing outcomes. Recognising parents as children's primary carers and educators, ABC programmes are free to families and delivered through a range of evidence-based group and individual supports. The programme comprises 12 projects.⁶⁴

Targeted Parenting Supports

There are several thematic parent support programmes in operation in Ireland which target resources at the most vulnerable children and families who often face barriers to accessing mainstream services. This approach aligns with the *Investing in Children* Recommendation's statement that: "The most successful strategies in addressing child poverty have proved to be those underpinned by policies improving the well-being of all children, whilst giving careful consideration to children in particularly vulnerable situations."⁶⁵

Targeted programmes include the Tusla's Traveller Parent Support Programme which employs 17 Family Link Workers and offers culturally sensitive parenting programmes for Traveller parents of children from birth to five years of age.⁶⁶ In addition, two targeted programmes are co-funded by the Government and the European Union's European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programme. The first are Family Support Practitioners who work with families living in International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS):⁶⁷ in 2025 funding was provided to increase the number of these IPAS workers from 17 to 20.⁶⁸ The second is the Young Parents' Support Programme—

rebranded from the Teen Parents Support Programme in 2024 — which supports parents under 24 years and their families from pregnancy through the first 1,000 days of the child's life.⁶⁹ Delivered by non-governmental organisations through local projects, the Programme comprises 19 projects covering 16 counties.

These programmes are complemented by the Parent Peer Support Fund, administered by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, which supports parent peer support initiatives. In March 2026, the fund's value was increased from €100,000 to €152,500, funding 49 organisations.⁷⁰

In addition, two regionally-bound projects provide information and advocacy support to parents of children in care or subject to child care proceedings: Clarecare Advocacy Services, and a pilot parental advocacy project being run by Barnardos in three geographical sites. Barnardos also operates a national helpline on a pilot basis for parents of children in care.⁷¹

Homeless Families

A large cohort of children, 5,604 children, are living with their families in emergency homeless accommodation, many for protracted periods.⁷² The number of homeless children has increased over the past twelve months, with an additional 896 children now experiencing homelessness, along with their families. These families are living in a range of transitory accommodation including Family Hubs, hotels and repurposed commercial properties.

64 See Tusla's webpage on the Area Based Childhood Programme (ABC) <<https://bit.ly/3Rwmpsb>> accessed 25 May 2026.

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

66 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 37.

67 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 39.

68 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 19 January 2026.

69 The website of the Young Parents Support Programme <<https://bit.ly/4dP5b0L>> accessed 26 May 2026.

70 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Minister Foley Announces Funding for 49 Parenting Peer Support Projects' (press release, 11 March 2026).

71 See the webpages: <<https://bit.ly/3PAdbZ>> and <<https://bit.ly/4f3xpal>> accessed on 26 May 2026.

72 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, March 2026* (DHLGH 2026).

Research from the Lynn Clinic note that: The common theme is the precarious nature of this accommodation that impacts family life. It is never a home, rarely even a house, mostly just a room, without a secure base from which children and their guardians can become part of the local community.⁷³

A 2025 Barnardos report described that parents can find moving into emergency accommodation extremely traumatic, often feeling they have let their children down. The all-encompassing nature of the housing problem can greatly exacerbate stress, anxiety and financial pressures, making it difficult to focus on children's other needs. For some parents, the uncertainty leads to a sense of hopelessness.⁷⁴ This report echoes the findings in an Ombudsman for Children 2019 report on homelessness which describes the additional challenges of parenting in a Family Hub to include navigating the challenges of shared space, the different parenting styles of the residents and the involvement of Hub staff.⁷⁵

There are positive steps being taken by the Government focused specifically on the impact of the housing crisis on children. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are currently developing a Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan and as part of its development, hosted a public consultation process in early 2026.⁷⁶ Family Hub accommodation is provided by a range of providers who offer varying levels of support services. There is an urgent need for child and family support practitioners, similar to those who work in International Protection Accommodation Services, to be present in Family Hubs to support families who are experiencing homelessness.

Quality of Alternative Care

Investing in Children identifies "children in alternative care and street children" as a cohort of children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantages.⁷⁷ The Recommendation calls on Member States to invest in improving the quality of alternative care to "[e]nsure that children removed from parental care grow up in an environment that meets their needs".⁷⁸ It sets out five objectives, each of which is examined below.

The United Nations defines the term 'alternative care' as relating to any arrangement, formal or informal, that aims to ensure the protection and well-being of children who are deprived of parental care or who are at risk of this.⁷⁹ Applying this definition to Ireland, alternative care may be either informal kinship care or formal care (where a child is placed by Tusla in foster or residential care). The scope of alternative care does not extend to children who have been adopted nor to those remanded or detained in the Oberstown Children Detention Campus unless they are also in Tusla's care.

Poverty as a Justification for Child Removal

The Recommendation calls on Member States to "[e]nsure that poverty is never the only justification for removing a child from parental care; aim at enabling children to remain in or return to the care of their parents by, for example, tackling the family's material deprivation."⁸⁰ There is no express prohibition on poverty being a sole justification for removing a child from parental care in Irish law or policy. However, Tusla's policy is that poverty is a risk factor that may compound other concerns but is not in itself a ground for care proceedings.⁸¹

73 A Walsh and others, 'The Lynn Clinic and Health Equity: Transforming Good Intentions into Effective Clinical Practice' *Paediatrics*. 2025;156(S1):e2025070739B, 21.

74 Barnardos Homelessness, *Poor Housing and the Impact on Children 2025* (Barnardos 2025) 10.

75 Ombudsman for Children, *No Place Like Home: Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs* (Ombudsman for Children's Office 2019).

76 See the webpage of Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan Public Consultation <<https://bit.ly/42ZT0Js>> accessed 26 May 2026.

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

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

79 UN General Assembly, 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children Res A/RES/64/142' (2010) para 5.

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

81 *Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook* (Health Service Executive 2011) 85-88 and *Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook 2* (Tusla 2018) 98-100.

Poverty is a vulnerability factor that requires family support responses rather than child protection intervention.

Prevent Institutionalisation

The Recommendation calls on Member States to “[e]nsure adequate gatekeeping to prevent children being placed in institutions and provide for regular reviews in the event of such placements.”⁸²

Institutional care is not defined in the Recommendation, but Eurochild’s DataCare study which mapped alternative care systems across Europe defines institutional care as: Residential care where residents are isolated from the broader community and/or compelled to live together; Residents do not have sufficient control over their lives and over decisions that affect them; and the requirements of the organisation itself tend to take precedence over the residents’ individualised needs.⁸³

Both UNICEF and Eurochild emphasise that smaller, more personalised living arrangements are more likely to ensure self-determination and needs-led care, with UNICEF calling for settings that resemble family homes with a stable and caring figure in the life of the child.⁸⁴

Ireland underwent a process of de-institutionalisation of its children’s industrial schools and reformatories during the 1970s and early 1980s, following the Kennedy Report in 1970,⁸⁵ though the last Mother and Baby Home did not close until the late 1990s. The publication in 2009 of the report of an inquiry into historical child abuse in institutions⁸⁶ prompted widespread public debate and generated Government commitment to a range of related reforms.⁸⁷ Ireland’s alternative care system is now largely family-based care. Of the 5,952 children in care at the end of March 2026, the majority were in foster care (85.3 per cent), followed by residential care (10.3 per cent) and other placements (4.4 per cent).⁸⁸

Residential care in Ireland is classified as either ‘General Residential Care’ or ‘Residential Special Care’. General residential care units are small group homes usually located in a house within a community setting. Such homes usually have a maximum of six children per unit in practice, though no statutory maximum is prescribed. By law, Tusla must establish and maintain a register of children’s residential services, and the operation of an unregistered centre is prohibited.⁸⁹ Maximum capacity is set as part of the registration process undertaken by either the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) or Tusla. All registered placements are governed by Regulations⁹⁰ and *National Standards*⁹¹ and are subject to periodic inspection.

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

83 Eurochild, Glossary, 4 <<https://bit.ly/3RjnL9P>> accessed 26 May 2026.

84 UNICEF, *The role of small-scale residential care for children in the transition from institutional to community-based care and in the continuum of care in the Europe and Central Asia Region* (UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2020); and M Herczog and others, *Better Data for Better Child Protection Systems in Europe: Mapping How Data on Children in Alternative Care are Collected, Analysed and Published Across 28 European Countries* (UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office and Eurochild 2021).

85 E Kennedy and Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools, *Reformatory and industrial schools system report 1970 chaired by District Justice Eileen Kennedy* (The Stationery Office 1970).

86 Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, ‘Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Commission Report’ (2009).

87 Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Health and Children, ‘Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009: Implementation Plan’ (Stationery Office 2009).

88 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report March 2026* (Tusla, 19 May 2026) 11.

89 Child Care Act 1991, ss 60 and 61.

90 Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995 (SI 259/1995); Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 (SI 260/1995); Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995 (SI 261/1995); Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Children in Special Care Units) Regulations 2017 (SI 634/2017) replacing SI 550/2004.

91 Department of Health and Children, *National Standards for Foster Care* (Department of Health and Children 2003); Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres* (HIQA 2018); Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Special Care Units* (HIQA 2014).

Not all children in alternative care are in registered placements. A shortage of placements has forced Tusla to use unregistered services. These Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs) are temporary measures in hotel rooms or rented apartments for example. Tusla made significant progress to reduce the number of SEAs during 2025 and early 2026, with approximately 70 children remaining in SEAs as of May 2026.⁹² Tusla is working to move the remaining children into registered placements in the coming months. The use of SEAs has been the subject of sustained criticism from the judiciary, the Ombudsman for Children and others.⁹³ The use of SEAs is symptomatic of the country failing to plan sufficient residential placements in line with population growth and this has not been helped by the way residential facilities are developed in Ireland. For example, they are not developed by local councils or municipalities. Tusla as a national organisation has to develop these facilities in competition with other public bodies.

Special Care: The second classification of residential care in Ireland, 'Residential Special Care', operates under specific legal provisions whereby a child aged 11–17 may be detained by the High Court for care and therapeutic purposes if they meet specific eligibility criteria. Ireland's three mixed-gender special care centres have a combined registered capacity of 26 beds,⁹⁴ reduced in practice to 15 due to staffing shortages.⁹⁵ Demand frequently exceeds the number of available placements. Situated apart from local communities in secure, closed settings with onsite education, children in special care are subject to close supervision, restricted movement and limited privacy. Staff may use physical restraint in certain circumstances and private security personnel have at times been engaged to supplement staffing.⁹⁶

There is a risk of the child being institutionalised if they remain in special care for extended periods. A 2025 External Review Group examination of Special Care services found that special care is no longer functioning as a short-term intervention, with some children detained for up to two years due to a lack of suitable onward placements.⁹⁷ Existing units were deemed no longer fit for purpose, and the Review recommended a purpose-built Centre for Excellence with graduated security levels, a unified multidisciplinary team and supporting regional and community-based services. However, recruitment challenges persist. Despite a new Special Care Worker grade, a net gain of just seven staff in 2025 enabled only one additional bed to open.⁹⁸

Specialist Support: Ireland's continuum of care remains narrow, confined to foster care, residential care and special care. This limited range of options has consequences: the 2025 External Review of Special Care found that civil detention in special care (a closed institution that should be as a measure of last resort) has become the default formal option for children whose needs cannot be met within mainstream care settings. It also appears that many children with complex needs are placed in SEAs as no other placement is able to cater for their needs. Budget 2026 allocated €1.3 million to provide an enhanced multi-disciplinary therapeutic service to children on the edge of special care, in special care, and transitioning from a special care environment.⁹⁹ There is a need to continue to invest in the development of community-based specialist foster and residential placements for children with complex needs to creating a more graduated and appropriate pathway between mainstream and closed care.

92 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 3 June 2026.

93 See for example: *In the matter of B (a child)* [2026] IEDC 3; *In the matter of A (a child)* [2026] IEDC 4 and 'Vulnerable Children Spending Years in Tusla's Temporary Special Emergency Arrangements' *The Journal* (13 February 2026) <<https://bit.ly/4bQu0tc>> accessed 26 March 2026.

94 G O'Neill and others, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care, Commissioned by the Chief Executive of the Child and Family Agency – Tusla* (Tusla 2025) 60.

95 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

96 Kitty Holland, 'Tusla Hires Security Guards due to Staffing Shortages at Centre for Very Vulnerable Children' (*Irish Times*, Dublin, 18 May 2026) <<https://bit.ly/4nPWJTj>> accessed 26 May 2026.

97 G O'Neill and others, *Report of the External Review Group on Special Care, Commissioned by the Chief Executive of the Child and Family Agency – Tusla* (Tusla 2025).

98 'The Irish Times view on special care for children: State is failing the most vulnerable', *The Irish Times* (22 January 2026).

99 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 March 2026.

Reviews: Each child in care is entitled to a periodic review of their placement by Tusla.¹⁰⁰ Child in care reviews are held as social work led reviews with input from the child, family members and other relevant professionals. Irish law is silent on how the review should be conducted and whether it is independently chaired. Where a judicial care order has been made there is no mandated role for the court to review the placement type or the child's progress, however, some judges have developed a practice of holding a review of the case or the case may be re-entered. The law on special care differs, it requires the High Court to conduct a review of a child's detention every four weeks and in practice the Court often conducts reviews more frequently.¹⁰¹

Quality Community-Based and Foster Care

The Recommendation calls on Member States to “[s]top the expansion of institutional care settings for children without parental care; promote quality, community-based care and foster care within family settings instead, where children's voice is given due consideration.”¹⁰²

As noted above, most children in care live in family-based foster care or community-based residential care. Irish policy favours family-based foster care over residential care¹⁰³ and Tusla policy states that a child aged 12 years or younger should not be placed in residential care, barring exceptional circumstances.¹⁰⁴ Noteworthy regional variation exists: Dublin North-East and Dublin Mid-Leinster had the highest proportions of children in residential care (13.6 per

cent and 13.1 per cent), while West North-East and Mid-West had the lowest (4.5 per cent and 5.3 per cent).¹⁰⁵

The Recommendation calls on Member States to promote quality care. Foster, residential and special care are subject to Regulations¹⁰⁶ and are inspected against National Standards.¹⁰⁷ The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), an independent statutory body, registers and inspects care placements. However, its remit does not extend to all placement types so Tusla registers and inspects residential care centres operated by voluntary and private providers. Both HIQA and Tusla publish individual reports of their inspections but only HIQA provides annual analytical and thematic reports.¹⁰⁸ In late 2025, there were 285 children's residential care centres, 15 per cent of which were subject to inspection by HIQA and the remaining 85 per cent by Tusla.¹⁰⁹ The division of the inspection function between the two bodies is problematic and does not allow for a coherent view of quality across all alternative care settings. An extension to HIQA's remit is urgently required to address this issue

Drawing on inspections carried out in 2024, HIQA found that children living in Tusla run care settings “were receiving good quality safe care”.¹¹⁰ As part of its inspections of residential care settings in 2024, HIQA engaged with 66 children and young people. The majority of children felt safe, happy in their placements and had built trusting relationships with staff. They understood their rights, were involved in

100 Child Care Act 1991 s 42; Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995 (S.I. No.259 of 1995) 25; Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 (S.I. No.260 of 1995) 18; and Child Care (Placement of Children With Relatives) Regulations 1995 (S.I. No.261 of 1995) 18.

101 Child Care Act, s 23I.

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

103 See the Department of Children, Disability and Equality webpage on Alternative Care <<https://bit.ly/4duiS6m>> accessed 26 May 2026.

104 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Review of the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services Available 2024* (2025) 105.

105 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report March 2026* (Tusla, 19 May 2026) 11.

106 Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995 (S.I. No.259 of 1995); Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 (S.I. No.260 of 1995); and Child Care (Placement of Children With Relatives) Regulations 1995 (S.I. No.261 of 1995); and Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Children in Special Care Units) Regulations 2017; S.I. No 634 of 2017 which replaced S.I. No 550 of 2004.

107 Department of Health and Children, *National Standards for Foster Care* (Department of Health and Children 2003); Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Children's Residential Centres* (HIQA 2018); Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Special Care Units* (HIQA 2014).

108 See for example Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children's Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) and Tusla's webpages on its Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service <<https://bit.ly/4btjAOR>> accessed 25 May 2026.

109 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 62; and Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children's Services in 2024* (HIQA 2025) 23.

110 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children's Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 70.

decisions about their care, and had their health and education needs met. Family contact was facilitated appropriately, and they were being supported to prepare for leaving care. However, a smaller number of children raised concerns, including feeling excluded from important decisions and experiencing slow feedback. Some were unsettled by changes in their social worker, while others found it difficult to maintain family contact or access their social workers due to the distance of their placement from home. A number were also disappointed that promised improvements to the physical condition of their centres had not materialised.¹¹¹



Access to Quality Services

The Recommendation calls on Member States to “[e]nsure that children without parental care have access to quality services (both mainstream and specific services) related to their health, education, employment, social assistance, security and housing situation, including during their transition to adulthood.”¹¹²

Tusla has overarching responsibility for the welfare of children in its care, a role it delegates to the child’s allocated social worker.¹¹³ Social workers have a range of statutory duties including the preparation and review of a child’s Care Plan, finding an appropriate placement for the child, visiting the child in their placement, supervising the child’s placement to ensure it meets the child’s needs, addressing the child’s education and health needs, and working with the child’s family.

In March 2026, 97.8 per cent of children in care had an allocated caseworker — 92 per cent of whom were social workers — with 132 children still awaiting allocation.¹¹⁴ Every child in care has a statutory entitlement to an up-to-date Care Plan, developed following a child-in-care review.¹¹⁵ The Care Plan sets out the child’s identified educational, medical and other needs and how these will be met and the child’s file should contain a comprehensive record of any medical matters, including vaccinations. As of March 2026, 82 per cent of children had an up-to-date Care Plan, leaving 1,044 without one.¹¹⁶ The figures for allocated case workers and Care Plans represent an improvement of two percentage points on the same period last year.¹¹⁷

While Tusla has overall responsibility for a child in care they must often rely on other Departments and agencies for the provision of services and supports in relation to the child’s health, education, employment, social assistance, security and housing situation. All children in care are eligible for a Medical Card and may be eligible for educational grants.¹¹⁸ Foster carers are paid a weekly Foster Care Allowance to provide for the foster child.

111 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children’s Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 33-34.

112 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 9.

113 Department of Health and Children, *National Standards for Foster Care* (Department of Health and Children 2003) 16; and Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres* (HIQA 2018) 7. Health Information and Quality Authority, *National Standards for Special Care Units* (HIQA 2014) 15.

114 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report March 2026* (Tusla, 19 May 2026) 13.

115 Child Care (Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995 (SI 259/1995) 23; Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 (SI 260/1995) 11; and Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations 1995 (SI 261/1995) 11.

116 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report March 2026* (Tusla, 19 May 2026) 13.

117 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Performance and Activity Report March 2026* (Tusla, 19 May 2026) 13.

118 These include that care leavers are eligible for special assessment rules for those applying for a Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant <<https://bit.ly/3Q3ia74>> accessed 28 May 2026; and may be eligible for a Tusla Bursary Scheme for young people with care experience. The Bursary Scheme is administered by Tusla in conjunction with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and Dormant Accounts <<https://bit.ly/4o48hmb>> accessed 28 May 2026.

The *Young Ireland* national policy framework commits to ensure that children in care can access HSE services (which include mental health, disability and addition services) in the same way as other children and commits that the child's care status "must be an additional vulnerability factor that needs to be considered".¹¹⁹ It is not known if progress has been made on this action. Difficulties and delays in accessing appropriate mental health and disability services for a child in care have been raised repeatedly in court proceedings.¹²⁰

The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 places a duty on a broad range of statutory and State-funded bodies to collaborate in the planning and delivery of child welfare and family support services, and expressly permits information-sharing, including personal data, where necessary and proportionate.¹²¹ Importantly, this duty will enable cooperation on the planning and delivery of prevention, early intervention and family support initiatives at the community level.

The Recommendation calls on Member States to ensure that children without parental care have access to quality services during their transition to adulthood. Tusla assesses eligibility and, where applicable, provides aftercare support.¹²² In December 2025, 2,985 young people were in receipt of aftercare services.¹²³ Care leavers may also be eligible for specific housing and educational supports.¹²⁴ Despite this, gaps in aftercare provision warrant attention. A small but vulnerable cohort falls outside the one-year eligibility criteria for aftercare assessment and supports end at 21 for those not in education or training, both risk leaving some young people without a safety net.

Despite a Joint Protocol between Tusla and the HSE governing transitions from care for children with disabilities or capacity issues, last-minute planning has been reported in some cases.¹²⁵ Finally, the shortage of affordable housing is driving some care leavers to live in unsuitable or overcrowded family homes or pushing them into homelessness. Of grave concern, 157 care leavers aged 18 to 22 in receipt of aftercare supports were recorded as homeless at the end of 2025.¹²⁶ The forthcoming National Policy Framework on Alternative Care presents an opportunity to deliver on the Government commitment to examine ways to further support young people as they age out of care,¹²⁷ including by prioritising housing for care leavers within the successor to the *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023–2025*.¹²⁸

Children Left Behind

The Recommendation calls on Member States to "[p]rovide appropriate support to children left behind when one or both parents migrate to another country to work, as well as to their replacement carers".¹²⁹ We are not aware that this phenomenon is occurring in Ireland.

119 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* (2023) 91 - Action 44.2.

120 M Corbett and C Coulter, *Falling through the Cracks: An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024* (Child Law Project 2024) 53-54.

121 Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, s 11B.

122 Child Care Act 1991, s 45. This includes a weekly allowance of €300 for care leavers engaged in qualifying education or training.

123 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 38.

124 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 10 April 2025 [351].

125 Ombudsman for Children, *Nowhere to Turn: Children with disabilities left with no support* (Ombudsman for Children's Office 2023); M Corbett and C Coulter, *Falling through the Cracks: An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024* (Child Law Project 2024).

126 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 42.

127 Government of Ireland, *Securing Ireland's Future: Programme for Government 2025* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

128 Government of Ireland, *Housing for All: Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2023).

129 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 9.

Recommendations

Budget 2027

- Increase Tusla's overall budget by €50 million to provide investment in family support, early intervention, child protection and alternative care services to meet increasing demand. Among other things, this will allow for increased support to Family Resource Centres.
- Ringfence and increase the budget allocated to Tusla to raise the percentage directed to early intervention and prevention by three percent points each year, for a period of five years.
- Provide funding for Tusla to provide child and family support practitioners to support homeless families living in Family Hubs and roll out any other relevant actions contained in the forthcoming Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan.

Short-term

- Expediate engagement and collaborative action with the community and voluntary sector to increase the capacity of the services they provide in the areas of early intervention and prevention, as well as family support.
- Publish a phased plan for how to achieve access to home visiting for all vulnerable first-time parents.
- Undertake research across the six Tusla regions to identify the drivers for the variation in the numbers of children in care and the proportion of children in foster care as opposed to residential care.
- Provide funding to roll out the actions contained in the forthcoming National Policy Framework on Alternative Care.
- Implement the recommendations of Tusla's External Review on Special Care with a particular focus on establishing a dedicated Centre of Excellence and developing specialist and high support community-based placements for children with complex needs.
- Fund a national advocacy service for parents of children in care or subject to child care proceedings.

Medium-term

- Commit to ensure the availability of a minimum suite of proven early intervention and prevention supports within each of the Tusla's 30 networks for children at risk of entering care.
- Strengthen aftercare supports and widen eligibility criteria to ensure all young care leavers and vulnerable young people known to Tusla's services are supported to transition successfully into adulthood.

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 160 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child.

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