CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ALLIANCE

Uniting Voices For Children

Report Card 2026

Is Government keeping its promises to children?

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Foreword

Report Card 2026 is the first to be published for the coalition (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Independents) under the new *Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future* and how it performed for children and young people in 2025.

This year's Report Card is the eighteenth edition in the series for the Children's Rights Alliance and covers key areas which, if implemented, will address major systemic issues for children and young people: Safeguarding, Welfare and Alternative Care; Early Years; Mental Health; Housing and Education. As with previous editions, our independent panel of experts have closely examined the promises made to children and young people and have graded the Government on its efforts to fulfil these commitments.

Safeguarding, Welfare and Alternative Care

This year's Report Card places a strong focus on the fundamentals needed to ensure the protection and welfare of children in Ireland. The current Programme for Government has some particularly strong commitments to support the development of our safeguarding, welfare and alternative care system. At the same time, 2025 was the year that child protection came into sharp focus, especially because of the tragic deaths of Kyran Durnin and Daniel Aruebose during the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that their disappearance went unnoticed for some time. The importance of systems to respond to child deaths will be enhanced under this *Programme for Government* if the Government is able to **establish a statutory National Child Death Review mechanism**. The Government gets a **'C-'** grade as the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality recently committed to putting the National Review Panel on a statutory footing which solely examines the deaths of children linked to Tulsa services. However, the Government will need to look at how the deaths of children linked with other services will be dealt with.

The Report Card also points to bigger questions on how Government fared in **ensuring the state agency is robust, resilient and responsive** enough to meet rapid increases in referrals and demand for support. Their efforts received a **'C'** in this regard. Tusla - the Child and Family Agency are often engaged in crisis-driven responses to stretch capacity to meet the demand while being short 400

frontline staff. This is because Tusla is often the last safety net for children. In response to significant population growth and Covid-19 restrictions, the system and structures have managed extraordinary demands, but recruitment issues have been years in the making and it will take time to build up the sufficient workforce.

When parts of the system are under enormous pressure, this can result in a huge burden on services, with some of the most vulnerable children who are most impacted. Investment in prevention and early intervention would help reduce the complexity of cases flowing through the system, particularly in regions with reduced personnel. The Government receives its highest grade in the entire Report Card, a **'B-'**, for creating a **high-level cross departmental committee** charged with collaborating on service planning and delivery. This is significant as child protection and welfare is everyone's business and not just Tusla's. Many of the children in Tusla's care are there because their families have struggled to access wider services. This needs to change.

Ensuring children's safety and wellbeing online is another area where progress is slow in 2025. Great strides have been made to establish and resource Coimisiún na Mean and it is positive to see the Online Safety Code come into full effect in the year **('C+')**. However, children and young people are still left waiting for an individual complaints mechanism that would provide an accessible route to justice when platforms fail to respond or uphold their rights. While there is little to see in terms of any real positive impacts for children and their engagement with the online world, we continue to see egregious harm happening to children online. In the area of **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)**, the Government receive a **'C+'** on action to deliver a new **EU Directive** that holds platforms accountable. Out of 34 Western European countries, Ireland went from being placed last, with the lowest CSAM rate, to eighth in just two years. While the Government has been vocal at EU level, the sheer scale of this issue requires more aggressive and decisive action to ensure children's safety.

Early Years

The Government is at a crossroads in the area of early childhood education and care. On the positive side, there is an ambitious target to reach with the Programme for Government committing to **reducing the cost of childcare** to just €200 a month for families. Following substantial investment in the sector in recent years, 2025 saw continued progress on addressing the financial burden

on families. Changes to the National Childcare Scheme income thresholds will mean all families below the income poverty line will receive the subsidy support available from 2026. This measure and adjustments to the fee caps of Core Funding Partner Services earn the Government a **'C'** grade as in real terms, it means the maximum amount of fees charged to parents is lower. However, there is a long way to go for childcare costs to be reduced to €200. Government will need to re-engineer the system to achieve this and in their first year. Small steps towards developing a public model of early years can be seen with **increased capital investment** under the *Revised National Development Plan* that will help to create additional capacity in areas where children's needs are simply not being met. Government receives a **'C'** grade but with too many young children not accessing or engaging in early years services, the pace of change needs to increase to ensure the benefits of quality early childhood education and care are enjoyed equally in all counties and communities.

Mental Health

Access to early intervention and timely supports is a running theme when we look at the commitments to improve youth mental health. In many ways, this Government is starting on the back foot when it comes to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health services are at an all-time high, at 4,433 children by December 2025. Importantly, when we look at the health system's ability to respond to urgent and ongoing mental health issues, referrals between 2016 and 2025 increased by 59 per cent, with just a 23 per cent in accepted referral. Demand is still outweighing services' resources, with the Government awarded a **'C'** grade for efforts to resource CAMHS **to reduce waiting lists.** In 2025, we saw a second scathing report into CAMHS in Kerry which found a risk for potential harm in the cases of over 200 children. High rates of prescriptions, an absence of compliance with recommended physical assessments and a lack of monitoring and oversight identified in the region are symptoms of wider, systemic issues across youth mental health services. It is essential that Government makes progress to **regulate CAMHS** and ensure standards are implemented that protect children and young people, especially at crisis moments but also throughout their engagement with mental health services. While this work has started, progress is far too slow, and results in a **'C'** grade. The pandemic was a wake-up call for the Government and a real test of the public services that support children and young people. Given the impact the pandemic had on youth mental health in particular, these commitments

need to be an absolute priority for the Government. But beyond that, the Government need to look at the system as a whole and what is needed to **develop a new care model for HSE Primary Care Psychology** that would expediate services for children with less complex needs. With limited action to move in this direction, the Government receive a **'D'** grade and gives itself a steeper hill to climb for the rest of its term.

Housing

This series of Report Card looks at two distinct aspects of housing and accommodation: Child and Family Homelessness and International Protection Accommodation. However, in the first year, Government action across both areas sees it lagging shamefully behind its own promises to children. One of the lowest grades this year is given to the Government on **international protection accommodation**, which receives a **'D'**. As of January 2026, there are 9,831 children in the international protection system, 7,529 of whom were living in emergency accommodation centres. While there is evidence of National Standards being upheld in some permanent IPAS centres and good practice in terms of child safeguarding, access to food and own-door accommodation, Government is failing to make this the reality for all children. HIQA play a critical inspectorate role to ensure children's rights are protected in the system but as emergency centres fall outside its remit, we do not have inspections to ensure compliance with any standards or escalate safeguarding issues, and Government is turning a blind eye to the deteriorating standards that are occurring. New research published by Doras reveals the detrimental impact of living in conditions far below what is considered appropriate. With concerning, retrograde changes expected in the incoming International Protection Bill, including the detention of children for immigration purposes, as a measure of last resort which infringes on their rights. The Government is going in the wrong direction if it wishes to fulfil this commitment.

The Government started its term in office with record levels of children and families living in emergency accommodation. When the *Programme for Government* was published in January 2025 there were a staggering 4,510 children homeless. By December 2025, that figure had increased to 5,188. We all want to see an end to the homelessness crisis, but it will continue to spiral without a crisis-response from Government. It is widely agreed that the scale of the problem requires a **cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention,** but Government failed to initiate this in its first year and is awarded

a **'D'** grade. In terms of its targets for **building social housing** and creating the outlet for families to move out of emergency homeless accommodation, Government fell short of its year-one target, at 9,089 new builds compared to the average annual goal of 12,000 and is awarded a **'D'** grade. With 19,088 families with children on the social housing list and a further 34,867 on Home Assistance Payment (HAP), we effectively have 54,000 families with children waiting for the Government to assist as a matter of urgency. The prioritisation to progress a dedicated **Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan** in 2025 shows Government recognition of the long-term impact this crisis is having on children and the specific needs of children experiencing homelessness that require further attention. Government receives a **'C'** grade in recognition of this action, but we need momentum to continue to see the Plan put into action, with budget investment behind its implementation.

Education

This series of Report Card tracks progress on big ticket reforms happening in education. However, the performance was a mixed bag during the Government's first year. The Government committed to continuing the programme of **'Reform of the Senior Cycle'** and we recognise that in 2025 the redevelopment really moved beyond design into early delivery, with a new coherent framework and new and revised subjects being introduced. A strong focus on wellbeing, skills development and pathway diversity and a commitment to carry out a Child Rights Impact Assessment in the redevelopment helps the Government earn a **'C+'** grade. While the progress made on Senior Cycle Reform moves forward, related promises to **reform the CAO** system have yet to happen. The stand-alone commitment recognises the importance and weight the CAO points system has in Irish education and reform of the system, which is in existence for 50 years, is long overdue. Students consistently raise the issue of the points system and the unbearable stress it places on them and their peers. However, we are about to enter another exam and assessment cycle where nothing has changed for these students, and for this lack of progress, the Government receives a **'D'** grade. Looking beyond mainstream education settings, the Government has also committed to implement the recommendations from the recent Report on **Review of Out-of-School Education Provision** to support school completion. The Review highlighted the positive impact alternative education settings can have, providing an individual education plan for students with the necessary

wraparound supports to help them reach their full potential. However, implementation of the Report's recommendations that would place value on and strengthen these education settings has not even begun as the Report has still not been published. The Government receives its second **'D'** grade in Education as a result. Publishing and implementing the Report must be a priority to ensure that children and young people whose needs are not being met by the mainstream system and are at risk of disengagement and early school leaving, are not disregarded.

Conclusion

The new *Programme for Government* contains a plethora of promises to children that, if fully implemented, would deliver better outcomes for their future. However, what is clear from this year's Report Card 2026 is that the Government has a long way to go in most of the areas that were analysed.

The challenges for Government are not easy ones. Years of under-resourcing and investments in anything but prevention and early intervention mechanisms have meant that a lot of the major systems in our society are locked in a constant battle to meet increased demand. It will take them years to fulfil some of these commitments, but if Government continue to fall short of its own estimations, children and young people will lose out. It is a question of whether they have political ambition and the drive and urgency that is needed to ensure children's needs are prioritised over the course of their term.

Tanya Ward
Chief Executive

Children's Rights Alliance Members

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 165 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies, and services.

- A.S.S.C. Accompaniment Support Services for Children
- Alcohol Action Ireland
- Amber Domestic Abuse CLG
- Amnesty International Ireland
- An Cosán
- Anew
- Anne Sullivan Foundation
- Aoibhneas
- Archways
- AslAm
- Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI)
- Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)
- ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd
- Atheist Ireland
- Ballaghaderreen Family Resource Centre
- Barnardos
- Barretstown
- Bedford Row Family Project
- BeLonG To Youth Services
- Bodywhys
- Bray and North Wicklow Area Partnership
- Breaking Through CLG
- CARI Foundation
- Catholic Guides of Ireland
- Childhood Development Initiative
- Children in Hospital Ireland
- Children's Books Ireland
- Children's Grief Centre
- ChildVision
- Citywise Education
- Clarecare
- Community Connect Support CLG
- COPE Galway
- Cork Life Centre
- Cork Migrant Centre
- Crann Centre
- Crosscare
- CyberSafeKids
- Cycle Against Suicide
- Dalkey School Project National School
- Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service
- Dental Health Foundation of Ireland
- Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, UCC
- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Doras
- Down Syndrome Ireland
- Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
- Dyslexia Association of Ireland
- Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland
- Early Childhood Ireland
- Early Learning Initiative (National College of Ireland)
- Early Years – the Organisation for Young Children
- Educate Together
- Empowerment Plus
- EPIC
- Extern Ireland
- FamiliBase
- FASD Ireland
- Féach
- Focus Ireland
- Foróige
- Gaeloideachas
- Galway Traveller Movement
- Good Shepherd Cork
- Helium Arts
- Humanist Association of Ireland
- Hygiene Hub
- Immigrant Council of Ireland
- Inclusion Ireland
- Inner City Organisations Network (ICON)
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors
- Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
- Irish Association of Social Workers
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
- Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
- Irish Foster Care Association
- Irish Girl Guides
- Irish Heart Foundation
- Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
- Irish Penal Reform Trust
- Irish Primary Principals' Network
- Irish Refugee Council
- Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU)
- Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
- Irish Traveller Movement
- Irish Youth Foundation

- iScoil
- Jigsaw
- Katharine Howard Foundation
- Kerry Community Youth Service (KCYS)
- Kids' Own Publishing Partnership
- Laois Domestic Abuse Services
- Le Chéile Mentoring
- Leap Ireland
- Let's Grow Together
- LGBT Ireland
- Mecpaths
- Mental Health Reform
- Mercy Law Resource Centre
- Mothers' Union
- Move Ireland
- Museum of Childhood Ireland
- Music Generation
- My Mind
- My Project Minding You
- National Childhood Network
- National Forum of Family Resource Centres
- National Parents Council Primary
- National Youth Council of Ireland
- Neurodiversity Ireland
- New Directions
- Northside Family Resource Centre
- Novas
- One Family
- One in Four
- Our Lady of Lourdes Community Services Group
- Parents Plus
- Pavee Point
- Peter McVerry Trust
- Prevention and Early Intervention Network
- Psychological Society of Ireland
- Rainbow Club Cork
- Rainbows Ireland
- Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
- Realt Beag/Ballyfermot Star
- Respond
- SAFE Ireland
- Saoirse Domestic Violence Services
- SAOL Project
- School of Education UCD
- Scouting Ireland
- Sexual Violence Centre Cork
- Simon Communities of Ireland
- SIPTU
- Social Care Ireland
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Southend Family Resource Centre
- SPHE Network
- Sphere 17 Regional Youth Service
- SpunOut.ie
- St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
- St. Patrick's Mental Health Services
- StartBright Early Learning Centres
- TASC
- Teachers' Union of Ireland
- Teach Tearmainn
- Terenure College Rugby Football Club
- The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
- The B!G Idea
- The Irish Red Cross
- The Jack and Jill Children's Foundation
- The Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy (SERP) Institute
- The Shona Project
- The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
- The Wheel
- Transgender Equality Network Ireland
- Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
- Treoir
- UNICEF Ireland
- Vision Ireland
- Willow Domestic Abuse Services
- Women's Aid
- YMCA Dublin
- Young Ballymun
- Young Social Innovators
- Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
- Youth Work Ireland

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- Department of Education and Youth
- Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
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- Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
- Department of Health
- Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration
- Coimisiún na Meán
- Health Service Executive
- Tusla, the Child and Family Agency

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- CyberSafeKids
- Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
- Doras
- Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland
- Focus Ireland
- Irish Heart Foundation
- Irish Traveller Movement
- iScoil
- Kinship Care

- Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services
- National Youth Council Ireland
- Neurodiversity Ireland
- Northside Family Resource Centre
- Pavee Point
- St Patrick's Mental Health Services
- Safe Ireland

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Particular thanks are also due to the Children's Rights Alliance Board for their support and oversight of the process.

The Alliance would also like to acknowledge the work of Children Now, based in California, whose annual report card provided the initial inspiration for this series.

We extend our thanks to the members of the indpendent Assessment Panel who, by assessing the grades in each section and adding their considerable experience, validate this report. The grades allocated represent the collective views of the panel rather than the views of any individual.

The Assessment Panel comprised:

- Dr Aisling Parkes, Senior Lecturer, School of Law, University College Cork
- Tom Costello, Social Impact Advisor
- Maurice Devlin, Emeritus Professor, Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University
- Áine Hyland, Emeritus Professor of Education and former Vice-President of University College Cork
- David Joyce, Equality Officer, Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- Aoife Quinn, Policy and Government Affairs Manager, Chambers Ireland
- Mark Smyth, Chartered Clinical Psychologist
- Dr Joseph Mooney, Assistant Professor, School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, UCD

Finally, massive thanks go to the Report Card team for their incredibly hard work and commitment to produce a superb publication this year.

Research Methodology

Report Card 2026 is the first analysis of the progress for children under the current Programme for Government - Securing Ireland's Future.

The Children's Rights Alliance has selected 25 commitments across five areas from Securing Ireland's Future to track over the course of this Government's term in office. Commitments were shortlisted based on several core criteria:

- The commitment directly impacts children, defined as those under the age of 18.
- The commitment wording is clear and measurable.
- The commitment relates to one of the Alliance's strategic goals.
- If achieved, the commitment has significant potential to implement children's rights and improve the quality of life for children growing up in Ireland.

The Report takes a thematic approach, with commitments grouped together based on the five overarching areas.

We sought to ensure that the commitments covered children and young people's rights and needs, related to the whole of a child's development from infancy through to adolescence; and finally, spanned multiple different policy areas to reflect the broad range of issues that can affect children's lives.

The development of this new series of Report Card commenced with a consultation with members of the Children's Rights Alliance to identify what the most strategic commitments for children and young people are in the *Programme for Government Securing Ireland's Future*. We asked members to consider how progress could be measured and what additional insights they had for the Alliance to consider. Each section of Report Card contains a detailed children's rights, policy and legislative analysis of relevant documents, research and academic literature. This is then supplemented with insights and evidence gained from further engagement with our members and subject specialists. Engaged with relevant Government Departments and statutory agencies aims to capture developments which occurred in 2025, as per our

research timeframe. This enabled us to draw on the most up-to-date facts and figures when drafting each commitment section.

As in other years, members, Government officials and sector representatives had an opportunity to feed into our analysis, and once finalised, this went to an independent panel of experts for grading on the progress made in 2025. Details of panel membership are contained in the 'Acknowledgements'.

Grading

The following provides an outline of what each letter grade means in terms of Government progress on the tracked commitments.

Grade	Explanation
A	Excellent, making a real difference to children's lives
B	Good effort, positive results for children
C	Satisfactory attempt, but children still left wanting
D	Barely acceptable performance, little or no positive impact on children
E	Unacceptable, taking steps in the wrong direction, no positive impact on children
F	Fail, taking steps that undermine children's wellbeing
N/A	Not applicable, due to vague nature of Government commitment

Key Facts & Statistics (December 2025)

70%

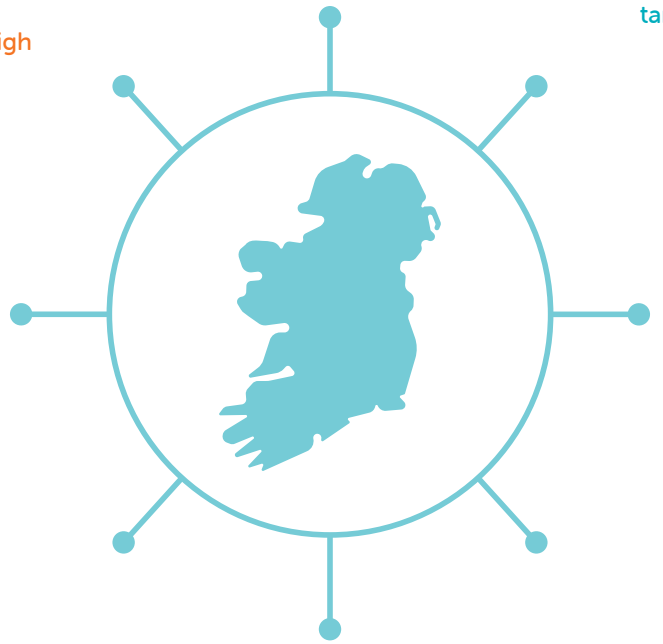
of students reported experiencing high/very high exam-related stress

2020 2,327
2021 2,451
2022 3,442
2023 3,962
2024 4,510
2025 5,188

Children homeless in Ireland

75.7%

target for new build social housing met in 2025 (9,089 vs 12,000)



245,000

children benefitted from National Childcare Scheme (2025)

9,789

children living in IPAS Accommodation (December 2025)

1 in 8

children are a victim of image-based child sexual violence globally

185

children in special emergency arrangements (SEAs) (November 2025)

4,433

children on CAMHS waiting list (December 2025)

1

Early Years

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare Scheme and explore options to cap costs for larger families.	Steady	C
Provide capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities, to create additional capacity in areas where unmet need exists. Plan the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme, including Irish medium naíonraí.	Steady	C

The *Programme for Government* commits to publishing 'a detailed action plan' on how to build an affordable, high quality, accessible early childhood education and care system with State-led facilities adding capacity. The publication of *Shaping the Future* in its first year in office is a welcome development in this regard.

The Government is awarded a 'C' grade for its efforts to address the cost of childcare by progressively reducing the cost to €200 over the lifetime of the Government. In 2025 there have been positive initiatives to tackle the costs paid by parents for childcare such as through the widening application of fee caps and changes to be introduced to the National Childcare Scheme income thresholds in 2026. This means that more families will be able to access the maximum subsidy available under the scheme. It is still unclear how the Government intend to introduce a flat maximum fee payable by all parents. There is still some way to go to achieve a maximum monthly fee for all families.

The Government is awarded a 'C' grade for its commitment to provide capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities, to create additional capacity in areas where unmet need exists. Increased allocation of funding through the *Revised National Development Plan* and the initiation of a scheme to develop State-led facilities have laid an important foundation for the future success of this commitment. The development of the Forward Planning Model will ensure that future capital projects will be informed by demand and supply issues in local areas. However, while important foundations have been laid, there have been no additional places provided under this new funding scheme. The intention to provide up to 800 places in 2026 is welcome and one that will provide an important benchmark for measurement in future Report Cards.

Introduction

The perinatal, infancy, and early childhood periods are formative times for child development and wellbeing. The World Health Organisation (WHO) highlight that over a period of 30 years, research across multiple disciplines has confirmed that critical foundations for health, wellbeing and productivity are laid down in a child's first three years.[1] No other stage of life depends more on the external environment for growth and development.[2]

0-3 years

Critical foundations for health, well-being and productivity are laid down in a child's first three years

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child calls for an understanding that early childhood is not merely preparation for adulthood and requires that children - including the very youngest - be respected in their own right.[3]

Of central importance to a child's development is the provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[4], which 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'.[5] While Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises parents and carers as primary caregivers,[6] Article 18 imposes a duty on States to provide assistance, including quality childcare services.[7] Recognising that the traditional divisions between 'care' and 'education' services have not always been in children's best interests, the Committee recommends a coordinated, holistic, and multi-sectoral approach to early childhood.[8]

1 WHO *Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential* (WHO 2018) 5.

2 J. Clinton, A. Feller, R. Williams, 'The importance of infant mental health' (2016) *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 21(5), 239–241.

3 UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 16.

4 OECD *Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care, TALIS*, (OECD 2025) p. 3.

5 UNESCO 'Early Childhood Education and Care' https://bit.ly/44XjkFE accessed 7 January 2026.

6 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 5.

7 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 18.

8 UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 30.

In the implementation of early childhood programmes and the delivery of services, the Committee 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'.[9] Historically, Ireland's comparative expenditure on ECEC has lagged behind other countries.[10] 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 GDP[11] as a comparator.[12] 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.[13] This represents a 140 per cent increase in funding over a seven-year period. This increased public funding has resulted in enhanced public management of the sector. [14] At the same time, there remains a need 'for significant additional investment in order to close the gap with other EU countries'.[15]

In 2023, following its examination of Ireland's record on children's rights, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observations called for increased access to affordable childcare for parents engaged in the labour market, and especially those experiencing disadvantage. The Committee also recommended that the Irish Government increase the level of funding allocated to childcare and move towards a publicly funded model of childcare.[16]

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9 UNCRC, General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 38.

10 OECD, 'OECD Family database PF3.1: Public spending on childcare and early education' < https://bit.ly/4jGkyLp> accessed 8 January 2026 1.

11 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 then Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2 March 2026.

12 OECD, 'OECD Family database PF3.1: Public spending on childcare and early education' < https://bit.ly/4jGkyLp> accessed 8 January 2026.

13 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 16.

14 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 16.

15 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan: Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 16.

16 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 26.

The *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* commits the Government to publishing 'a detailed action plan' on how to build an affordable, high quality, accessible early childhood education and care system with State-led facilities adding capacity.[17] The *Programme for Government* also commits to:

- Progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare Scheme and explore options to cap costs for larger families.
- Provide capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities to create additional capacity in areas where unmet needs exist.
- Plan the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme, including Irish medium naíonraí.

17 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 62.

Commitment

Progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare Scheme and explore options to cap costs for larger families.

Section Grade

A B **C** D E F

Introduction

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) provides parents with support in relation to childcare costs.[18] 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. [19]

- 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.[20] This is means-tested.

The NCS also has a Sponsor Referral where special arrangements are made for vulnerable children and families. A Sponsor Body, (such as Tusla), can refer a child for a sponsored childcare place. A Sponsor Referral addresses instances where childcare is needed on child welfare, child protection, family support or other specified grounds. The decision is based on the particular need of the child in line with their defined criteria.[21]

Overall uptake of the NCS continues to grow significantly, with 5,149 children benefitting in 2019 and an expected reach of 277,000 children in 2026.[22]

18 12 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 5 January 2025.

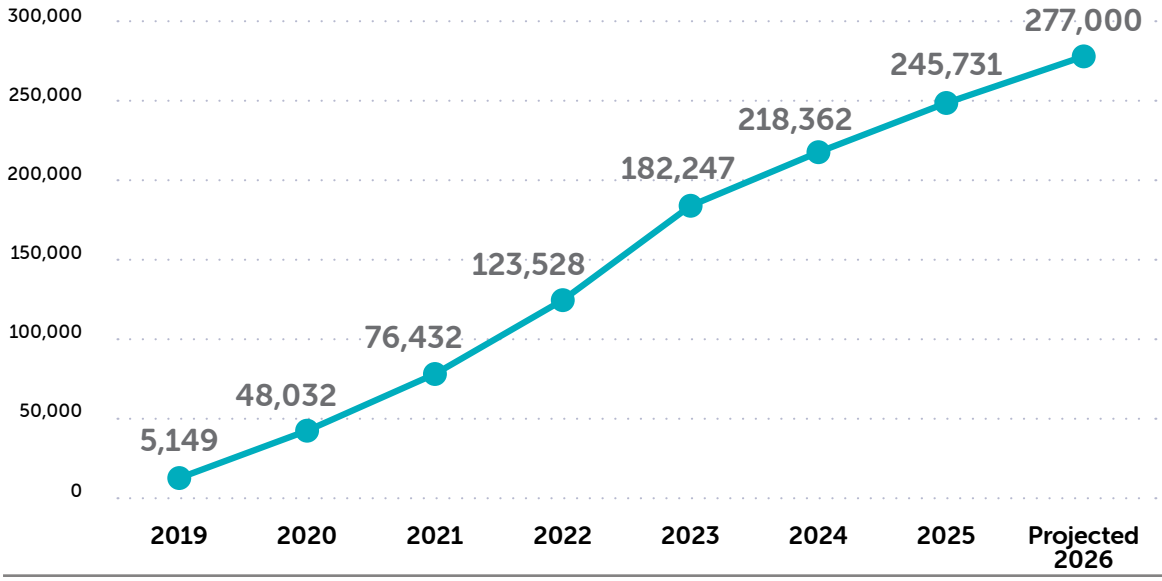
19 Government of Ireland, 'National Childcare Scheme: Types of Subsidy' <https://bit.ly/3rM6E0U> accessed 7 February 2025.

20 Government of Ireland, 'National Childcare Scheme: Types of Subsidy' <https://bit.ly/3rM6E0U> accessed 7 February 2025.

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

22 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2 March 2026.

Number of unique children benefitting from NCS



Source: Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Seventeen per cent increase in number of children availing of Government-funded childcare subsidies' (Press Release 30 May 2025) and Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2 March 2026.

Since September 2024, the NCS universal subsidy has been set at €2.14 per hour per child.[23] The income assessed subsidy is up €5.10 per hour depending on income and personal circumstances. An increased allocation for the NCS in Budget 2026 means overall investment will reach €593.9 million in 2026, a 12 per cent increase on 2025.[24]

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 in 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.[25] In the year the National Childcare Scheme was launched, this rate was €26,179 for a household containing two adults and one child.[26]

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

24 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 20 January 2026.

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

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

However, since then, increases in the national minimum wage rate means that those on the lowest incomes effectively have received less support for childcare costs. [27] This has been noted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) as having a negative impact on households with lower incomes, those of which may experience wage inflation and receive less support for childcare costs.[28]

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 where they live or the type of childcare provider (whether a community or private provider).

The overall disparity in childcare fees is evident in childcare data collected by Pobal.[29] The national weekly median fee for full-day care was €200.00, but this varied from a high of €265.93 in Dublin Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown to a low, in Leitrim, of €160.00.[30] The national weekly median fee for part-time care was €114.50, with a variance at the county level from a high of €135.00 in Dublin-Fingal, to a low of €88.50 in Leitrim.[31] A similar pattern was observed for sessional childcare which had a national median fee of €75.00. The highest weekly median fee was in Dublin Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown at €81.45 and the lowest was in Monaghan at €64.50.[32]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Type of Care	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

While there is a wide variety of fees charged across the country, the childcare fees set by providers receiving Core Funding has remained at either the rate charged since 30 September 2021, or at the rate when they first signed up to the funding programme. To balance the needs of providers and parents, the then Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth undertook a fee increase assessment process in the latter half of 2024. Services charging fees lower than the average in their county were allowed to apply and services were obliged to demonstrate the need for a fee increase.[33]

Between 1 August and 29 November 2024, 1,145 services had applied for a sanctioned fee increase.[34] Of this number, 898 services received approval to increase at least one of their fee options (for example, sessional fee and/or full-time fee etc).[35] The remaining 237 were not permitted to increase any of their fees.[36] The process of determining eligibility to increase fees was informed by projected enrolments for the coming year, along with an analysis of expenditure data for the previous year.

The fee increase was capped at a maximum rate, depending on the type of care being provided – for example, a maximum of €33.40 per week for 45

33 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

34 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

35 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

36 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

hours of care (full-time) or a maximum of €14.80 for 20 hours of care.[37] This maximum increase is equivalent to €0.74c per hour, the rate of increase for the NCS Universal subsidy.[38] 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. [39] However, this means that for some parents 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.[40] A family accessing childcare from a provider who had newly joined Core Funding in 2024 could be charged a maximum fee of €295 per week. Offsetting the NCS Universal subsidy of €96.30 against this, the fee payable would be a maximum of €198.70.[41] The means-tested subsidy could reduce the fee payable, depending on the family's income.

While families accessing early childhood education and care through centre-based services have benefited from subsidies through the NCS and fee management measures introduced as part of Core Funding, few if any parents using childminders have had any reduction in fees. The *National Action Plan for Childminding* sets out how regulation and subsidies will be extended to non-relative childminders.[42] The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 was enacted in July 2024.[43] New regulations for childminders and relevant parts of the Act came into effect on 30 September 2024.[44]

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37 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

38 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

39 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Data Written Answers 8 September 2025 [45122/25].

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

41 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Core Funding Fee Management Conditions' https://bit.ly/3LxI0Oc accessed 13 January 2026.

42 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *National Action Plan for Childminding (2021-2028)* (DECDIY 2021).

43 Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024.

44 S.I. No. 494/2024 - Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Childminding Services) Regulations 2024.

Under the regulations parents accessing childcare provided by registered childminders will be able to access subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme.

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

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. This will reduce costs for families paying the highest childcare fees and relates to 10 per cent of providers.[45]

In December 2025, the Minister realised the intention set out in *Securing Ireland's Future* to publish an action plan on how to build an early childhood education and care system that is affordable, high-quality and accessible. *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan – Phase 1 Report* was published on 17 December.[46] The report first 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*.[47]

Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan

Phase 1 will lower fee caps for Core Funding Partner Services, benefiting 47,000 families.

Under the Phase 1 actions, the Government will address affordability by progressively reducing the maximum amount paid by parents in childcare fees.[48] This will be achieved by

45 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.

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

47 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 7.

48 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 8.

lowering the fee caps for Core Funding Partner Services.[49] Fees for low-income families will be reduced by adjusting the lower and upper-income thresholds.[50] An increase in the lower income threshold to €34,000 means all families with incomes below the income poverty line will receive the maximum subsidy available.[51] An increase to the multiple child deduction will benefit families with two children and three or more children.[52] These changes are envisaged to benefit 47,000 children from low income families when they come into effect in September 2026.[53]

Phase 1: Affordability Action

Band	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

The extension of the NCS to parents accessing childcare through childminders is welcome. Under the 2024 regulations, for the next three-year transition period, childminders are being encouraged and supported to register, but registration will not yet be mandatory.[54] Up to the end of December 2025, 158 childminders were registered with Tusla - the Child and Family Agency.[55]

49 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 8.

50 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 8.

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

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

53 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2 March 2026.

54 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2 March 2026.

55 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Childcare Qualifications Written Answers 24 February 2026 [14211/12/26].

What do children and young people need next?

Under the last *Programme for Government,* significant progress was made on increasing public investment and management and oversight of the early childhood education and care sector. This has included substantially reducing the cost of childcare fees. According to data from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, a two-parent family on 67 per cent of the average wage paid, on average, 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.[56] While this is welcome progress on affordability, fees still remain substantially higher that the EU median of 5 per cent for both families.[57] The Government will need to maintain momentum on fee management and on investment in childcare subsidies in the coming years in order to move closer to the EU median.

From September 2026, all families below the income poverty threshold will be eligible for the maximum subsidy under the NCS. The adjustment of the thresholds for the income-assessed subsidy in Budget 2026 is a particularly welcome development. This change explicitly intends to ensure that all families with an income below the relative income poverty line receive the maximum subsidy. The adjustment of the income thresholds should be considered on a yearly basis as part of the Budgetary process in order to ensure that the rates keep pace with both the national minimum wage and the latest poverty data.

The ability of parents using childminders to access subsidies as part of the regulation of this form of childcare is welcome. However, the registration of childminders to date has been low compared to the usage of this type of childcare according to Census 2022.[58] Therefore, many parents using a childminder have yet to benefit from a reduction in costs due to now being eligible for the NCS.

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56 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 20 January 2026.

57 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 20 January 2026.

58 According to Census 2022, 15 per cent of children under the age of 15 years in childcare were being cared for by a childminder in their own home. This equates to almost 53,000 children Central Statistics Office (CSO) *Census 2022: Profile 3 - Households, Families and Childcare* (CSO 2023).

Recommendations

- Develop a clear roadmap outlining how the Government will move towards a fixed maximum childcare fee rate over the lifetime of the Government.

Commitment

Provide capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities, to create additional capacity in areas where unmet need exists.

Plan the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme, including Irish medium naíonraí.

Section Grade

A B **C** D E F

Introduction

There is limited data on how the capacity of existing childcare places can respond to demand across the country. The most comprehensive data available on childcare is published by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and this brings together information from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey (AEYSP) which is completed by nearly all service providers.[59]

The Pobal childcare data aggregates information about the capacity of the early years sector to respond to demand across the country. Pobal estimates[60] that there is a total of 4,825 services across the country with 247,011 enrolments. Alongside this, it is estimated that 47 per cent of services have a waiting list for places and 41 per cent have vacancies.[61] Counties where the proportion of services with waiting lists was higher than 47 per cent, i.e. higher than the national average, included all areas of Dublin and Monaghan, Leitrim, Kilkenny, Sligo, Kildare, Carlow, Wexford and Louth.[62] This perhaps indicates that there is increased demand in more rural counties. When examined by age group, the highest estimated waiting list figures are for children aged 1 to 2 and 2 to 3 with a combined total number of 44,734 on waiting lists with early years services across the country. [63] It is important to note that the waiting list data published by Pobal does not account for children being on more than one waiting list meaning the total is likely to be less than this figure.

In a survey conducted at the end of 2024 amongst Children's Rights Alliance members and early years providers in both the community and private sectors, the issue of supply being unable to meet demand also emerged. While the survey was relatively small in scale, with 95 responses, it provides an insight into some of the issues that providers face across the country. Almost four-fifths of services (77 per cent) responding to the survey indicated that they have a waiting list for their service. There were 19 services (20 per cent) that

59 For 2024/2025 childcare data is reported by 85 per cent of services. See Pobal 'Childcare Data: Capacity' https://bit.ly/3NchQBG accessed 11 March 2026.

60 Pobal estimates are based on extrapolated figures which use the reported figures and individual county response rates. See further detail Pobal 'Childcare Data: Capacity' https://bit.ly/3NchQBG accessed 11 March 2026.

61 Pobal 'Childcare Data: Capacity' https://bit.ly/3NchQBG accessed 11 March 2026.

62 Pobal 'Childcare Data: Capacity' https://bit.ly/3NchQBG accessed 11 March 2026.

63 Pobal 'Childcare Data: Capacity' https://bit.ly/3NchQBG accessed 11 March 2026.

indicated they do not have a waiting list. There were at least 3,061 children on waiting lists for a space at the services who took part in the survey. The number per individual service ranged from two to 450. Amongst the 74 providers with a waiting list, the age groups with most demand for places are babies (21 services) and pre-school children (22 services) followed by toddler age group (15 services) and school-aged children (11 services). Four services stated that places for all age groups or a mix of age groups were in equal demand.

Despite the limitations of the data, the trends identified in both the Pobal data and the survey of childcare providers undertaken by the Alliance in 2024 align with information from the Department. The trends in supply not meeting demand for younger children and in rural areas was acknowledged by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality in a statement to the Joint Committee on Children and Equality in February 2026 where she stated: 'It appears that demand for early learning and childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country, particularly for younger children'.[64] The Minister further emphasised to members of the Committee that the capital funding programme would target areas where supply was an issue and where the State could respond to a need for childcare.[65] The Programme for Government responds to this need to increase capacity in the sector by providing capital investment to build or purchase state-owned childcare facilities along with identifying the need to develop these facilities in tandem with the school building programme.

The commitment to pursue a programme of capital funding in state-led childcare represents an important departure from the significant concentration on increasing current expenditure investment in the last five years (predominantly through the initiation of core funding). However, the Irish Government does have a track record in leveraging capital investment in the centre-based provision of childcare services, linked to the aim of increasing the number of childcare places, in the first decade of this century. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) secured €419 million in funding, through co-funding by the State and the EU, resulting in the creation of an extra

64 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality 'Ministerial Remarks State provided childcare places and early childcare matters' (Joint Committee on Children and Equality 26 February 2026).

65 Joint Committee on Children and Equality 'State Provided Childcare Places and Early Childcare Matters: Discussion' (Houses of the Oireachtas 26 February 2026).

40,000 childcare places. [66] A successor programme, the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (2006-2010), provided €358 million in capital funding with the anticipation that this would create an additional 25,000 childcare places.[67]

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028 (*First 5*) acknowledges the significant capital investment made available under EOCP and NCIP and notes that in recent years the 'private market has responded to increasing demand'. However, analysis shows that availability is a key concern for specific groups of children including under threes.[68] A few months prior to the publication of *First* 5, the Government launched *Project 2040,* a long-term overarching strategy which aimed to make Ireland 'a better country for all and to build a more resilient and sustainable future'.[69] Two key documents comprised *Project Ireland 2040*; the *National Planning Framework* (NPF)[70], which outlines the vision and strategy for national development up to 2040 and the *National Development Plan 2021 to 2030 (NDP)*[71] which details the enabling investment to implement the NPF.

First 5 notes that access to Early Learning and Care and School-Aged Childcare is identified as 'a national policy objective in Project Ireland 2040', leading to 'greater capital investment over the next decade' with €250 million committed to developing childcare infrastructure.[72] *Project 2040* acknowledged childcare as 'being critical both as an educational support for children' and for labour market participation and jobs creation in the NPF. [73] Aligning population and employment growth with educational investment is emphasised in the NPF with investment needed in a childcare planning function in order to monitor, analyse and forecast investment needs.[74]

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66 O'Donoghue, B., Hayes, N. 'The Impact of Policy Tool Selection on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland'. EECERA 2009, Nineteenth European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education. 29 - 29 August 2009. Palais des Congrès of the European Union, Strasbourg, France

67 Barry Andrews TD, Minister of State for Children, Child Care Services Written Answers, 30 November 2010 [44951/10].

68 Government of Ireland, First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland 2018) 90.

69 Government of Ireland, 'Project Ireland 2040' https://bit.ly/4qre6uk accessed 14 January 2026.

70 Government of Ireland, 'National Planning Framework' (Government of Ireland 2018).

71 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021).

72 Government of Ireland, First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland 2018) 90.

73 Government of Ireland, 'National Planning Framework' (Government of Ireland 2018) 89.

74 Government of Ireland, 'National Planning Framework' (Government of Ireland 2018) 90.

The NDP, under *Project 2040*, identifies three pillars of investment in the area of early childhood education and care – Modernisation, New Capacity and First 5 Initiatives.[75] Under the Modernisation pillar, infrastructure developed through funding from the EOCP and NCIP will be upgraded through follow-up funding.[76] Secondly, the NDP acknowledges that childcare supply in Ireland is reaching capacity and that for some groups of children access to places is already challenging. Therefore, 'public investment in capital infrastructure in the NDP for early learning and childcare, should help to address capacity challenges, including the undersupply for certain types of provision and in specific areas of the country'.[77] The third pillar identifies the need to support initiatives under *First 5* that need capital support – such as piloting meals and outdoor provision.[78]

The National Development Plan identifies three pillars of investment in the area of early childhood education and care

Separate to the allocation of NDP funding under *Project 2040,* the Government received a significant injection of capital funding through the resolution of the Apple State aid case.[79] In September 2024, this case came to a conclusion with the Court of Justice of the European Union stating that following the decision of the European Commission in 2016, Ireland should recover €13 billion in back taxes from Apple, and that the decision should stand.[80] To comply with the 2016 decision of the Commission, Apple placed €13 billion in back taxes, plus €1.4 billion in interest into an escrow fund.[81] At the end of 2023 the value of the fund was €13.774 billion with an increase of €400 million during the year (the first year the funds had increased).[82]

75 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021) 147.

76 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021) 147.

77 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021) 147.

78 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021) 147.

79 The Apple state aid case relates to an investigation initiated by the European Commission in 2013. This investigation centred around Apple's operations in Ireland and whether they benefited from State aid in the form of preferential tax treatment.

80 Judgement of 10. 9. 2024 – CASE C-465/20 P Commission v Ireland and Others.

81 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2023*, (C&AG), 360.

82 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2023*, (C&AG), 360.

The value of the funds equates to one year of expenditure under the NDP.[83] Yet while the broader NDP discussions focused on discussing capital spending across Government there was little focus on how the funding arising from the Apple State aid case could be invested in services for children and young people.

In deciding how this money should be spent, the Minister for Finance announced as part of Budget 2025, that the use of the funds should be underpinned by the guiding principle that they 'benefit all citizens by supporting our future economic development'.[84] A framework document published on Budget day sets out the high level approach to spending the funding in the escrow funds with a focus on the areas of housing, energy, water and transport infrastructure.[85] Any focus on children and young people is absent from the framework, yet there are several areas, including capital investment in childcare, where funding is needed. For instance, through the use of the escrow funds, the Government could prioritise investment in early years settings by publicly funding the building of early years facilities that could be operated by community and not-for-profit providers working with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised children and young people in the country.

The National Development Plan 2021-2030 sets out the gross capital allocated expenditure across each government department.[86] In 2025, less than one per cent of capital expenditure was projected to be spent on the areas under the remit of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (€100 million).[87] Given that the funds from the Escrow account represent approximately one year of NDP funding, apportioning out these funds across all government departments effectively would result in an additional allocation of €100 million to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for apportionment across all of its functions.

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83 Department of Finance, Budget 2025 Use of the Escrow Receipts A Framework (Department of Finance 2024).

84 Minister for Finance, Dail Debates, 'Statement by Minister Chambers on Budget 2025', Speech, 1 October 2024 (Houses of the Oireachtas).

85 Department of Finance, Budget 2025 Use of the Escrow Receipts A Framework (Department of Finance 2024).

86 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021) 44.

87 Government of Ireland 'National Development Plan 2021-2030' (Government of Ireland 2021) 44.

To ensure supply matches demand, a Supply Management Unit was established in the Department of Children in January 2024, and it gradually increased its staffing throughout that year. The remit of this unit incuded the delivery of capital funding through the Building Blocks scheme along with exploring public provision recommended under *Partnership for Public Good* and developing a forward planning model.[88] The development of the latter includes the expertise of statisticians from the Central Statistics Office and an early learning and childcare expert.[89] This model will identify the different types of childcare supply across the country and whether they meet the need in their local areas. [90]

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In the area of access, *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan* outlined that two capital funding schemes would be launched in 2026. The first of these would co-fund existing providers to expand provision while the second would see capital investment in state-led services. [91] The second focuses on co-funding existing providers to expand provision.[92]

Further detail on the allocation of capital investment for childcare was outlined in the *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Children, Disability and Equality* which was published in November 2025.[93] The plan sets out a commitment to invest €197 million over the next five years (2026 to 2030) in capital childcare infrastructure including non-supply capital investment. [94]

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

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

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

91 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 9.

92 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 9.

93 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Children, Disability and Equality* (DCDE 2025).

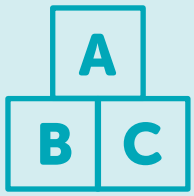
94 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Children, Disability and Equality* (DCDE 2025).

Annual Capital Allocation

Total Allocation 2026 to 2030	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
€197m	€45m	€38m	€38m	€38m	€38m

Specific reference is made to the commitments under the *Programme for Government* on acquiring State-led childcare infrastructure noting that this 'commits, for the first time, to the State owning early learning and childcare buildings'.[95] To oversee this outcome, governance structures at programmatic and project level have been put in place. The Forward Planning and Delivery Unit (formerly the Supply Management Unit set up in 2024) will be an integral aspect of the rollout of this programme of capital funding. An Early Learning and Childcare Capital Steering Group has been established, and the Forward Planning and Delivery Unit will propose projects to this group.[96] Membership of the Steering Group includes representatives from the Office of Public Works and the Department of Education's Planning and Building Unit who bring technical expertise related to capital projects.[97] The group is chaired by the Assistant Secretary for the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Division.[98] The inclusion of the Department of Education and Youth provides important expertise as well as an explicit link to the commitment to develop state-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme.

In January 2026, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality announced that €135 million in funding would be made available as part of the *State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital*



€135 million

funding for State-led Early Learning and Childcare settings

95 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Children, Disability and Equality* (DCDE 2025) 13.

96 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2 March 2026.

97 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Early Childhood Education and Care Written Answers 3 March 2026 [17161/26].

98 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Early Childhood Education and Care Written Answers 3 March 2026 [17161/26].

Programme 2026.[99] This directly relates to the commitment contained in *the Programme for Government*. The overall objective of this programme is to 'deliver additional supply of high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare to address deficits in capacity'.[100] This includes responding to specific needs, including care for younger children (aged under three) and in disadvantaged or rural areas.[101]

Childcare places provided under the *State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme* will be inclusive and of high-quality, as well as cost-effective and delivered on time.[102] The programme contains an objective in support of improved public management of the sector in direct response to the recommendation of *Partnership for Public Good* report. This programme will further enhance public management of the sector and 'will allow the State to influence and lead the sector in ways that are hard to achieve through greater public management alone'.[103] Under Objective 4 of the programme is consideration of accessibility for parents and links to other services and amenities, this also includes reference to 'investing in buildings that share sites with other amenities such as schools and community centres'.[104]

In 2026, approximately 800 new childcare places will be created through investment in up to eight buildings. A number of projects are currently being considered by the Department with engagement at an advanced stage with Dún-Laoghaire Rathdown County Council.[105]

800

In 2026, 800 new childcare places will be created through investment in up to eight buildings.

99 Department of Children, Disability and Equality 'Minister Foley announces new €135 million programme of State-led early learning and childcare services' Press Release, 21 January 2026.

100 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme 2026' (Gov.ie 2026) 4.

101 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme 2026' (Gov.ie 2026) 4.

102 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme 2026' (Gov.ie 2026) 5.

103 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme 2026' (Gov.ie 2026) 5.

104 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme 2026' (Gov.ie 2026) 4 & 5.

105 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'Minister Foley announces new €135 million programme of State-led early learning and childcare services' Press Release, 21 January 2026.

The work of the *Forward Planning and Delivery Unit* in the Department will play a critical role in identifying where there is a demonstrated need for childcare places. Currently the only publicly available data on childcare demand and supply is that captured through the Pobal childcare data which provides insights on both waiting lists and vacancies.[106] However, the data does not provide an analysis of how vacancies can meet the demand on the waiting lists.[107] The development of the Forward Planning Model is a key resource in this regard. This model 'allows officials to assess where there are mismatches between demand and supply'.[108] The model uses data including child population data and Geographical Information System (GIS) tools.[109] The model maps publicly subsidised provision by service type and age group of children against the actual number of children in a local area. [110] This means that a granular analysis of supply and demand can be undertaken. [111]

What do children and young people need next?

The development of the Forward Planning Model to inform the future initiation of publicly-funded service provision is welcome. However, given the prevalence of the private sector in the provision of childcare in Ireland, the use of the data is commercially sensitive and should be maintained to inform public investment in the sector. There is a need to utilise this data in setting out ambitious targets for the delivery of new childcare places through the State-led capital investment programme.

The publication of the new childcare action plan, *Shaping the Future*, provides an opportunity for in-depth engagement with all stakeholders on what needs to happen next in the sector. As part of Phase 2 of the *Action Plan,* the public consultation process will consider a number of a questions related to access.

106 Pobal *Early Learning and Childcare Data 2024-2025* (Pobal 2025) https://bit.ly/3NRPdJT accessed 13 January 2026.

107 Pobal *Early Learning and Childcare Data 2024-2025* (Pobal 2025) https://bit.ly/3NRPdJT accessed 13 January 2026.

108 Department of Children, Equality and Disability 'State-led Early Learning and Childcare Capital Programme 2026' (Gov.ie 2026) 6.

109 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Departmental Expenditure Written Answers, 22 January 2026 [5332/26].

110 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Childcare Services Written Answers, 28 January 2026 [6673/6677/6678/26].

111 Norma Foley TD, Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Childcare Services Written Answers, 28 January 2026 [6673/6677/6678/26].

This includes:

- What is the appropriate balance between private, community, State-led and childminding provision?
- What should the role of schools be in maintaining and increasing the supply of ELC and SAC services?[112]

These are significant questions in terms of the future development of the sector in Ireland. The first considers what the future role of the state may be in funding and managing early learning and care and linked to this, how it can respond to supply issues that are not currently being addressed by private and community providers.

The second question could unlock what the full potential is of incorporating the development of state-led provision alongside schools. Based on the current school building programme, the incorporation of childcare facilities must be a much longer-term project given that there are currently, 284 projects at various stages of development, many of which may not have considered incorporating childcare facilities into their plans. However, there may be further insights from international examples which could illustrate how this could be developed outside of existing structures. For instance, the UK government recently launched Phase 2 of a School-based Nursery Capital Grant scheme. Under Phase 1 of this scheme 300 new school-based nurseries were developed which will provide up to 6,000 new early years places. Phase 2 will see £45 million in funding being allocated with the aim of creating at least 300 new or expanded school-based nurseries.[113]

While the Alliance's survey of childcare providers was limited in terms of its scope and generalisability to the wider sector, many of the findings point to the need for increased funding in the early years sector. The implication is that this will result in increased public management. The vast majority of services indicated that they have challenges in recruiting (84 per cent) and retaining (74 per cent) staff with the most common issues being low wages and poor

112 Department of Children, Disability and Equality *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan Phase 1 Report* (DCDE 2025) 28.

113 The Education Hub Phase 2 of the school-based nursery programme: Everything you need to know (Blogpost 4 September 2025) https://bit.ly/4sO9Kyh accessed 13 March 2026.

terms and conditions. A further indication of the need for increased public investment is in relation to the economic sustainability of services. Over half of respondents stated that their service was not economically sustainable. Connected to this was a perception of insufficient Government funding, with 39 out of 51 respondents indicating that their service was at risk of becoming unviable due to this.

Children and their families need to see the development of a childcare system based on a children's rights-based approach as set out in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's *General Comment No.7, Implementing child rights in early childhood.*[114] This sets out that the initiation of a capital funding scheme to increase state-led provision is an important start in this regard but should merely be the first step in moving towards a system underpinned by children's rights.

Recommendations

- Publish a high-level analysis of childcare need in Ireland along with an indication of how the Department of Children, Disability and Equality will engage with other State actors, Government departments and statutory agencies to ensure future provision in areas of high need.
- Set out ambitious annual targets for childcare places to be delivered under the new capital investment programmes.
- Explore how other countries accommodate childcare facilities within a school campus. This could include conducting study trips, commissioning research and engaging with national and international stakeholders.

114 UNCRC 'General Comment No.7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev.1 para 28.

2

Education

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Implement a range of recommendations from the recent Report on Review of Out-of-School Education Provision to support school completion.	Slow	D
Work with the sector to reform the CAO system to ensure that young people are best served by it.	Slow	D
Continue the programme of reform of Senior Cycle to ensure that students benefit from up-to-date curricula, more diverse skills development and assessments, and reduced stress levels.	Steady	C+

Commitment

Implement a range of recommendations from the recent Report on Review of Out-of-School Education Provision to support school completion.

Section Grade

A B C **D** E F

Implement a range of recommendations from the recent Report on Review of Out-of-School Education Provision to support school completion.

The *Programme for Government* commitment places primary emphasis on implementing a range of recommendations from the Review of Out of School Education Provision to support school completion, recognising that some children and young people require alternative, and Out of School pathways to remain engaged in education and progress meaningfully. While the Out of School Education Review was completed in 2024, it has not yet been published or implemented.

Investment in Out of School provision has been limited and short-term, and Out of School along with other alternative education programmes, continues to lack formal recognition and integration within the Irish education system. However, Budget 2026 included an additional funding allocation for Out of School provision. Implementing recommendations from the Review of Out of School Report will be essential to support children and young people at risk of disengagement and early school leaving who cannot access or continue in mainstream school.

Introduction

In 2022, the Department of Education published its *Review of Out of School Educational Provision*, sometimes also referred to as alternative education.[1] The Review found that despite Ireland having a high retention rate to Leaving Certificate, there are still young people whose individual needs cannot be

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

met by the mainstream education system.[2] Out of School education settings were found to have the capacity to provide 'flexible, individual education plans with prolonged support on a one-to-one basis to students' by adopting a wraparound approach to meeting student needs.[3] However, the Review noted that there was no consistent approach applied in relation to the education curriculum, certification, and education pathways across the sector.[4]

Review

of Out of School Educational Provision (2022)

The Review recommended the development of a framework of support for young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged from education, which considers the position of Out of School education provision, improvement in the level of data recording and tracking of students and additional research on the needs, supports and outcomes of students who avail of out of school provision.[5] The Review also recommended a standardised structure for the governance of out of school education, provision, the development of a referral framework and a mapping of all support services available to schools. An Implementation Group was established to oversee the fulfilment of the recommendations of the Review. This Implementation Group completed its work in 2024 and followed this with a consultation with a number of children and young people previously consulted for the initiative.[6]

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

3 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out of School Education Provision,* Version 2 – October 2022, 11.

4 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, Review of Out of School Education Provision, Version 2 – October 2022, 11.

5 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out of School Education Provision,* Version 2 – October 2022, 12.

6 Communication received from the Department of Education and Youth by the Children's Rights Alliance on 13 January 2026.

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Out of School education settings were found to have the capacity to provide 'flexible, individual education plans with prolonged support on a one-to-one basis to students' by adopting a wraparound approach to meeting student needs.

Education Policy

The *Programme for Government* commitment to implement a range of recommendations from the recent report on Out of School education provision to support school completion" is situated within a wider Irish education policy context, characterised by persistent challenges around inclusion, equity and systemic pathways for children and young people whose needs are not met within mainstream school.[7] National policy and evidence increasingly recognise that a uniform school model does not adequately serve all learners, particularly children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, disability, disengagement or complex social and emotional needs.[8] This recognition is reflected across policy commitments to reduce early school leaving, address the inappropriate use of reduced timetables, and strengthen alternative and flexible education pathways, in line with children's rights standards.[9] Irish research indicates that Out of School and alternative education provision is diverse and variable in structure, governance and linkages to mainstream pathways, reflecting a fragmented sector that the Government's commitment could standardise and align.[10]

Children's Rights

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Ireland in 1992 States recognise the right of the child to education and agree that education shall be directed to "the development of the child's

7 National Council for Special Education, *An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society* (Policy Advice Paper No 7, January 2024); Department of Education and Youth, *Reflections on inclusion in the Irish education system,* Inspectorate Publication Department of Education and Youth (December 2025); Department of Education (Ireland), *DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (2017); Economic and Social Research Institute, *School-level patterns of non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24* (ESRI Research Series, 2026); Smyth E., *The School Completion Programme Revisited* (ESRI Research Series, 2025); Department of Education and Youth, *Education Plan 2025* (19 June 2025).

8 National Council for Special Education, An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society (Policy Advice Paper No 7, January 2024); Department of Education and Youth, Reflections on inclusion in the Irish education system, Inspectorate Publication Department of Education and Youth (December 2025); Department of Education (Ireland), DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (2017); Economic and Social Research Institute, School-level patterns of non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24 (ESRI Research Series, 2026); Smyth E., The School Completion Programme Revisited (ESRI Research Series, 2025); Department of Education and Youth, Education Plan 2025 (19 June 2025).

9 Department of Education, *Guidelines on Reduced School Timetable* (2018); UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on Ireland* (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/Art 5–6, paras 36–38.

10 Kovačič T. and Forkan C., 'Building upon the conceptualisation of alternative education in Ireland' (2024) *Irish Educational Studies* 1429–1453; Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision* (May 2022).

personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" and to the preparation of the child for "responsible life in a free society".[11] The Convention further requires that this right be exercised "on the basis of equal opportunity"[12] and that States ensure the rights set forth in the Convention "without discrimination of any kind".[13] The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has reiterated that discrimination against children is incompatible with the Convention, stating that it "offends the human dignity of the child" and emphasises that discrimination can have "a serious and profound impact on the child's development and life chances," including their ability to benefit from education.[14]

Ireland's obligations are reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified in 2018. Article 24 requires States to ensure "an inclusive education system at all levels" and to provide "reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements" as well as "the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education."[15] The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has clarified that "the right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy and practice" and that "placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without adapting teaching methods, curricula and learning environments does not constitute inclusion."[16] In this context, the *Programme for Government* commitment on Out of School provision directly engages Ireland's obligations to ensure that education is accessible, inclusive and effective in practice for all children.

These obligations must be read in light of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2023 Concluding Observations on Ireland, which identified

11 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child* Art 29(1) UNCRC General Comment No. 1 on Article 29(1) the Aims of Education (2001) CRC/GC/2001/Art 1, para 10.

12 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 28(1) para 1.

13 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 2(1) para 1.

14 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence* CRC/C/GC/20; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 5 (2003): General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child* CRC/GC/2003/5.

15 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (adopted 13 December 2006, Art 24(1)–(2)(c)–(d).

16 UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education* CRPD/C/GC/4 (2 September 2016) paras 11, 16.

education as one of six areas requiring urgent action.[17] In doing so, the Committee highlighted persistent barriers faced by children in disadvantaged situations, drew attention to the discriminatory effects of aspects of certification and alternative education pathways and noted the absence of sufficiently disaggregated data to assess the impact of education policy, including in relation to reduced timetables, Traveller children and children with disabilities.[18] The Committee specifically called on the State to strengthen the collection and analysis of disaggregated education data and to address the overuse of reduced timetables.[19] In this context, the continued absence of a published framework and an implementation plan for out of school education provision limits clarity on how these recommendations will be addressed in practice and underscores the importance of timely publication and follow-through to support a coordinated, evidence-informed response.

Evidence regarding alternative/out of school education provision in Ireland

Recent Irish research consistently demonstrates that alternative education provision plays a critical re-engagement and equity role for children and young people whose needs are not being met within mainstream school. The evaluation of the Rethink Ireland's Education Fund shows that alternative education in Ireland spans both out of school and in-school provision, operating across a continuum rather than at the margins of the system.[20] Drawing on international experience, Kovačič and Forkan identify three broad clusters of alternative education, such as lifelong learning and social inclusion initiatives, curriculum reform and diverse pathways to adulthood, and alternative centres of education operating outside mainstream schools – the latter aligning closely with the Department of Education's typology of Out of School provision.[21]

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17 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6 (28 February 2023) para 36.

18 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6 (28 February 2023) para. 37.

19 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6 (28 February 2023) para. 37.

20 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds (2025).

21 Tanja Kovačič and Cormac Forkan, 'Building upon the conceptualisation of alternative education in Ireland' (2024) 43(4) Irish Educational Studies 1429–1453.

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Alternative education provision plays a critical re-engagement and equity role for children and young people whose needs are not being met within mainstream school.

The evaluation finds that across all clusters, projects adopt student-centred, relational and innovative pedagogical approaches designed to address educational inequality holistically.[22] These approaches are associated with improved attendance, re-engagement with learning, stronger relationships with adults, accredited learning outcomes and positive progression to further education, training or employment.[23] Using Raywid's typology, the research concludes that these projects seek not only to offer opportunities to individual learners, but also to reshape school environments and challenge wider system structures, positioning alternative education as potential drivers of systemic innovation, rather than remedial interventions.[24] Common features include safe and calm learning environments, tailored instruction, integrated personal support, experiential learning opportunities and critically, mentoring, which is identified as central to sustained progression.[25]

At the same time, the evidence highlights persistent system weaknesses that the *Programme for Government* 2025 commitment to implement the *Review of Out of School Education* recommendations are well placed to now address. Irish evaluation and research identify uneven access, variable quality, limited guidance capacity, weak data integration and a lack of coherence across provision types, particularly affecting those under-16s and children and young people described as having complex needs.[26] While the Review marks an important policy acknowledgement of these gaps,[27] the research is clear that the absence of formal recognition, comprehensive mapping and coherent governance continues to limit the system's ability to deliver equitable outcomes.[28]

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22 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds (2025).

23 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds (2025).

24 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, *Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds* (2025); Mary Anne Raywid, 'Alternative Schools: The State of the Art' (1994) *Educational Leadership* 26–31.

25 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, *Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds* (2025); Kitty te Riele, 'Educational Alternatives for Marginalised Youth' (2007) *Australian Educational Researcher* 53–68.

26 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, *Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds* (2025); Tanja Kovačič and Cormac Forkan, 'Building upon the conceptualisation of alternative education in Ireland' (2024) 43(4) *Irish Educational Studies* 1429–1453.

27 Department of Education, Review of Out of School Education Provision (Government of Ireland 2022).

28 UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Rethink Ireland, Composite Report from the Evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund, Youth Funds and Children and Youth Funds (2025); Tanja Kovačič and Cormac Forkan, 'Building upon the conceptualisation of alternative education in Ireland' (2024) 43(4) Irish Educational Studies 1429–1453.

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Irish research identifies uneven access, variable quality, limited guidance capacity, weak data integration and a lack of coherence across provision types, particularly affecting those under-16s and children and young people described as having complex needs.

The Government commitment is the opportunity to address these gaps in a visible, systemic and practical way.

The Implementation Group completed its work in 2024[29] and follow-up consultation with children and young people on the recommendations was concluded in late 2024.[30] The Department indicated that members of the Implementation Group re-engaged directly with children and young people, who had previously participated in the consultation process[31], reflecting an effort to embed the principles of the Lundy model[32] of participation in the later stages of the work. [33]

The Government also secured €48 million full-year investment to implement a new DEIS Plus scheme[34] as part of a forthcoming DEIS Strategy, intended to support pupils at the highest risk of educational disadvantage across both DEIS and non-DEIS schools.[35] An additional €250,000 was also allocated to support and provide stability to existing alternative education settings.[36] This funding sits alongside other developments in the Out of School and alternative education landscape, including continued and expanded support for iScoil[37], which

Budget 2026

€48 million
to support DEIS and non-DEIS schools

€250,000
to support existing alternative education settings

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

30 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

31 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

32 The Lundy Model conceptualises Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right of the child to be heard, around four distinct but inter-connected elements. These elements are space, voice, audience and influence.

33 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

34 Conor McCarthy, 'New DEIS Plus plan needs to be bold' *The Irish Times* (19 November 2025) https://bit.ly/4aOLkyf

35 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

36 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

37 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.

allowed them to increase capacity[38] and support additional Tusla Education Support Service referred learners.[39]

What do children and young people need next?

The publication and follow-through on this *Programme for Government* commitment is essential in 2026. Children and young people need the recommendations of the *Review of Out of School Education Provision* to be published alongside a clear implementation plan and timelines. The recommendations represent an opportunity to define what Out of School provision is, quality standards, referral pathways, progression routes and how provision links to attendance, well-being and school completion objectives. The implementation of the *Review of Out of School Education Provision* recommendations is a significant policy step to ensure Ireland's education system complies with its children's rights obligations by providing coherent, quality-assured pathways for learners whose rights are not currently being realised within mainstream provision.

Recommendations

- Implement the recommendations of the Review of *Out of School Education Provision*.
- Secure budgeted investment to deliver the recommendations in Budget 2027.
- Embed Out of School and alternative provision within the education system through formal recognition, introducing oversight arrangements and progression pathways.

38 It is notable that iScoil could not take all referrals in the year and would need additional funding to meet the demand.

39 Department of Education and Youth, 'Ministers Naughton and Moynihan announce funding boost to iScoil', 29 December 2025 https://bit.ly/4s1457H accessed 17 February 2026.

Commitment

Work with the sector to reform the CAO system to ensure that young people are best served by it.

Section Grade

A B C **D** E F

Work with the sector to reform the CAO system to ensure that young people are best served by it.

Reform of the Central Applications Office (CAO) system has moved into an early policy development phase. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has advanced internal work on a draft discussion paper for ministerial and senior management consideration, with review planned for early 2026 to inform decisions on the future policy approach. The Department has identified that this work is explicitly grounded in the *Programme for Government* commitment to ensure that the CAO system serves young people effectively, with the experiences, needs, and views of young people identified as central to the reform agenda.

At this stage, the discussion paper remains for internal departmental use and external consultation has not yet commenced. It is anticipated that the CAO and higher education institutions will be key stakeholders as the process develops. While reform needs to be carried out in partnership with this sector, it also needs to be shaped by best interests of children and young people. Young people must also participate in decision-making as an equal partner.

Introduction

The CAO is the central admissions gateway to undergraduate higher education in Ireland and plays a decisive role in shaping who can access further and higher education. As such, the CAO is not a neutral administrative mechanism, but a powerful determinant of educational opportunity and life chances.[40]

40 Á. Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century* (Discussion Paper, Higher Education Authority 2011) 4.

The Leaving Certificate and the CAO perform distinct functions within Ireland's education system. The Leaving Certificate is the State's terminal post-primary assessment and certification process, representing the final examination of the Senior Cycle and serving as the standard qualification for progression to further and higher education, training and employment.[41] It is governed within the post-primary education system and reflects curricular and assessment policy objectives, including those currently being advanced through Senior Cycle Redevelopment.[42] The CAO, by contrast, is an administrative admissions mechanism that allocates undergraduate higher education places on behalf of institutions, primarily using Leaving Certificate results as the selection criteria. Its role is not to assess learning or determine curriculum content, but to manage competition for limited higher education places in a transparent and efficient manner.[43]

Each year, the CAO processes applications from over 80,000 applicants seeking undergraduate places across Ireland's universities, technological universities and associated colleges, making it the primary national mechanism for access to higher education.[44] The CAO operates a points-based admissions system, under which Leaving Certificate examination grades are converted into points and used to rank applicants competitively for available places in oversubscribed courses, in accordance with rules agreed by participating institutions.[45]

80,000-90,000

Number of yearly applicants seeking undergraduate places across Ireland's universities, technological universities and associated colleges.

41 State Examinations Commission, *About the State Examinations Commission* (gov.ie); National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Leaving Certificate Established* (ncca.ie).

42 Department of Education, *Equity and Excellence for All: Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Policy Statement, March 2022); National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA 2020).

43 Central Applications Office, *About the CAO*, www.cao.ie ; Á. Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century* (Discussion Paper, Higher Education Authority 2011) 4–6; Central Applications Office, *CAO Handbook 2024* (CAO 2024).

44 Central Applications Office, *CAO Annual Report and Statistics* (various years) www.cao.ie; Central Applications Office, Annual Statistics and Applicant Numbers.

45 Central Applications Office, How Offers are Issued (CAO), https://bit.ly/4br2Xn2 accessed 18 March 2026; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Central Applications Office https://bit.ly/4sPj44G accessed 18 March 2026.

The introduction of lettered grading bands in the Leaving Certificate in 1969, together with the establishment of the student grant scheme in 1968, formed part of a broader period of education system expansion. University College Dublin (UCD) Medical Faculty created the first points system to ration oversubscribed courses in 1968/1969. This practice soon spread across faculties and other higher education institutes.[46] Before this, entry relied on minimum requirements, ability to pay and individual applications to each college.[47] These reforms contributed to rising demand for higher education places and increased competition, which in turn generated pressure for a fairer and more transparent approach to admissions, culminating in the establishment of a centralised system in the mid-1970s.[48] The establishment of the CAO in 1976 aligned with a broader State objective to modernise and rationalise admissions, delivering a transparent and efficient system capable of operating at scale.[49]

As participation widened further and socio-economic inequalities persisted, and questions emerged as to whether a system designed primarily for efficiency and transparency was also delivering on broader policy goals relating to well-being, inclusion and learner-centred education.[50] In this sense, CAO reform is best understood as a progression and system-alignment issue, rather than as an assessment reform issue, while recognising that decisions taken in one part of the system inevitably shape behaviours and outcomes in another.[51]

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46 P. Clancy, *Access to College: Patterns of Continuity and Change* (Higher Education Authority 1981); Patrick Clancy, *Review of Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective*, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 2015.

47 S. McCoy, D. Byrne, J. O'Sullivan and E. Smyth, *The Early Impact of the Revised Leaving Certificate Grading Scheme on Student Perceptions and Behaviour* (Economic and Social Research Institute, 2019) 9.

48 J. Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure* (Institute of Public Administration 1981) 210–213; P. Clancy, *Access to College: Patterns of Continuity and Change* (Higher Education Authority 1981) 18–30; Department of Education, *Investment in Education* (Government of Ireland 1965); Á. Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century* (Discussion Paper, Higher Education Authority 2011) 4–6.

49 Central Applications Office, *CAO Handbook 1976* (CAO 1976); Áine Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century* (HEA Discussion Paper 2011) 15.

50 P. Clancy, 'Irish Higher Education: A Changing Relationship with Society' in Tom Garvin and others (eds), *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives* (Institute of Public Administration 2015).

51 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA 2020); OECD, *Students' Well-Being: PISA 2015 Results (Volume III)* (OECD Publishing 2017.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides every child with a right to education.[52] The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear that the purpose of this right is not merely access to schooling, but the maximisation of each child's ability to participate fully and effectively in society.[53] Education is framed as a fundamental human right that must be accessible, non-discriminatory, development-focused and respectful of the child's voice and best interests.[54] These Concluding Observations express concern about persistent inequalities within the education system and, in particular, the discriminatory effects of school-leaving certification and alternative certification pathways on children in disadvantaged situations.[55]

Article 2 of the UNCRC requires that children's rights be realised without discrimination of any kind, including on grounds such as socio-economic background or family circumstances.[56] Points-based systems are not socially neutral. Where progression to higher education depends primarily on competitive points thresholds, young people experiencing poverty or inequality may face restricted future opportunities through no fault of their own, undermining the principle of equal opportunity.[57]

Article 3 establishes that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, while Article 6 protects the child's right to survival and development.[58] Evidence from Ireland and other OECD countries shows that concentrated assessment pressure can negatively affect young people's well-being, engagement and educational experience, with long-term consequences.[59]

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52 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 28.

53 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 1: The Aims of Education* (2001) CRC/GC/2001/1 paras 2–9.

54 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 1: The Aims of Education* (2001) CRC/GC/2001/1 para 6; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 5* (2003) CRC/GC/2003/5 para 12.

55 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland* (CRC/C/IRL/CO/5–6, 2023) para 36.

56 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 2.

57 Reardon S., 'The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor' (2011) *Community Investments* 19(2); see also Á. Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century* (Discussion Paper, Higher Education Authority 2011) 16-18 and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022–2028* (Gov of Ireland 2022).

58 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 2.

59 OECD, *Students' Well-Being: PISA 2015 Results (Volume III)* (OECD Publishing 2017) Ch 3; see also E. Smyth and J. Banks, *High Stakes Testing and Student Stress* (ESRI 2020).

In addition, Article 12 guarantees children the right to express their views in matters affecting them, with those views given due weight.[60] Admissions and assessment systems are generally designed with limited participation by children and young people, even though international and national participation frameworks recognise the importance of involving children in decision-making processes that affect them.[61] Where systems are rigid and unresponsive to the learner voice, they undermine agency, participation and trust in education.[62]

Young people themselves have consistently articulated concerns about the impact of the points-driven CAO system on stress, well-being and their experience of Senior Cycle, highlighting the perceived 'all or nothing' nature of progression and the pressure associated with competitive ranking.[63] Representative bodies such as the ISSU have repeatedly called for reform of assessment and progression arrangements, including a review of CAO-related pressures.[64] The ISSU reports that 70 per cent of students experience high or very high exam-related stress, underscoring the scale of pressure experienced by learners approaching CAO decisions.[65] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has highlighted that the terminal and external nature of the Leaving Certificate, combined with its high-stakes role in tertiary entry, and widespread media coverage, creates a high-pressure environment and raises 'washback' concerns.[66]

70%

of students reported experiencing high/very high exam-related stress

60 UNCRC Art 12; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 12* (2009) CRC/C/GC/12.

61 OECD, *Child Participation in Decision-Making* (OECD 2023); Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* (Hub na nÓg 2023).

62 L. Lundy 'Voice Is Not Enough' (2007) 33 *British Educational Research Journal* 927.

63 Joanne Banks and Emer Smyth, *Student Stress and the Leaving Certificate* (ESRI Research Bulletin RB2015/2/7, Economic and Social Research Institute 2015).

64 Irish Second-Level Students' Union, Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Emer Neville, President, 5 October 2021).

65 P. Ó Caoimh (Uachtarán, Irish Second-Level Students' Union), *Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth* (22 October 2025).

66 OECD, *Implementation of Ireland's Leaving Certificate 2020–2021: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic* (OECD Education Policy Perspectives No 73, OECD Publishing 2023) 31.

Taking a children's rights lens, points-driven education and admissions systems are problematic where they prioritise ranking over development, entrench inequality, generate harm to well-being, narrow recognition of talent, limit children's participation, and constrain future life chances. While assessment and selection mechanisms are necessary within education systems, the UNCRC requires that they be designed in ways that are equitable, holistic, development-focused and consistent with children's best interests. Reforming points-based systems to incorporate broader measures of learning, multiple progression pathways, contextual supports and learner participation would better align educational policy with the State's obligations under the UNCRC.

The *Programme for Government* commits to working with the sector to review the CAO system, to ensure that young people are best served by it.[67] The policy challenge is not to conflate the roles of the Leaving Certificate and the CAO, but to manage their interaction more deliberately. This commitment sits alongside wider Government reforms and policy frameworks, including Senior Cycle Redevelopment and measures to widen access and participation in higher education. Consideration of the historical development of the CAO points system, together with evidence on its current operation and impacts, provides important context for this review and supports an evidence-informed assessment of the continued suitability of the model within a changing education system.

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

The last comprehensive, system-level review of entry to higher education, including the operation and impact of the CAO points system, was undertaken in 2011, on the request of the then Minister for Education.[68] As part of this, a 2011 HEA discussion paper examined the strengths and limitations of the points-based model and explicitly highlighted its strong influence on Senior

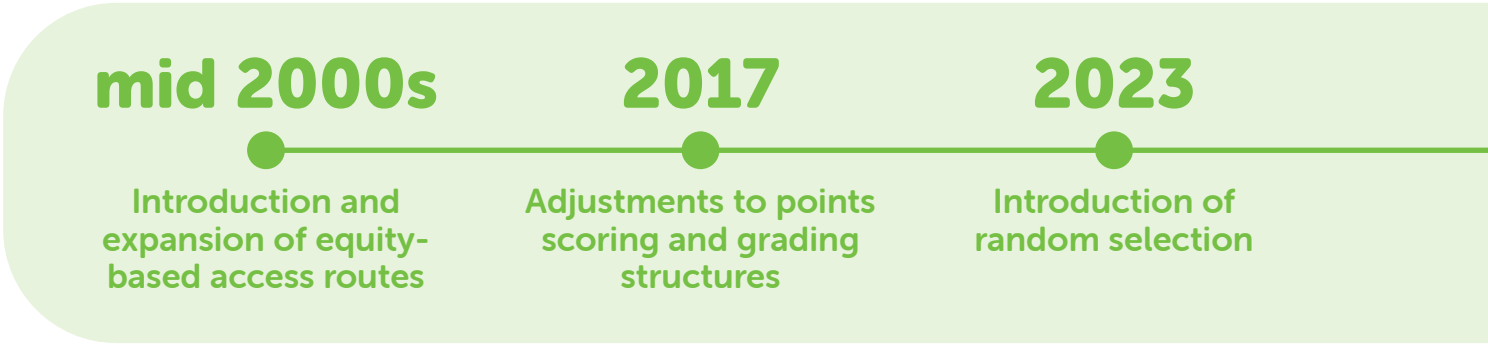
67 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025).

68 Á. Hyland, 'Whither the points system?' (2025), *Leader - Journal of the National Association of Principals and Deputy-Principals*, Spring 2025 3 https://bit.ly/3ZW2ow9 accessed 25 February 2026.

Cycle teaching, learning and student experience.[69] While the paper informed policy debate, it did not result in structural reform of the CAO admissions framework. Since that time, changes to the CAO have been incremental and operational, rather than constituting a formal review of the model itself.

Key developments since the CAO's establishment include:

- the introduction and expansion of equity-based access routes (notably HEAR and DARE) operating through the CAO from the mid-2000s, aligned with widening participation objectives.[70]
- periodic adjustments to points scoring and grading structures, most significantly the reform of Leaving Certificate grading bands and associated points in 2017.[71]
- the introduction of random selection in 2023, where applicants have equal points for oversubscribed courses, to address tie-break pressures.[72]
- ongoing digitalisation and process improvements to application, offer and acceptance systems.



69 Áine Hyland, *Entry to Higher Education in Ireland in the 21st Century* (Discussion Paper, Higher Education Authority 2011).

70 Higher Education Authority, *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013* (HEA 2008); Higher Education Authority, *National Access Plan 2022–2028* (HEA 2022).

71 Department of Education and Skills, *Reform of Leaving Certificate Grading System* (Circular Letter, 2017); Centra Applications Office (CAO), *The New Common Points Scale,* 2017 https://bit.ly/4cweFic accessed 16 February 2026.

72 CAO 'Random Number' https://bit.ly/4lzJO70 accessed 19 March 2026. Central Applications Office, *CAO Handbook 2024* (CAO 2024) 31.

While these changes have improved transparency, administrative efficiency and access to some extent, they have been piecemeal and have not altered the fundamental reliance on aggregated examination points as the dominant gateway to higher education. That is why the new commitment in the Programme for Government to review the CAO is so important as it could provide a mechanism to address the negative impact that the points system is having on the education system and life outcomes for young people.

The Department of Further and Higher Education Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) has advised that work has progressed internally on the development of a draft discussion paper for consideration by the Minister and senior management. In line with the *Programme for Government* commitment, the experiences, needs and views of young people are identified as a central consideration in this work. However, the mechanisms for incorporating these perspectives, along with any specific actions or milestones to be delivered in 2026, will be determined following ministerial and senior management consideration of the paper.[73]

External consultation has not yet commenced. It is anticipated that the CAO will be a key stakeholder in any subsequent phase of work. DFHERIS has also clarified the governance context: the CAO is an independent, not-for-profit company established by Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which are autonomous and retain responsibility for their academic affairs, including admissions. HEIs have delegated to the CAO the administrative function of centrally processing Irish and EU applications and issuing offers on their instruction, while the decision-making authority on admissions remains with the institutions themselves. Any future reform in this area would therefore require close collaboration with the third-level sector, with due regard to institutional autonomy and system-level coherence.[74]

73 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 22 December 2025.

74 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 22 December 2025.

What do children and young people need next?

Children and young people need a higher education admissions system that recognises them as developing rights holders, not simply as candidates ranked by a single high-stakes metric. The current points-driven system is not socially neutral. A socio-economic gradient refers to the systematic relationship between socio-economic status and educational outcomes, whereby participation increases with socio-economic advantage.[75] Irish higher-education data published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) demonstrates persistent differences in entry and participation by socio-economic background, consistent with such a gradient, notwithstanding the operation of targeted access schemes.[76] While access routes such as HEAR and DARE mitigate barriers for some applicants, they operate alongside an unchanged core architecture of competitive points-based allocation and therefore have limited capacity to address structural inequalities at the point of progression.[77]

International experience demonstrates that alternative approaches are both feasible and effective. In Finland, admission to higher education operates through two main routes: certificate-based selection, which uses performance in the national matriculation examination, taken at the end of upper-secondary education, and institution-specific entrance examinations for particular fields of study. Certificate-based routes use defined eligibility thresholds[78] and scoring rules linked to matriculation results, while institutions may also apply field-specific criteria to prioritise applicants within the eligible pool.[79] In Scotland, a system of contextualised admissions assesses attainment alongside socio-economic context, school profile and disadvantage indicators, including the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and care

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75 J. D. Willms, Ten Hypotheses about Socio-Economic Gradients and Community Differences in Children's Developmental Outcomes (UNESCO/ERIC 2003).

76 Higher Education Authority, Socio-Economic Profiles of Higher Education Participation 2021/22–2023/24 (HEA, 2024).

77 Irish Universities Association, HEAR & DARE Annual Report 2023 (IUA, 2024).

78 Unlike Ireland's CAO system, which allocates places primarily through competitive rank-ordering of applicants based on aggregated Leaving Certificate points, Finnish certificate-based admission uses minimum eligibility thresholds linked to matriculation examination results to determine eligibility for particular fields, alongside institution-specific entrance examinations; see Central Applications Office, *Points System Explained* (CAO); Eurydice Network, *Finland: National Reforms in Higher Education* (European Commission).

79 Eurydice Network, *Finland: National Reforms in Higher Education* (European Commission) https://bit.ly/46G5LLm accessed 16 February 2026; Yliopistovalinnat (Studyinfo Finland), *Scoring of Certificate-Based Admissions in 2026* (Finnish National Agency for Education).

experience. Where indicators are present, institutions may make adjusted offers, recognise potential alongside attainment, or provide foundation years and guaranteed interviews. This approach is supported by sector-wide expectations, published criteria and national monitoring, and evidence shows measurable improvements in access for applicants from the most deprived areas.[80]

The Scottish experience demonstrates that a more active system-level role for government in admissions frameworks through the setting of shared objectives, development of a common evidence base and routine monitoring of outcomes can support greater equity, coherence and accountability, while operating alongside institutional autonomy in admissions decision-making.[81] For Ireland, this points to the potential value of exploring how Government oversight of the admissions framework, aligned with wider education, social-equity and children's rights commitments might complement institutional discretion and targeted access measures within CAO reform.

80 Scottish Government, *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access* (2016); Scottish Funding Council, *Widening Access: Annual Monitoring Reports* (2018/19-2023/24); Scottish Funding Council, *Widening Access and Outcome Agreement*.

81 Scottish Government, *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access* (2016); Scottish Funding Council, *Report on Widening Access 2023–24* (SFC 2024); Commissioner for Fair Access, *Annual Report* (Scottish Government, 2017–2024).

Indicator	Scotland	Ireland
Students from areas identified as most deprived (SIMD20)	**16.7% of entrants** (full-time first degree) in 2023–24, rising from 16.3% in 2022/23.[82]	**9% of students classified as disadvantaged** across HE in 2021–24.[83]
Increase participation levels of under-represented groups over time	Participation from deprived areas up **37%** since widening access effort began. Scotland has a clear national longitudinal target. Scotland operates an explicit, time-bound, nationally monitored target: By 2030, 20% of Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants should come from the 20% most deprived areas (SIMD20).[84] This is a single, headline longitudinal participation target, measured consistently year-on-year against a fixed deprivation benchmark.	No equivalent national longitudinal target. Targets focus on: • improving access rates through specific routes (e.g. HEAR, DARE) • institutional performance[85] • retention and success • selected sub-groups (e.g. students with disabilities, Traveller students) There is no nationally agreed benchmark equivalent to 'X% of entrants from the lowest Y% socio-economic group by year Z'. Stratification persists.

82 Scottish Funding Council, *Report on Widening* Access SFC 2023–24.

83 HEA, *Socio-Economic* Profiles 2021/22–2023/24 (Statistical profile, 2025).

84 This target was set following the Commission on Widening Access (2016) and is monitored annually by the Scottish Funding Council and the Commissioner for Fair Access.

85 Institutional performance refers to the extent to which individual higher-education institutions meet agreed equity of access, participation and success objectives, as set out in institution-specific Access Plans and monitored by the Higher Education Authority.

Indicator	Scotland	Ireland
Care-experienced entrants	**510** in 2020–21 **545** in 2021–22 **585** in 2022-23 An estimated **620** (about 1.9 %) in 2023–24, indicating a continuing upward trend in participation by this group.[86]	Ireland has targeted supports but currently lacks comparable national metrics reported publicly.[87]
Disability entrants[88]	**22.3%** of full-time first-degree entrants declared a disability in 2023/24.	**17.8%** of new undergraduate entrants reported a disability in most recent data available 2021/22.
Further Education to Higher Education entry with credit for prior learning	**3,100** students from SIMD20 areas in 2023–24.[89]	Further Education to Higher Education data exists, but it is fragmented across different sources and does not form a single, comprehensive national metric.

86 Scottish Funding Council, *Report on Widening Access* SFC 2023–24.

87 While Ireland publishes socio-economic and disability participation profiles and implements targeted access supports, it does not currently maintain a single, publicly reported national longitudinal participation metric for widening access across all priority groups comparable to Scotland's SIMD20 target, and data on some priority cohorts (e.g. care-experienced students) is not yet routinely available in HEA national statistics. There are efforts (e.g. recent HEA Second Data Plan recommendations) to improve data collection for these groups, including on ethnicity and care experience, but these are still under development.

88 Differences in data sources and methodologies mean these figures are not directly comparable like-for-like percentages, but they each provide a national participation indicator for disability in Higher Education.

89 Scottish Funding Council, *Report on Widening Access* (SFC 2023–24).

Recommendations

- Accelerate and publish a clear roadmap for the CAO review in 2026. This should confirm mandate, scope, governance structures and sector representation, and publish a clear timeline with quarterly milestones to ensure transparency and momentum.
- Embed meaningful youth participation from the outset by co-designing the CAO review with young people, establishing a Youth Expert Panel with a defined remit to shape options, test proposals and advise on impacts relating to stress, equity and progression.
- Consider a clearer system-level role for Government in setting expectations on equitable access, including agreed indicators and monitoring arrangements, while respecting institutional autonomy.
- Align CAO reform with Senior Cycle Redevelopment by ensuring admissions arrangements recognise broader learning outcomes, accommodate diverse forms of achievement, and support rather than undermine curriculum and assessment reform.

Commitment

Continue the programme of reform of Senior Cycle to ensure that students benefit from up-to-date curricula, more diverse skills development and assessments, and reduced stress levels.

Section Grade

A B C+ D E F

Continue the programme of reform of Senior Cycle to ensure that students benefit from up-to-date curricula, more diverse skills development and assessments, and reduced stress levels.

Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR) has moved beyond design into delivery, with clear progress made in establishing a coherent reform framework, advancing new and revised subjects, embedding broader assessment approaches, and reaffirming commitments to wellbeing, skills development and pathway diversity. Good structures are in place for stakeholder engagement. However, at the same time the programme has been impacted by several challenges. Additional resources have been made available to support teaching capacity and training for schools is underway but there are still disputes with some partners.

At the same time, the school community and young people require more improved information supports as the programme roles out. The availability of AI tools has also caused an additional complication for the 'Additional Assessment Components' (AACs). The State Exams Commission has addressed this by issuing guidelines for the use of AI tools for projects. However, a wider rethink will be necessary to ensure that young people develop the knowledge and skills that they need for the twenty-first century and the widespread availability of AI tools could lead to serious de-skilling.

Equity risks more broadly remain unresolved, particularly in relation the differing capacities of schools to absorb reform, access professional learning, and provide guidance and wellbeing supports, which could translate into an inconsistent learner experience. Critically, formal evaluation of Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR) has not yet commenced and therefore evidence on whether reform objectives such as reduced stress, improved learning experiences and the effective integration of

SCR competencies and assessment practices are being achieved in practice is not yet available. The Department has indicated that a programme evaluation will advance during Quarter 2 2026, including the definition of scope, procurement of external expertise and the undertaking of a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA).[90]

Introduction

Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR) is a central strand of current education policy, aimed at delivering a more inclusive, learner-centred and balanced Senior Cycle that better supports student wellbeing, engagement and diverse forms of learning and achievement. The *Programme for Government* reaffirms the State's commitment to continuing and embedding SCR, with a clear emphasis on ensuring that post-primary education equips young people with the knowledge, skills and competencies required for further education, training, employment and active participation in society.[91] The *Programme for Government* frames Senior Cycle reform as a key mechanism for improving educational experience and outcomes, rather than solely as a curriculum adjustment.

SCR was initiated in response to evidence that the existing Senior Cycle model, centred on a small number of high-stakes terminal examinations, was no longer fully meeting the educational, developmental and wellbeing needs of young people, nor the skills requirements of society and the economy.[92] Government-commissioned reviews identified concerns including excessive assessment pressure, a narrowing of learning experiences due to examination 'backwash', limited recognition of a broad range of skills and competencies, and misalignment between Senior Cycle learning and contemporary pathways to further and higher education and employment.[93]

90 Communication received by the Alliance from Department of Education and Youth on 13 March 2026.

91 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government – Shaping Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025).

92 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report*; (NCCA 2022); Department of Education, Senior Cycle Redevelopment https://bit.ly/4rTGpSz accessed 16 February 2026.

93 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report*; (NCCA 2022); Department of Education, Senior Cycle Redevelopment https://bit.ly/4rTGpSz accessed 16 February 2026.

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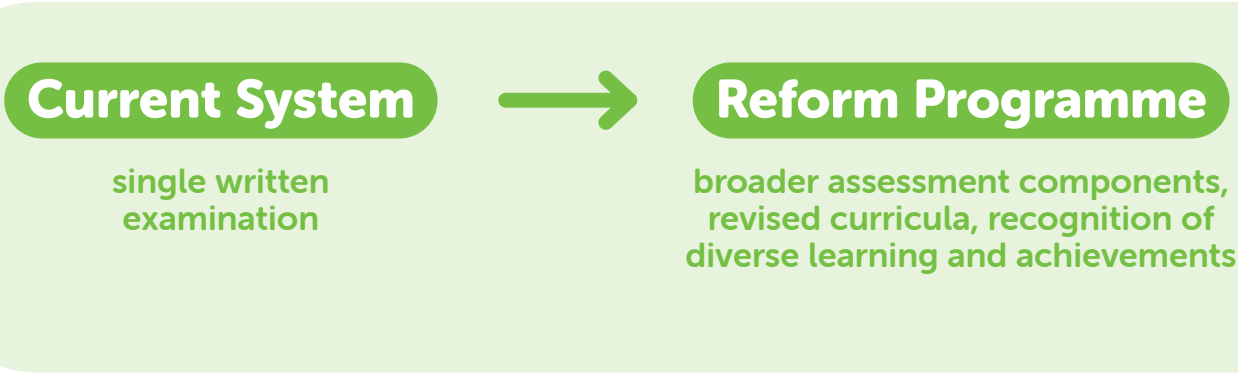
Senior Cycle Redevelopment was initiated in response to evidence that the existing Senior Cycle model was no longer fully meeting the educational, developmental and wellbeing needs of young people.



The redevelopment programme therefore seeks to rebalance assessment, broaden curricular experiences, and ensure that Senior Cycle better supports student wellbeing, progression and preparedness for life beyond school.[94] SCR builds on the policy direction set out in the Department of Education's *Equity and Excellence for All* announcement, with three core tenets – empowering students for twenty-first century challenges, enriching the student experience, and embedding wellbeing while reducing excessive stress.[95]

Central to this reform is a move away from exclusive reliance on a single terminal written examination, through the introduction of broader assessment components, revised curricula and enhanced recognition of different ways of learning and demonstrating achievement.[96] The reform programme is informed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report 2022, which was based on extensive research and consultation conducted from 2016 to 2019, with students, parents, educators and wider stakeholders, and which emphasised the need for greater balance, flexibility and coherence across Senior Cycle.[97]

The Senior Cycle review and redevelopment programme in Ireland is informed by extensive evidence and consultation showing a need to broaden and rebalance what is valued, assessed and certified at the end of post-primary education by moving beyond an exam-dominant model and widening the definition of achievement. This is reflected in the Advisory Report's identification of broader assessment approaches and in the redevelopment

94 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report*; (NCCA 2022); Department of Education, Senior Cycle Redevelopment https://bit.ly/4rTGpSz accessed 16 February 2026.

95 Department of Education, *Minister Foley announces plan for reform of Senior Cycle education - Equity and Excellence for All* (Press Release 29 March 2022).

96 Department of Education, 'Senior Cycle Redevelopment' https://bit.ly/4azuKRA accessed 16 February 2026.

97 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA 2022).

vision of a Senior Cycle that delivers "equity and excellence for all" with greater emphasis on additional assessment components, alongside traditional examinations.[98]

In its Senior Cycle Reform Report, published after nationwide student consultations across 32 schools, the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) foregrounded student wellbeing, stress and the need for structured support mechanisms as being crucial to any senior cycle change.[99] The ISSU framed its recommendations around students' lived experiences, particularly noting that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated stress and mental health challenges for Senior Cycle cohorts and that current guidance and support systems were insufficient to help students to navigate both pandemic-related and systemic pressures.[100] The ISSU also noted that student voice and participation in discussions about reform is itself a wellbeing intervention, as it acknowledges and addresses the concerns of students about stress, mental health and the capacity of existing systems to respond.[101]

The *Programme for Government* sets out commitments on Senior Cycle Redevelopment and, separately, on reform of the CAO system, under the respective remits of the Department of Education and Youth and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which together form part of the wider policy landscape relevant to progression from post-primary education.[102] The commitment relating to CAO reform is tracked in more detail in here. In the *Programme for Government,* SCR is also situated within wider reform measures focused on equity, wellbeing and opportunity, recognising that changes to curriculum and assessment must be supported by aligned progression and system structures if they are to have meaningful impact.[103]

98 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report*; (NCCA 2022); Department of Education, Senior Cycle Redevelopment https://bit.ly/4rTGpSz accessed 16 February 2026.

99 Irish Second-Level Students' Union, *Senior Cycle Reform Report* (ISSU 2021) https://bit.ly/4c3j6kF accessed 16 February 2026.

100 Irish Second-Level Students' Union, *Senior Cycle Reform Report* (ISSU 2021) https://bit.ly/4c3j6kF accessed 16 February 2026.

101 Irish Second-Level Students' Union, *Senior Cycle Reform Report* (ISSU 2021) https://bit.ly/4c3j6kF accessed 16 February 2026.

102 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government* (2025).

103 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government* (2025) 66-74.

Children's rights

The right to education under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) extends beyond access to schooling to encompass the aims, quality and lived experience of education, including the development of the child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential and preparation for responsible life in society, which necessarily includes how learning is assessed and recognised.[104] Articles 28 and 29 require States to ensure education is accessible on the basis of equal opportunity and directed to the development of children's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential.[105] Under the UNCRC, education must be delivered on the basis of equal treatment and directed towards the child's full development and preparation for responsible life in society.[106] Ireland's most recent examination by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023 identified education among the areas requiring urgent measures, and critically for this policy context raised concern about "the discriminatory effect of the school leaving certificate and alternative methods of certification on children in disadvantaged situations".[107] This is directly relevant to SCR implementation and certification design. New assessment components, certification pathways, and progression mechanisms must be designed to reduce rather than reproduce inequality for children in disadvantaged circumstances.

While the UN Committee does not refer explicitly to Senior Cycle or national assessment models, its interpretation of these Articles emphasises that education systems for adolescents should support wellbeing, recognise diverse abilities, and prepare young people for further learning, employment and participation in society.[108] These principles are reinforced by other international standards-setting bodies, including the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which stresses that education must

104 Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 1989) 1577 UNTS (UNCRC) Arts 28–29; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 1: The Aims of Education* (2001) UN Doc CRC/GC/2001/1 paras 6–9.

105 Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 1989) 1577 UNTS (UNCRC) Art 29 (1)(a).

106 Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 1989) 1577 UNTS (UNCRC) Arts 2, Arts 28–29.

107 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland' (7 February 2023) CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 36(b).

108 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education* (CRC/GC/2001/1) paras 2, 9; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 20: The Implementation of the Rights of the Child during Adolescence* (CRC/C/GC/20) paras 18, 26, 67.

be adaptable and not indirectly discriminatory,[109] and by UNESCO, which has cautioned against over-reliance on high-stakes examinations and has emphasised the need for broader recognition of learning outcomes and more holistic assessment approaches in upper-secondary education systems.[110]

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

Since its launch in March 2022, Senior Cycle Redevelopment has moved from vision to early implementation and structural groundwork. A Senior Cycle Programme Delivery Board and a Senior Cycle Partners' Forum have been established to oversee implementation and ensure collaborative engagement with students, parents, teachers, school leaders and children's rights stakeholders.[111] The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published the *Senior Cycle Review Advisory Report*, which sets out purpose, vision and a multi-stage plan for redevelopment, and has begun rolling out work on pathways, curriculum components, and assessment, reporting and transitions.[112]

Budget 2026 provided specific support for ongoing curriculum reform efforts, including SCR. Within the overall allocation of €13.1 billion to the Department of Education and Youth, the budget committed an additional €19 million for the continuation of important curricular development and related teacher education, explicitly noting that this funding package supports the ongoing delivery of SCR alongside other planned enhancements in teaching and learning.[113] The Department has indicated that Budget 2026 also included funding specifically for the continuation of SCR. However, this allocation does not include substitution costs for teachers attending professional learning. It also does not include related capital investment, such as the €30 million

109 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 13: The Right to Education* (E/C.12/1999/10) paras 6–7, 31.

110 UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (UNESCO 2021); UNESCO, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?* (UNESCO 2015).

111 Department of Education, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment Board,* February 2024 https://bit.ly/46Kw2bt accessed 16 February 2026; Department of Education, *Senior Cycle Partners Forum,* February 2024 https://bit.ly/4ajadlE accessed 16 February 2026.

112 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA 2022).

113 Department of Education and Youth, *Ministers McEntee and Moynihan announce details of €13.1 billion education funding in Budget 2026* (8 Oct 2025) https://bit.ly/4rlOlw4 accessed 16 February 2026.

commitment under the Climate Action Summer Works Scheme to upgrade 60 science laboratories, which will support the delivery of revised science curricula at Senior Cycle.[114] While the budget does not itemise a separate, discrete school grant for SCR implementation, the curricular development funding will underpin system-level reform supports, and additional in-school supports such as implementation grants for science subjects and equipment for Phase One schools for the new subjects, which are tied to SCR rollout.[115] Broader Budget 2026 measures, including the provision of additional teaching posts and increases in school capitation funding, strengthen overall school capacity and therefore provide an important enabling context for the effective implementation of SCR.[116]

The Department of Education and Youth outlines a range of mechanisms through which young people have been engaged in SCR.[117] Student representation has been included in formal structures, most notably through the participation of the ISSU on the SCR Partners' Forum since 2023, supported by bilateral engagements with the SCR Programme Management Office.[118] Comhairle na nÓg has also presented findings of research they carried out with young people on school stress and their experiences and views on Senior Cycle to the Partners' Forum in November 2025.[119] At national level, student voice is represented on the NCCA Council through the rotating position of the ISSU President.[120] Young people have contributed to the redevelopment of subject specifications through NCCA consultations, including surveys and school-based focus groups.[121] The Department has also engaged with students through ISSU and Comhairle na nÓg events, targeted SCR workshops, panel discussions, outreach events, and student-focused launches of new subjects and programmes.[122] Student focus groups informed the SCR communications strategy, with draft materials circulated for

114 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 March 2026.

115 Department of Education and Youth, *Ministers McEntee and Moynihan announce details of €13.1 billion education funding in Budget 2026* (8 Oct 2025) https://bit.ly/4rlOlw4 accessed 16 February 2026.

116 Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, *Budget 2026: Expenditure Report* (Government of Ireland 14 October 2025).

117 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

118 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

119 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

120 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

121 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

122 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

feedback.[123] Young people have additionally participated in SCR conferences for school leaders, and information for students is provided through a dedicated gov.ie web page.[124]

Curriculum reforms

Subjects and programmes development

The NCCA has commenced redevelopment of subject specifications across the Senior Cycle, with changes being introduced across five tranches of subjects up to 2029.[125] New specifications for multiple subjects are in development, with the first tranche having been introduced into schools in 2025/2026. This includes Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Business, Ancient Greek, Latin and, Arabic.[126] Two new Leaving Certificate subjects - Drama, Film and Theatre Studies and Climate Action and Sustainable Development - are being introduced on a phased basis from the start of the 2025/2026 school year, with 100 post-primary schools selected for the Phase One rollout (57 offering Drama, Film and Theatre Studies and 43 offering Climate Action and Sustainable Development).[127]

New subjects

Two new Leaving Certificate subjects *Drama, Film and Theatre Studies* and *Climate Action and Sustainable Development* are being introduced on a phased basis from the start of the 2025/2026 school year

123 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth 26 January 2026.

124 Communication received by the Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 26 January 2026.

125 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Schedule of Senior Cycle subjects for redevelopment,* https://bit.ly/4akV2IH accessed 16 February 2026.

126 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Schedule of Senior Cycle subjects for redevelopment,* https://bit.ly/4akV2IH accessed 16 February 2026.

127 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Schedule of Senior Cycle subjects for redevelopment,* https://bit.ly/4akV2IH accessed 16 February 2026. Department of Education, *Phase One Schools Selected to Offer New Leaving Certificate Subjects of Drama, Film and Theatre Studies and Climate Action and Sustainable Development* (16 September 2024) https://bit.ly/4aRtgU9 accessed 26 February 2026.

The NCCA has developed a new Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), specification to support all student learning in Senior Cycle.[128] SPHE is a critical enabling pillar of Senior Cycle, supporting student wellbeing, relationships and rights literacy at a significant point of development and transition for young people. In its 2021 Senior Cycle consultations, the ISSU consistently reported that students value SPHE when it is delivered well, but highlighted uneven quality, limited time and variable teacher confidence as factors undermining its impact on mental health, stress management and emotional support for all young people seeking help during Senior Cycle.[129]

These concerns were reinforced in 2024 when the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) Youth Advisory Group appeared before an Oireachtas Committee.[130] Both the ISSU and the OCO Youth Advisory Group point to clear implementation risks, such as in the areas of consistent timetabling, effective teacher training and a whole-school commitment to SPHE – all of which are required to mitigate inequalities in wellbeing and student experience. From a children's rights perspective, effective SPHE delivery is not optional but a necessary safeguard to ensure the Senior Cycle experience aligns with the best interests of the child, supports student voice, and promotes equal access to well-being supports across schools.[131]

As part of Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR), new progression options have been introduced to widen subject access. Since the 2022/2023 school year, students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) can also study Mathematics and a Modern Foreign Language.[132] In addition, students in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) are no longer required

128 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)* https://bit.ly/4alG7xZ accessed 16 February 2026.

129 Irish Second-Level Students' Union, *Senior Cycle Reform Report* (ISSU 2021) https://bit.ly/4c3j6kF accessed 16 February 2026.

130 Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Ireland's International Obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 23 April 2024) https://bit.ly/4rv6RC7 accessed 16 February 2026.

131 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 4 (2003) on Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (13 February 2003) UN Doc CRC/GC/2003/4; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 12 (2009) on the Right of the Child to be Heard* (20 July 2009) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/12.

132 Department of Education and Youth and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Leaving Certificate Applied Programme* (Curriculum Online) https://bit.ly/3MtR4nW accessed 16 February 2026.

to meet specific subject-entry criteria in order to take Link Modules.[133] An updated Transition Year Programme Statement, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as part of Senior Cycle Redevelopment, was published in August 2024 and provides a revised framework for schools to audit and revise their Transition Year provision in the 2024/2025 school year, with implementation expected by schools from September 2025.[134]

Progress has been delivered for young people through the continued recognition, strengthening and protection of the Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1 LPs and L2 LPs) as integral Senior Cycle pathways for students with additional and complex learning needs. These programmes ensure that learners who are not accessing Leaving Certificate subjects can participate in a coherent, outcomes-focused programme aligned with Senior Cycle principles of inclusion, wellbeing and progression.[135] The L1 and L2 programmes are underpinned by clearly defined learning outcomes across areas such as personal care, communication, numeracy, social development and preparation for adult life, and are formally certified through the State Examinations Commission, providing national recognition of achievement.[136] Importantly, SCR has affirmed the status of L1 and L2 programmes as valid and valued pathways supporting continuity from Junior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes and strengthening progression routes to adult services, further education and training, and community participation.[137]

Assessment

SCR is introducing a revised assessment model that broadens evaluation beyond the traditional terminal written examination to include Additional Assessment Components (AACs) worth at least 40 per cent of the final subject

133 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme* (Curriculum Online). https://bit.ly/46w2fU3 accessed 16 February 2026.

134 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), *'New and revised subjects and programmes published'* (21 October 2024) https://bit.ly/468oKhv accessed 16 February 2026.

135 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA 2022); see also National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes at Senior Cycle* (NCCA).

136 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes* (22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/4azIsEl accessed 16 February 2026.

137 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes* (22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/4azIsEl accessed 16 February 2026.

mark in all Leaving Certificate subjects.[138] Under the revised model, AACs will be externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission, incorporating formats such as research projects, portfolios, performances, investigations and practical work to better capture a broader range of learning skills and competencies throughout the Senior Cycle.[139]

This represents a significant shift from the historic predominance of end-of-year exams. However, the concept of non-written assessment is not entirely new. Prior to SCR, approximately three-quarters of Leaving Certificate subjects already featured assessment elements beyond the written examination, including orals in languages, music performances, practical tests, aural tests and coursework.[140] These pre-existing components in subjects such as Irish (orals), Music (practical performance), Art (project) and Design & Communication Graphics (project) demonstrate that a diversity of assessment types was already embedded in the system.[141]

The new AAC framework therefore extends and standardises such approaches across the full suite of subjects, rather than relying solely on selective practical or performance components in a subset of subjects. The policy intent is to reduce the disproportionate emphasis on one single set of exams in June, align assessment with learning throughout the Senior Cycle, support wellbeing objectives by valuing diverse student strengths and learning styles, and provide evidence of applied and integrated competencies.[142]

Support for implementation

International evidence, national curriculum analysis and teachers' representative bodies all underline the fact that without adequate training, time and implementation supports, reform risks being experienced by young people as uneven, stressful and diminished in impact. The Organisation for

138 Department of Education and Youth, *Information for Schools on Delivering Revised and New Specifications* (27 Feb 2024) https://bit.ly/4aAgqsm accessed 16 February 2026.

139 Written Answers, *Education Policy Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Dáil Éireann, 8 Apr 2025) https://bit.ly/4aFV2BZ accessed 16 February 2026.

140 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Leaving Certificate Established* (CurriculumOnline.ie) https://bit.ly/4tFwXDS accessed 16 February 2026.

141 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Leaving Certificate Established* (CurriculumOnline.ie) https://bit.ly/4tFwXDS accessed 16 February 2026.

142 Carl O' Brien, 'Leaving Cert 2.0: What to expect from the reformed senior cycle' The Irish Times (14 Jan 2025) https://bit.ly/4tFM9B2 accessed 16 February 2026.

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has found that large-scale curriculum and assessment reform succeeds where teachers are sufficiently resourced, professionally supported and engaged, warning that inadequate implementation capacity can undermine learner outcomes and wellbeing.[143] The NCCA similarly identifies teacher capacity, professional learning and system supports as essential 'conducive conditions' for Senior Cycle reform, noting that changes to curriculum and assessment will directly shape students' classroom experience.[144]

The Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) emphasise the importance of considering implementation challenges for smaller schools, schools in areas designated disadvantage, Gaelcholáisti and Gaeltacht schools.[145] Challenges relating to funding, infrastructure, staffing availability and access to teaching resources in Irish require particular consideration in these contexts.[146]

In terms of implementation and communication supports, information notes for schools have been regularly published, assisting schools in understanding implementation schedules, changes to LCA and Senior Cycle subjects, and supporting teacher engagement with SCR.[147] While recent efforts to improve communication around Senior Cycle Redevelopment represent a positive first step, the scale and complexity of the reform and the inclusion of multiple stakeholders means that how information is communicated requires careful consideration, particularly to ensure accessibility for parents and students, proportionate length, and the use of clear and varied communication methods.

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143 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Education Policy Outlook 2025* (OECD Publishing 2025); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Teacher Professional Learning: Drawing Upon International Practice for a Future Vision* (OECD Publishing 2025); P. Gouëdard, B. Pont, S. Hyttinen Pinhsuan Huang, *Curriculum Reform: A Literature Review to Support Effective Implementation* (OECD Working Paper 2020).

144 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA 2022).

145 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union on 9 March 2026.

146 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union on 9 March 2026.

147 Department of Education and Youth, 'Senior Cycle Redevelopment' https://bit.ly/4qGafJ9 accessed 16 February 2026.

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The NCCA similarly identifies teacher capacity, professional learning and system supports as essential 'conducive conditions' for Senior Cycle reform, noting that changes to curriculum and assessment will directly shape students' classroom experience.

The statutory national provider of professional learning for teachers and school leaders, Oide, has delivered a coordinated programme of professional learning, guidance and school-based supports to underpin Senior Cycle Redevelopment, including national webinars, subject-specific and cross-curricular Continuous Professional Development, leadership supports and implementation resources to build teacher capacity for curriculum change, broader assessment practices and learner-centred pedagogy.[148]

In late 2024, both post-primary teacher unions sought a pause in elements of Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR).[149] In response, the Department of Education intensified engagement with the unions to clarify the scope of the concerns raised, consider the implications of delay, and explore how any pause might be used to address implementation challenges.[150] Following written submissions from both unions in March 2025, and careful consideration of issues relating both to SCR and to wider, long standing matters, the Minister for Education and Youth confirmed in April 2025 that Tranche 1 would proceed as planned. In doing so, the Minister emphasised the length of time committed to SCR since 2016, extensive stakeholder engagement, and significant revisions already made in response to union feedback, alongside the *Programme for Government* 2025 commitment to continuing Senior Cycle reform in the best interests of students.[151]

While acknowledging teachers' concerns, the Minister concluded that further delay would not serve learners and committed to intensified engagement to strengthen implementation supports.[152] Ongoing structured engagement between Department officials and unions led to proposals to further support schools, teachers and students.[153] While these proposals were accepted

148 *Senior Cycle Redevelopment Implementation Support Measures* (May 2025) accessed 16 February 2026.

149 Department of Education and Youth, *Statement from Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (8 May 2025) https://bit.ly/4rXi7XW accessed 16 February 2026.

150 Department of Education and Youth, *Statement from Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (8 May 2025) https://bit.ly/4rXi7XW accessed 16 February 2026.

151 Department of Education and Youth, *Statement from Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (8 May 2025) https://bit.ly/4rXi7XW accessed 16 February 2026.

152 Department of Education and Youth, *Statement from Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (8 May 2025) https://bit.ly/4rXi7XW accessed 16 February 2026.

153 Department of Education and Youth, *Statement from Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (8 May 2025) https://bit.ly/4rXi7XW accessed 16 February 2026.

by one of the teacher unions and not by the other, both unions have raised concerns regarding equity, resourcing and teacher training.[154]

Tranche 1 of SCR is therefore proceeding in a complex industrial relations context with continued concerns among some teachers about workload, capacity and the adequacy of school-level supports to realise reform ambitions.[155]

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents both a significant opportunity and a material implementation risk for Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR). While SCR planning has begun to recognise the implications of AI, including the provision for the establishment of a working group to examine the appropriate use of artificial intelligence in teaching, learning and assessment in the context of Senior Cycle Redevelopment,[156] policy and practice in this area remain at an early stage of development.

The absence of clear guidance on the use of Artificial Intelligence in teaching, learning, and assessment has raised concerns for teachers

Submissions to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth during 2025 show that post-primary teacher unions, including the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland TUI), have raised concerns about the absence of clear, authoritative guidance on

154 Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025); Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025); Joint Committee on Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/46V3Z9g accessed 16 February 2026.

155 Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, *ASTI Rejects Proposed Senior Cycle Redevelopment Implementation Supports* (ASTI Press Statement, April 2025) https://bit.ly/4rRjasb accessed 16 February 2025; Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025); Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025); Joint Committee on Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 16 and 22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/4reBqvG https://bit.ly/46V3Z9g accessed 16 February 2026.

156 Department of Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment Implementation Support Measures,* Section 6.5, (May 2025) https://bit.ly/4blWkSN accessed 13 March 2026.

acceptable and ethical AI use in teaching, learning and assessment particularly in the context of Additional Assessment Components (AACs), warning that inconsistent school-level responses risk undermining assessment integrity and equity for students.[157] The Irish Science Teachers' Association has echoed these concerns, initially producing its own unofficial AI guidance for teachers in the absence of national direction, a step which illustrates the level of professional need and systemic policy gaps.[158]

Organisations, including the National Youth Council of Ireland and the Ombudsman for Children Office, have identified that young people are already using AI extensively for learning and study, and that policy responses must prioritise digital literacy, equity of access, clarity on acceptable use and protection from harm, rather than punitive or exclusionary approaches.[159] AAC guidance published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment requires students to acknowledge sources used in coursework and project work and to ensure that submissions represent their own work, requirements which also apply where AI tools are used.[160] In addition, the State Examinations Commission's *Coursework Rules and Procedures 2025/2026* sets out the acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI tools in coursework and the procedures that apply where breaches of assessment regulations occur.[161]

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has recognised the emerging implications of generative AI for assessment and has commissioned research examining its potential impact on high-stakes examinations.[162] In parallel, national guidance has begun to emerge. The Department of Education and Youth, with support from Oide Technology in Education, published Guidance on AI in Schools under the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 to support

157 Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland, *Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (ASTI, October 2025); Teachers' Union of Ireland, *Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (TUI, October 2025).

158 Irish Science Teachers' Association, *ISTA Guidance on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Teaching and Assessment* (ISTA, 2024/2025).

159 Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, *Artificial Intelligence Children and Young People,* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 23 September) https://bit.ly/4kHCNAG accessed 16 February 2026.

160 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Subject Specifications* (NCCA 2023–2025).

161 State Examinations Commission, *Coursework Rules and Procedures 2025/2026* (SEC, September 2025).

162 Dáil Éireann, *Parliamentary Debates*, Written Answers, 3 April 2025 (Question No 217, Deputy Aidan Farrelly to the Minister for Education, Artificial Intelligence) https://bit.ly/40qgwhx accessed 13 March 2026.

teachers and school leaders in developing understanding and responsible practice in relation to AI use.[163]

While some guidance has begun to emerge, the pace at which AI tools are developing raises broader questions about how coursework, assessment integrity and the development of subject knowledge and skills should be protected in an evolving technological environment. AI is a tool that needs to be understood and could be used in coursework but excessive reliance on AI-generated outputs could risk students failing to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to flourish in a subject. As AI capabilities continue to evolve, the design and structure of assessment may therefore require ongoing review.

Diverse skills and development

Senior Cycle Redevelopment has begun to deliver more diverse skills development for young people by explicitly re-orienting Senior Cycle learning towards key competencies (knowledge, skills, values, attributes) that students develop across subjects and modules, and by designing assessments to better capture those competencies in practice.[164] The shift towards broader assessment in Senior SCR is operationalised through new and revised subject specifications and Additional Assessment Components (AACs), which complement traditional written examinations and are designed to assess students' skills and key competencies in ways that terminal written examinations cannot - including research, performance and practical investigation formats.[165]

Implementation resources and professional learning materials that support schools with SCR have been published, including Schools Information Notes updating communities on SCR roll-out and professional learning materials designed to help schools plan for and embed investigative, practical and project-based Additional Assessment Components alongside written

163 Department of Education and Youth, *Guidance on Artificial Intelligence in Schools* (Department of Education and Youth, October 2025) https://bit.ly/4cQNSO5 accessed 13 March 2026.

164 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), *Key Competencies in Senior Cycle* (NCCA 2024).

165 Department of Education and Youth, *Information for Schools on Delivering Revised and New Specifications* (27 February 2024, updated 13 February 2026) https://bit.ly/3OkSQlu accessed 16 February 2026.

examinations, as well as leadership-focused professional learning to support whole-school planning, teaching, learning and assessment.[166]

Senior Cycle Redevelopment places a strong emphasis on the development of key competencies and skills through teaching and learning across the full three years of Senior Cycle, including Transition Year. Within this broader framework, the State Examinations Commission plays a central role in the external assessment and certification of learning, including the assessment of Additional Assessment Components (AACs). Guidance to support the implementation of AACs has been developed as part of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment process, involving the NCCA and the State Examinations Commission, with support from the Department of Education and partners such as Oide to assist schools in introducing these new assessment elements. As implementation progresses, ensuring that the pace of rollout and the level of system support available to schools are sufficient to realise the full ambition of the intended skills reform will be an important consideration.

The ASTI's survey of teachers on AACs reports significant dissatisfaction with the proposed minimum 40 per cent weighting in subjects that previously had no such component, signalling risks around workload, feasibility and consistency of implementation.[167] The TUI has cautioned that AACs must meaningfully measure skills not captured in written examinations, as otherwise they risk becoming tokenistic and distorting the intent of assessment reform.[168] While SCR has clearly advanced a competency-based vision and the structures to broaden skills recognition, the extent to which young people experience genuinely improved, equitable skills development will depend on appropriate and sustained implementation supports, assessment relevance and system readiness.

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166 Department of Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment: Schools Information Note (September 2025)* (Oide, 12 September 2025) https://bit.ly/4cwzdao accessed 16 February 2026.

167 Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), *Senior Cycle Redevelopment: Additional Assessment Components (AACs) –survey of teachers* (ASTI/REDC, January 2025) https://bit.ly/4tDq4TH accessed 16 February 2026.

168 Joint Committee on Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/46V3Z9g accessed 16 February 2026; Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025).

The NCCA has also begun work on flexible pathways through Senior Cycle. In 2025, NCCA launched a Senior Cycle Pathways Project, working directly with 14 representative schools to develop proposals for more flexible and responsive pathways that support diverse student progression; these proposals are intended to inform a public consultation in 2026.[169] This project is grounded in the broader understanding of Senior Cycle as comprising multiple programme routes including Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Established, LCVP, LCA, and Level 1/Level 2 Learning Programmes and the integration of key competencies across learning areas.[170] The work of the Pathways Project reflects NCCA's role in ensuring that curriculum structures and student progression options align with the redeveloped vision of Senior Cycle, supporting both equity and choice. While early in development and not yet a published framework, the initiative represents a significant contribution to pathways thinking as part of SCR.[171]

The Department of Education and Youth has indicated that a number of Department officials sit on a Pathways and Transitions Group, an inter-departmental working group of DEY and DFHERIS, with membership comprised of officials of both Departments. The role of the group is to facilitate mutual collaboration on issues and developments relating to transitions from post-primary to further and higher education and the world of work, supporting effective policy implementation and, ultimately, improved experience and outcomes for young people.[172]

Reducing stress

According to the Department of Education and Youth, the Senior Cycle Redevelopment programme is explicitly designed to reduce exam-related stress and improve students' assessment experience through a package

169 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Pathways Project in Senior Cycle (NCCA, 22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/469CiJJ accessed 16 February 2026; NCCA, *Senior Cycle Pathways Project Information Bulletin 1 2025* (NCCA 2025) https://bit.ly/4tEM9RN accessed 16 February 2026.

170 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Programmes* (NCCA 2026) https://bit.ly/3MgPiXg accessed 16 February 2026; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Key Competencies* (NCCA, 10 March 2025) https://bit.ly/4rjqLQi accessed 16 February 2026.

171 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Senior Cycle Pathways Project Information Bulletin 1 2025* (NCCA 2025) https://bit.ly/4tEM9RN accessed 16 February 2026.

172 Communication received by the Childrens Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 26 January 2026.

of interconnected reforms.[173] Central to this approach is a shift in how assessment is experienced by young people, including the introduction of Additional Assessment Components (AACs) in Leaving Certificate Established subjects to spread assessment over time, reduce reliance on a single terminal written examination, and diversify assessment modes.[174] The teaching and learning associated with AACs is to be integrated across the course of study in a given subject, rather than something additional.[175] The programme also commits to reducing the number and duration of terminal written examinations, conducting early reviews of new subject specifications to monitor impact, and expanding pathways across Senior Cycle by lowering barriers between Leaving Certificate programmes.[176]

The Department has also identified student support teams as a central part of the student support system in a school. The student support team acts as the overarching entity concerned with the progressing of actions for the welfare and wellbeing of all students. It is a mechanism through which many of the existing student supports are coordinated and planned. Through implementing a continuum of support, the student support team can provide for 'the educational, social, emotional, behavioural and learning needs of all, some and few students to ensure their ongoing wellbeing'.[177]

Despite the existence of a substantial and consistent evidence base highlighting the scale and impact of school and Leaving Certificate-related stress on young people, SCR has not yet put in place a mechanism to measure, monitor or publicly report on whether its stated objective of reducing student stress is being realised in practice. The ISSU has documented high levels of stress among Senior Cycle students, including at the Joint Oireachtas Committee in October 2025, indicating that a significant majority

173 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

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175 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

176 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 13 January 2026.

177 Communication received by the Childrens Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 26 January 2026.

of students experience high or very high exam-related stress.[178] Youth-led evidence from the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive identified school stress as a national priority based on consultations with thousands of young people.[179] The Ombudsman for Children's Office has further situated Leaving Certificate stress as a children's rights concern, referencing UN Committee findings that Irish young people experience disproportionate levels of mental stress and calling for reform that meaningfully reflects children's voices.[180]

The Department of Education and Youth have indicated that the scoping exercise for the evaluation of SCR implementation has commenced and is due to conclude by the end of Quarter 1 2026.[181] It has also identified that reducing student stress levels was identified as one of the central tenets on which SCR is founded and as such, the consideration of the impact of SCR implementation on reducing young people's stress levels will form part of the evaluation.[182]

While SCR explicitly articulates stress reduction as an intended outcome which is evident in commitments to broader assessment approaches, wellbeing and skills development, to date no baseline indicators or evaluation framework have been published to assess change in student stress levels over time. In the absence of agreed metrics or reporting arrangements, and notwithstanding the alignment of reform design with student-identified stress drivers,[183] it is not currently possible to identify and evaluate what has been achieved for young people to date in terms of reduced stress, nor to assess whether implementation is delivering on one of SCR's central policy aims.

178 Joint Committee on Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/46V3Z9g accessed 16 February 2026; Irish Secondary Students Union (ISSU), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025).

179 Comhairle nan Og, *Comhairle na nÓg National Executive 2024-2026 Begins Work on School Stress* (5 September 2024) https://bit.ly/4tG0OvS accessed 16 February 2026.

180 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Children's voice not strong enough in Leaving Cert reform – Ombudsman for Children* (Press Release, 9 November 2021).

181 Communication received by the Childrens Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 26 January 2026.

182 Communication received by the Childrens Rights Alliance from the Department of Education and Youth on 26 January 2026.

183 Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Joanne Banks, *Student, Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Senior Cycle Education* (ESRI Research Series No 94, 2019).

Children's rights and equality

Senior Cycle represents one of the most important reforms in education and it has broken new ground when it comes to involving children and young people in decision-making. For example, the ISSU is an important partner in the Department of Education and Youth's Stakeholder Forum, and has been invited several times to present to the Programme Board. The ISSU is also represented on the NCCA which oversees subject development. Young people have also been important partners in providing feedback and shaping the communications around the Senior Cycle redevelopment programme.

Government national policy framework that requires all Departments to prioritise children's rights in decisions affecting them

However, at the same time, the SCR has not to date been subject to a formal Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). A CRIA is a decision-making framework that helps decisionmakers understand how children's rights, as laid out in the UNCRC and other international human rights treaties, may be affected by a proposal law, policy or decision.[184] SCR directly affects children's rights to education, wellbeing, non-discrimination and participation, yet to date there is no mechanism to systematically assess its differential impacts on diverse groups of learners. The Government's own national policy framework, *Young Ireland (2023–2028)*, commits all Departments to placing children's rights "foremost" in decisions that affect their lives and explicitly promotes the use of impact assessment tools to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking.[185] The Department has indicated that it proposes to carry out a CRIA on Senior Cycle Redevelopment in conjunction with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality as part of the SCR Progamme evaluation, which will be advanced during Quarter 2 of 2026 and this is very welcome. This needs to be supported by a widespread consultation with young people and a plan for implementation.

184 Payne, L., 2020. *ENOC synthesis report*, (ENOC 2020) 11.

185 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (Government of Ireland 2023) 12–15.

Equality and equity issues have also come up as an issue under the SCR. In January 2025, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) used its statutory powers under Section 32 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 to invite the State Examinations Commission to review how the Reasonable Accommodations at State Examinations scheme (RACE), which provides accommodations such as modified papers, additional time and digital delivery for students with disabilities, is administered, with a specific focus on accessibility and equality of opportunity for candidates with visual impairments.[186] While this review arises in the context of the broader State examinations system rather than directly from Senior Cycle Redevelopment, it highlights important considerations regarding accessibility and equality within assessment arrangements. This review has since been completed, including consultation and stakeholder engagement and the SEC has now agreed to prepare and implement an Equality Action Plan aimed at strengthening equality of access to State Examinations for students with visual impairments.[187] The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has called on the SEC to consider consultation with young people with visual impairments and to address the design of modified examination papers, the provision and delivery of digital examination papers, the accessibility of application procedures, consistency of treatment for all students with visual impairments, and the accessibility of information published by the SEC.[188]

While this is a welcome development, it only applies to the examinations process. There is a need to carry out a much broader review of the SEC programme as a whole so the rights and needs of other young people can be identified and addressed. There is significant evidence of socio-economic inequality and barriers experienced by young people with disabilities and minority ethnic backgrounds, including Travellers and Roma. The SEC reform process needs to embed equality of opportunity in the centre of its overall approach.

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186 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *IHREC invites State Examinations Commission to undertake an equality review of the RACE Scheme*, 6 January 2025 https://bit.ly/4tEp9SX accessed 16 February 2026.

187 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *Commission welcomes State Examinations Commissions agreement to undertake Equality Action Plan on accessibility of State Examinations* https://bit.ly/3OPCsju accessed 4 March 2026.

188 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *Commission welcomes State Examinations Commissions agreement to undertake Equality Action Plan on accessibility of State Examinations* https://bit.ly/3OPCsju accessed 4 March 2026.

What do children and young people need next?

The year 2026 marks a decade since the NCCA began its consultation on what reform at Senior Cycle level should entail and could be a critical delivery year for Senior Cycle Redevelopment (SCR). The 2025/2026 academic year sees the introduction of the newly developed subjects in Tranche 1 in fifth year and the first roll-out of the two new subjects Drama Theatre and Film Studies and Climate and Sustainable Development. Progress is evident in the areas of curriculum and assessment reform. However the commitment to wider skills development and reducing stress for young people must now move decisively from policy intent to lived experience.

Senior Cycle Redevelopment represents a significant opportunity to reshape young people's experience of post-primary education in Ireland. To date, progress has been made in establishing the architecture of reform and in engaging students through consultation and representative mechanisms. As SCR enters the implementation phase, continued attention to governance and delivery mechanisms will be important to support consistent outcomes. In particular, strengthening approaches to youth participation, evaluation, rights and equality analysis, AI governance and monitoring of student stress would help ensure that reform objectives are fully realised in practice.

At this stage in the SCR programme, it is also worth considering other areas not covered by the programme such as guidance. The ASTI, TUI and ISSU have highlighted that guidance capacity has not been formally embedded, resourced or planned for as part of SCR implementation, creating a potential delivery risk for young people as complexity increases.[189]

189 Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025); Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), *Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth on Senior Cycle Redevelopment,* (Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Youth, 22 October 2025); Joint Committee on Education and Youth, *Senior Cycle Redevelopment* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 22 October 2025) https://bit.ly/46V3Z9g accessed 16 February 2026; Irish Second-Level Students' Union, *Senior Cycle Reform Report* (ISSU 2021) https://bit.ly/4c3j6kF accessed 16 February 2026.

Recommendations

- Complete a wider equality review of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment programme. Ensure that both the CRIA and the equality review include a strong youth engagement.
- Reconsider the approach to learning and assessment under the State Examination Commission in light of the availability and evolving capacity of artificial intelligence as a matter of urgency.
- Ensure that young people are involved in the design of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment evaluation framework with agreed indicators on student stress, workload, learning experience, equity and progression, supported by routine student feedback and public reporting.

3

Housing and Homelessness

Section 3.A
Child and Family Homelessness

Section 3.B
International Protection Accommodation

3.A

Child and Family Homelessness

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Continue to roll out the largest social housing programme in the history of the State, building on average 12,000 new social homes per annum, with local authorities playing a key role in the delivery of this goal.	Insufficient	D
Continue the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme to prevent homelessness, with annual targets and budgets assigned for each local authority.	Slow	C
Ensure a holistic, cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention.	Limited	D
Provide emergency accommodation for everyone who needs it, with special supports for children impacted by homelessness.	Slow	C
Fully implement the Youth Homelessness Strategy.	Slow	D+

The new *Programme for Government* provides a much-needed focus and commitment to tackle the ongoing housing crisis in Ireland. The commitments contained in the document seek to address a number of inter-related issues which will ultimately seek to break the entrenchment of child and family homelessness.

The Government receives a 'D' grade for its commitment to build an average of 12,000 new social homes each year. It is welcome to see the Government ramp up its targets to deliver new-build social housing. Reaching this target will help to expand the social housing stock and address the significant need for secure accommodation, including for 19,088 families on the waiting list. However, in its first year in office the Government has failed to meet the target, with just 9,089 new social homes being built in 2025. The Government is already 3,000 homes below target.

The Government receives a 'C' grade for its continued support for the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme. This measure was introduced following the lifting of the eviction ban in 2023. It represents an important intervention to both prevent children and families from experiencing homelessness and to help them to exit emergency accommodation. While it is welcome to see the Government continue to invest in this measure, the scale of the child and family homelessness crisis means that the impact often barely dents the numbers continuing to present and become trapped in emergency accommodation.

Ensuring a cross-departmental approach to homeless prevention receives a 'D' grade. Under Pillar 2 of the *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030* the Government commits to the development of a homeless prevention framework. However, despite the high levels of child and family homelessness, apart from a reference in the housing action plan there has

been no progress on developing either the framework or an implementation plan to sit alongside it.

The provision of emergency accommodation and special supports for children impacted by homelessness receives a 'C' grade. Throughout 2025 the number of children and families living in emergency accommodation continued to rise. By December 2025, there were 5,188 children and 2,478 families living in homeless accommodation. It is welcome that Government will finally begin to address the harm caused by homelessness by developing a cross-Government child and family homelessness action plan guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The commitment to fully implement the youth homelessness strategy receives a 'D+' grade. The number of young people in emergency accommodation continued to rise throughout 2025. While there were some successes under the *Youth Homelessness Strategy*, such as the Supported Housing for Youth, there is a need for a renewed focus to tackle homelessness amongst this group through meaningful cross-Government action.

Introduction

Housing is one of the most significant social issues facing the country for children, young people and families. At a national level the challenges with supply are a number of years in the making. The slowdown in construction following the Global Financial Crisis in the late 2000s, coupled with a failure to keep supply up with a growing population, have been key drivers of the significant challenge Ireland faces in relation to housing.[1] In the late 1990s and early 2000s construction exceeded population growth. However, the recovery

1 Department of Finance *Future Forty: A Fiscal and Economic Outlook to 2065* (Government of Ireland 2025) 61.

in construction output, following the collapse of output in the early 2010s, and in particular the low level of output in 2013, has not rebounded enough to be in line with an increase in the population.[2] Therefore, 'considerably more supply is still needed to satisfy demand'.[3]

It is unsurprising that tied to a lack of supply is the issue of affordability. Over a ten-year period from 2015 to 2025, house prices have increased by 50 per cent in Dublin and closer to 100 per cent in other parts of Ireland.[4] In 2023, Ireland was categorised as 'Seriously Unaffordable' in an examination of middle-income housing affordability across 94 major markets in eight countries, including the Dublin market in Ireland. [5]

Similar issues are evident in the Private Rental Sector. The availability of properties to rent in February 2026 is just two-fifths of the 2015-2019 average.[6] The contraction of supply is most evident at the lower end of the market with just 31 properties available to rent within any HAP limit in December 2025.[7] Households with particular challenges in terms of affordability included those renting privately and those on low incomes.[8] Therefore, low-income families in this tenure had a heightened risk of becoming homeless.

Global evidence reviews have found that homelessness is associated with multiple negative physical, mental, and behavioural health outcomes, with the duration of homelessness compounding and elevating the risk of adverse outcomes.[9] Children who experience homelessness are more likely to have developmental and learning delays, as well as poorer academic attainment.[10]

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2 Department of Finance Future *Forty: A Fiscal and Economic Outlook to 2065* (Government of Ireland 2025) 61.

3 Department of Finance Future *Forty: A Fiscal and Economic Outlook to 2065* (Government of Ireland 2025) 61.

4 Daft.ie The *Daft.ie House Price Report An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential sales market 2025 Q1* (Daft.ie 2025) 3.

5 Wendall Cox *Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* (Chapman University 2024) 8.

6 R. Lyons *2025 Q4 – Year in Review Daft.ie Rental Report* https://bit.ly/3NgzFzm accessed 4 March 2026.

7 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market December 2025* (2026) 2.

8 Eoin Corrigan et al 'Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market' (2019) *Economic and Social Review*, 50 (1), pp. 119-157.

9 Laura E. Gultekin et al, 'Health risks and outcomes of homelessness in school-age children and youth: a scoping review of the literature' (2020) *Journal of School Nursing* 36(1) 10-18.

10 Saskia D'Sa et al, 'The psychological impact of childhood homelessness—a literature review' (2020) *Irish Journal of Medical Science*.

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.[11] 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.[12] 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 wellbeing, along with reports of 'greater conflict and less closeness'.[13]

Under Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), all children have the right to an adequate standard of living to meet their physical and social development. In cases where parents or carers are unable to provide this, the State must assist by providing 'material assistance and support programmes particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing'.[14]
The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on its recent examination of Ireland's record under the Convention called on the Government:

> [...] to address the root causes of homelessness among children, strengthen measures to phase out temporary and emergency accommodation schemes and significantly increase the availability of adequate and long-term social housing for families in need.[15]

In addressing the root causes of homelessness among families with children and young people living independently, the Government needs to increase the supply of affordable housing and at the same time grow the social housing stock for families that need it. The Government also needs to put in place a plan to phase our temporary and emergency accommodation and ensure that families with children and young people benefit from housing security.

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11 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.

12 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.

13 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth *Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing* (ESRI 2024) vi.

14 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3(UNCRC) Art 27.

15 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (28 February 2023), Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland, para 35, at b.

The *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future,* was published on 23 January 2025 and emphasises both the social and economic importance of housing and its effect across the lifecycle. With substantial challenges in this area, the Government commits to 'a radical step change in housing supply'.[16] While acknowledging the progress made under *Housing for All*[17], the Government commits to developing a new, fully funded plan to build more homes. Increasing supply will be a central aspect of tackling the housing crisis and the Government commits to building record levels of social housing and delivering an overall increase in supply of 300,000 new homes by the end of 2030.[18] Given this ambitious commitment, and acknowledging the harm caused by homelessness, housing insecurity and inadequacy, a number of key commitments to track as part of Report Card have been identified:

- Continue to roll out the largest social housing programme in the history of the State, building an average of 12,000 new social homes per annum, with local authorities playing a key role in the delivery of this goal.
- Continue the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme to prevent homelessness, with annual targets and budgets assigned for each local authority.
- Ensure a holistic, cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention.
- Provide emergency accommodation for everyone who needs it, with special supports for children impacted by homelessness.
- Fully implement the Youth Homelessness strategy.

On 13 November 2025 the Government published a new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 – An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness*.[19] The plan has two pillars – *Activating Supply* and *Supporting People*.

16 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government Securing our Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 40.

17 Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning *Housing for All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland* (DHLGP 2021).

18 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government Securing our Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 40.

19 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 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).

Over the duration of the plan, and in line with the *Programme for Government,* is a commitment to deliver 300,000 homes (across all tenures) with the *Activating Supply* pillar focused on creating an enabling environment and infrastructure to underpin this delivery. This includes ensuring that there is an adequate pipeline of land available; developing the conditions needed to attract investment; increasing skills and the adoption of *Modern Methods of Construction* in building homes and working to reduce and end dereliction and vacancies.[20] Delivering on the level of output committed to under the plan will require significant investment from the Exchequer, including €20 billion to support new social and affordable housing delivery.[21]

The second pillar of the plan focuses on people and a series of actions needed to end homelessness, supporting affordability and addressing the housing needs of people throughout their lives. Under this pillar, 12,000 social homes will be delivered each year. Specific actions on homelessness and the delivery of homes for older people and other groups with particular needs, such as disabled people and Travellers are outlined. Affordable home ownership along with affordability measures for renting and greater protections for renters will be advanced. Under this pillar, there will also be investment in the built environments in communities across the country.[22]

20 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.

21 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) 44.

22 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.

Commitment

Build an average 12,000 new social homes per annum

Section Grade

A B C- D E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

One of the most important commitments in the *Programme for Government* is the pledge to deliver 12,000 new social homes per annum.[23] This is set within an overall target of delivering 300,000 homes across all housing tenures by 2030.[24] The responsibility to provide social housing in Ireland lies with the local authorities.[25] The Housing Act 1988 requires housing authorities to provide housing to individuals unable to provide it from their own resources and to regularly assess the number of individuals or households in need of housing in their designated area.[26] When making these assessments, the Council is required to have regard to the housing need of persons who are: homeless; living in unsuitable accommodation; living in overcrowded accommodation; are sharing accommodation with another person and have a reasonable requirement for separate accommodation; are young persons leaving institutional care or without family accommodation; are in need of accommodation for medical or compassionate reasons; are older or disabled.[27]

Once an individual or household has been assessed as being in need of housing support, social housing support may be provided in a number of ways by the local authority. This includes renting a property owned by or leased long-term by a local authority or Approved Housing Body (AHB) or, the provision of Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) to rent a property from a private landlord.

The latest available information on the assessment of housing needs relates to November 2024.[28] In summary, the assessment found that there were 59,941 households qualifying for social housing support, a 1.9 per cent increase on 2023. Of all households identified on the housing list and in need of

23 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government Securing our Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 40.

24 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government Securing our Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 40.

25 Housing Act 1988, S.9.

26 Housing Act 1988, S.9.

27 Summarised from section 9, Housing Act 1988.

28 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024 – Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.

social housing support, 32 per cent (19,088) included children.[29] This was a decrease of 1,844 households, based on the 2023 figures.[30]

19,088

households with children in need of social housing

However, the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) states that households in receipt of HAP lack the security of tenure provided by local authority housing and therefore have an ongoing need for social housing.[31] The PBO refer to an investigation into HAP carried out by the Ombudsman in 2025 which highlighted the absence of a security of tenure and a lack of transparency on how these households are managed on local authority housing waiting lists.[32] The PBO argue that 'ongoing need acknowledges that these households lack a guaranteed right to social housing if their tenancy ends'.[33] Based on communications with *HAP Shared Services* in 2025 this amounts to an additional 34,867 households with children.[34]

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*. 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.

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

29 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments2024– Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.

30 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024 – Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2025), 35.

31 Parliamentary Budget Office *Ongoing Need 2024 – The True Demand for Social Housing* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2025) 3.

32 Parliamentary Budget Office *Ongoing Need 2024 – The True Demand for Social Housing* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2025) 3.

33 Parliamentary Budget Office *Ongoing Need 2024 – The True Demand for Social Housing* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2025) 3.

34 Parliamentary Budget Office *Ongoing Need 2024 – The True Demand for Social Housing* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2025) 5.

programmes.[35] The Government's new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities,* acknowledges that on average roughly 8,000 new build social homes were being delivered annually. To align with the commitment to build 12,000 new social homes, the plan acknowledges that there is a need to substantially scale-up delivery over the period 2025-2030.
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. During this period, while there was an incremental increase in the target set each year, the final output was under target in all three years. 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 Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) delivered just 5,047 and 1,126 homes respectively.[36] Overall, local authority output comprised of 40 per cent from turnkey properties, while for AHBs this was substantially higher at 89 per cent.[37]

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.[38] 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'.[39]
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.[40] A state construction company could ensure greater

35 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).

36 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4tAkBNj accessed 17 February 2026.

37 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4tAkBNj accessed 17 February 2026.

38 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.

39 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.

40 Social Democrats 'A Proposal for a State Construction Company' https://bit.ly/3McTxml accessed 17 February 2026.

alignment with social goals around housing as opposed to leaving it to market forces driven by a profit motive.

Despite the publication of the *Programme for Government* in January 2025, and its commitment to build 12,000 new social homes in 2025, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage continues to track 2025 output in line with the previous housing plan *Housing for All.*[41] Therefore, in 2025, the target being tracked and reported on is 10,000 new social build social homes.[42] This represented a slight increase on the 2024 target of 9,300.[43]

In March 2026, the final new build social housing output figures for 2025 were published.[44] This showed that 9,089 new build social houses were delivered, representing a 16 per cent increase in activity compared to 2024.[45] There were 2,869 houses delivered by local authorities, 4,215 units delivered through AHBs and 2,005 through Part V.[46] However, the overall output was just 91 per cent of the *Housing for All* target of 10,000 units to be delivered in 2025.

9,089

new build social houses delivered in 2025

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.

41 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4qN3vKl accessed 29 January 2026.

42 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4qN3vKl accessed 29 January 2026.

43 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4qN3vKl accessed 29 January 2026.

44 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).

45 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).

46 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' https://bit.ly/4rg83lH accessed 5 March 2026.

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.[47]

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.[48] 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.[49] 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.[50]

What do children and young people need next?

Based on the *Programme for Government* commitments, it could take less than five years for the Government to accommodate the 19,088 households with children on the social housing list and the additional 34,867 dependent on HAP. However, this does not factor population growth or the number of households without children also with an ongoing social housing need. At the same time, it means it is achievable in the lifetime of this Government to make a significant dent in the numbers on the housing waiting list and in providing greater security of tenure for those families on a low income, in receipt of HAP, and potentially at risk of homelessness in the private rented sector.

The final 2025 new social housing build figures show the Government has failed to reach the target set out in its own *Programme for Government*.

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47 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' https://bit.ly/4rg83IH accessed 5 March 2026.

48 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' https://bit.ly/4rg83IH accessed 5 March 2026.

49 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' https://bit.ly/4rg83IH accessed 5 March 2026.

50 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Social Housing New Build Output 2025' https://bit.ly/4rg83IH accessed 5 March 2026.

The delivery of just over 9,000 new build social homes is welcome, but it represents just 75 per cent of the target to build 12,000 new social homes each year. This means in 2026 the Government is already 3,000 homes behind target.

There is an indication of increased construction activity across all sectors with the CSO reporting that just over 36,000 dwellings were completed in 2025, a welcome increase of 20 per cent on 2024 and the highest number since 2011.[51] However, this is also far below the annual average output needed to fulfil the *Programme for Government* commitment to deliver 300,000 homes in five years.

In recognition of the need to increase targets and the level of output of new social homes, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030* sets out a number of key actions to create a more enabling environment for social housing construction. This includes introducing single stage approval for smaller developments, like those under €200 million in value; advancing delivery in both local authority and Approved Housing Body sectors by embedding the use of a 'Design and Build contract' approach and expanding the use of the Land Acquisition Fund.[52]

Recommendations

- 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.
- Increase new build local authority housing activity and decrease reliance on the market as a means of delivering output.

51 Central Statistics Office *New Dwelling Completions Q4 2025* (CSO 2026).

52 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) 78.

Commitment

Continue the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme to prevent homelessness, with annual targets and budgets assigned for each local authority

Section Grade

A B C D E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

Evictions are one of the drivers of homelessness, so the Programme for Government commitment to continue the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme is an important measure. In the Dublin Region during the six-month moratorium on evictions from October 2022 to March 2023, the percentage of new family presentations due to a Notice of Termination was 25 per cent.[53] While the moratorium on evictions reduced the proportion of families presenting to Dublin homeless services once it was lifted the numbers rose again. In April 2023, immediately after the moratorium over half (55 per cent) of families presenting to Dublin homeless services were due to a Notice of Termination. [54] In May, the figure was 43 per cent.[55]

More comparative date has been captured nationally in 2024 and 2025 on the proportion of families presenting to homeless due to a Notice of Termination through the Homeless Quarterly Progress Report. In 2024, 42 per cent of the 1,749 families presenting to homeless services had been given a Notice of Termination in the private rental sector.[56] In 2025, there were 1,887 families presenting to homeless services with 38 per cent related to a Notice of Termination. [57] However, in real terms this amounted to a decrease of just two families due to the higher overall number of families presenting to homeless services.

Following the lifting of the eviction ban in March 2023, the Government announced increased measures to acquire properties to prevent homelessness.[58] The Tenant in Situ Scheme, a priority category under the Second-Hand Acquisitions Programme[59], allows a local authority to purchase

53 DRHE *Monthly Report Monthly Report on Homelessness In Dublin Region* (DRHE various months 2022 and 2023).

54 DRHE *Monthly Report Monthly Report on Homelessness in Dublin Region* (DRHE April 2023).

55 DRHE *Monthly Report Monthly Report on Homelessness in Dublin Region* (DRHE May 2023).

56 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports 2024* (2024 &2025).

57 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports 2025* (2025 and 2026).

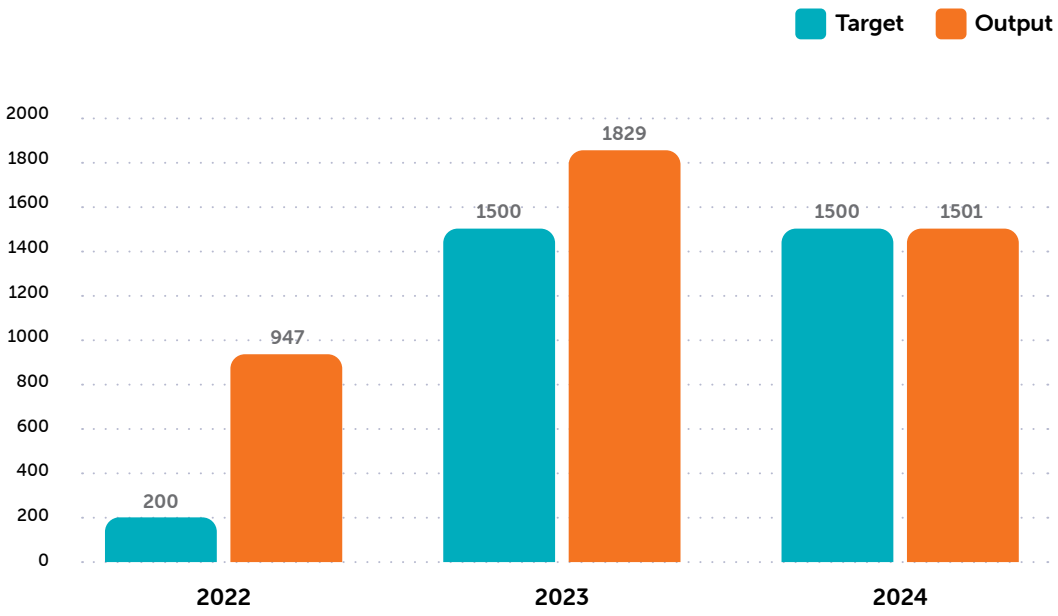
58 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Government Counter Motion on the Private Members Business: Motion re Eviction Ban', (Press Release 21 March 2023).

59 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 27 February 2026.

a property where a tenant faces eviction due to the landlord selling the property. There is a particular focus on properties where landlords are exiting the market, and the tenant is in receipt of social housing supports (such as HAP).[60]

In contrast to the challenges to deliver on the new build targets, acquisition output was exceeded in all three years – 2022, 2023 and 2024 - although in the latter year this was by just one unit. In 2022, the output of the social housing acquisition target was exceeded by 747, while in 2023 there was an extra 329 units acquired over a revised target of 1,500.[61] The substantial increase in the target for the acquisition of social homes can in part be attributed to the new scheme introduced in 2023.

Social Housing Acquisition 2022 to 2024 – Target v Output



Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4qN3vKl accessed 29 January 2026.

However, in terms of a homeless prevention measure, there has been a reduction in the impact that the initiative has had with 759 families prevented from entering homelessness in 2024 through the Tenant in Situ Scheme

60 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Government Counter Motion on the Private Members Business: Motion re Eviction Ban', (Press Release 21 March 2023).

61 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4qN3vKl accessed 29 January 2026.

but just 240 benefitting in 2025. This may be indicative of slight change in emphasis away from the scheme be a preventative measure and towards a focus on an exit pathway for families already in homeless accommodation.

In March 2025, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage announced that the Government had approved an additional €265 million in funding for acquisitions.[62] Amongst the priority areas are exits from homelessness and the Tenant in Situ Scheme along with an emphasis on supporting acquisitions for families and children.[63] In total, the Government made €325 million available in 2025 for local authorities to purchase second-hand properties. This will include a focus on the Tenant in Situ Scheme in instances where tenants are in receipt of HAP or Rental Accommodation Scheme and have received a notice of termination.[64] By January 2026, 89 per cent of this allocation (or €291 million) had been drawn down.[65]

A breakdown of the allocation by local authority shows that 47 per cent (€152 million) of the €325 million, was apportioned to the four Dublin local authorities, with €150 million drawn down.[66] The target for 2025 was set at 200 properties, with 461 properties acquired by the end of Quarter 3 2025. In the two previous years, the initial target of 200 properties was increased to 1,500 and on both occasions, this was exceeded.[67]

Under *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030,* the Second-Hand Social Housing Acquisitions Programme will seek to ensure that families and individuals in the most precarious housing situations are supported. This Programme will address tenancy sustainment and include responses for

62 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister Browne announces extra €265 million in funding for housing acquisitions' (Press Release 4 March 2025).

63 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister Browne announces extra €265 million in funding for housing acquisitions' (Press Release 4 March 2025).

64 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister Browne announces extra €265 million in funding for housing acquisitions' (Press Release 4 March 2025).

65 Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage James Browne TD, Housing Schemes, Written Answers 20 January 2026 [3745/26].

66 Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage James Browne TD, Housing Schemes, Written Answers 20 January 2026 [3745/26].

67 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Housing for All Social Housing Delivery v Targets' https://bit.ly/4qN3vKl accessed 29 January 2026.

people with a disability, care leavers and Housing First tenancies.[68] While the Tenant in Situ Scheme was introduced as a measure to prevent homelessness, there has been some criticism of the scheme. The implementation of the scheme has been found to be more complex than originally anticipated by one AHB.

Another AHB noted that following the government announcement to increase the use of the Tenant in Situ Scheme, they diverted time and resources away from their existing building and procurement work and towards this prevention measure.[69] The AHB identified two different situations where the Tenant in Situ Scheme could be used – once-off units with small scale landlords and multi-unit developments with one or more landlords.[70] Complexities soon emerged with the latter such as other tenancies in the development not being eligible for the Tenant in Situ Scheme.[71]

Further issues in using the scheme arose when the AHB was unofficially informed that the funding source to be used is one only available to local authorities. This resulted in only purchases then in the pipeline being allowed to proceed while closing off future projects.[72] There were also a number of issues with the administration of the scheme including the length of time the process took, resulting in some landlords pulling out because there were insufficient resources allocated to local authorities for the scale of the work involved.[73] The AHB also needed to consider the 'opportunity cost if the same staff had not been diverted from the original programme of acquisition of untenanted homes and construction projects'.[74]

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68 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.

69 Focus Ireland 'Internal Review of Focus Housing Association engagement with Tenant-in-situ scheme' (Focus Ireland 2024).

70 Focus Ireland 'Internal Review of Focus Housing Association engagement with Tenant-in-situ scheme' (Focus Ireland 2024).

71 Focus Ireland 'Internal Review of Focus Housing Association engagement with Tenant-in-situ scheme' (Focus Ireland 2024).

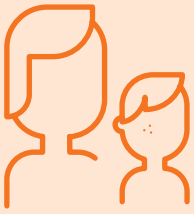
72 Focus Ireland 'Internal Review of Focus Housing Association engagement with Tenant-in-situ scheme' (Focus Ireland 2024).

73 Focus Ireland 'Internal Review of Focus Housing Association engagement with Tenant-in-situ scheme' (Focus Ireland 2024) 7.

74 Focus Ireland 'Internal Review of Focus Housing Association engagement with Tenant-in-situ scheme' (Focus Ireland 2024) 6.

Therefore, while the scheme is a positive initiative, its administration has perhaps hampered its impact.

At the extreme end of long-term homelessness, 20 per cent of families in emergency accommodation were there for over two years at the end of 2025.[75] While there are consistent patterns in the proportion of families in long-term homelessness, the actual number of families this impacts is increasing all the time in line with the continued upward trend in the numbers in homeless accommodation. In total, at the end of December 2025 one-third of families were in emergency accommodation for 18 months or more.[76] For a child or young person of any age, this is a significant amount of time in their development, education and childhood.



One third

of families were in emergency accommodation for 18 months or more

While the vast majority of families living in emergency accommodation are in the Dublin region, 71 per cent, they account for 90 per cent of families trapped in this accommodation for over two years.[77] 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.[78]

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.[79] 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

75 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026).

76 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026).

77 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026).

78 Laurie O'Donnell, Aisling Slein, and Daniel Hoey *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024).

79 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.

to the original €325 million allocated to second-hand acquisitions to date in 2025 (see section on Tenant-in-Situ Scheme).

What do children and young people need next?

There remains a significant proportion of families presenting to homeless services due to a Notice of Termination.

The Tenant in Situ Scheme is an important measure in terms of preventing families from entering homelessness in the first place. It is essential that funding for this scheme continues and that local authorities and AHBs work collaboratively to use it as an important means of preventing families entering emergency accommodation.

Funding for the Second-Hand Social Housing Acquisitions Programme in 2026 amounts to €373 million, an additional €80m on the €290m funding drawn down by local authorities in 2025.[80] The funding includes €150 million ringfenced for families exiting long-term homeless accommodation and €50m for Approved Housing Bodies (AHB) to provide accommodation for elderly or disabled persons and care leavers. There will be €157 million available to local authorities to use at their discretion, including for tenancy sustainment or tenant-in-situ acquisitions.

Additional funding is needed to support those families trapped in emergency accommodation long-term. Most families in emergency accommodation for the longest periods are located in the local authorities in the Dublin Region. Research indicates that these are larger families whose needs may not be met through the current housing stock. There is a need to identify ways to access larger four-to-five-bedroom properties in order to enable them to exit emergency accommodation. In regions outside Dublin, the development of specific and achievable targets to support families spending the longest time in emergency accommodation could be set to reduce the impact that the harm caused by homelessness has on them.

80 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage '€373 million announced as available for drawdown under the 2026 Second Hand Social Housing Acquisitions Programme' (Press Release 24 February 2026).

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.[81] 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.[82] Furthermore, prioritising long-term homelessness is a central focus of the Second-Hand Social Housing Acquisitions Programme.[83]

Recommendations

- Maintain funding for the Tenant in Situ Scheme and prioritise the acquisition of homes that meet the needs of families in, or at risk of, homelessness.
- Prioritise the acquisition and new build of four-bedroom houses in the Dublin region to reduce the number of families spending the longest time in emergency accommodation.
- To maximise the impact of the Tenant in Situ Scheme, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and local authorities should engage with AHBs to identify how the scheme can be implemented in a more effective and efficient way.

81 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.

82 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.

83 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.

Commitment

Cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention

Section Grade

A B C **D** E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

The *Programme for Government* includes a commitment to implement a 'cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention'. This would echo the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendation to Ireland that it should focus on the root causes of homelessness. There are many routes into homelessness. These can be categorised as being; structural – such as the ongoing housing crisis and the lack of access to affordable housing; institutional – which can be related to situations such as a young person leaving State care; and personal - this can include issues related to addiction, mental health or the break-up of a family or relationship.[84] A recently-published small study on family homelessness noted that one-third of the sample became homeless due to their private rental sector landlord selling the property they were living in.[85] For one-parent families financial inadequacy, housing market dynamics and relationship breakdown were key overlapping drivers for experiencing a personal housing crisis, including homelessness. Many also experienced domestic abuse and this was a contributing factor.[86]

The *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports* published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provide insights about the number of families presenting to emergency accommodation as well as the number of those families prevented from entering such accommodation.[87] Data from 2023 and 2024 highlights how integral prevention work has become in partially stemming the flow of families entering homeless accommodation. In 2023, this data showed that 50 per cent of families presenting to homeless services were prevented from entering emergency accommodation.[88] The *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report* notes the reason that families were prevented from entering homeless accommodation was due to a tenancy being created.[89]

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84 Peter McVerry Trust 'Causes of Homelessness' https://bit.ly/49TMpoc accessed 3 February 2026.

85 L. O'Donnell, A. Slein, & D. Hoey *Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Focus Ireland 2024) 17.

86 S. Sheridan *Lone Parents and Homelessness in Ireland Experiences and Interactions with Public Services* (Focus Ireland 2025) 56.

87 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports* https://bit.ly/49QYXvn accessed 23 January 2026.

88 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

89 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

This increased to 56 per cent in 2024, or an additional 638 families, prevented from entering homeless services.[90] However, an increased number of presentations to emergency accommodation (762 families) meant the total number of families entering homelessness was higher in 2024 (1,764)[91] than in 2023 (1,640).[92] In 2025, the number of overall presentations fell to 3,471 with the percentage of families prevented from entering emergency accommodation falling to 45 per cent.[93] Despite a higher level of presentations in 2025 compared to 2023, the prevention work seems not to have had the same impact as a lower proportion of families were prevented from entering emergency accommodation.

Therefore, while prevention work does continue to have a positive effect, the scale of presentations to homeless services means that it is having insufficient impact either through the lack of adequate resources or the implementation of a strategy unable to keep up with demand.

Number of Families Presenting to and Prevented from Entering Homeless Services 2023-2025

Item	2025	2024	2023
Presented to emergency accommodation	3,471	4,026	3,264
Prevented from entering homeless services	1,584	2,262	1,624
Percentage of families prevented from entering emergency accommodation	45%	56%	50%
Net number of families experiencing homelessness	1,887	1,764	1,640

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024; Quarter 4 2023; Quarter 4 2025 (DHLGH 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026).

90 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

91 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2024* (DHLGH 2025).

92 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2023* (DHLGH 2024).

93 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2025* (DHLGH 2026).

A review of the international evidence suggests affordable rents and legal protections for tenancy rights are key components of effective homelessness prevention strategies.[94] Specific aspects of homelessness prevention include having housing rights services available where homelessness may arise from illegal action from landlords and systems to:

- Prevent eviction by negotiation/working with landlords,
- Prevent homelessness arising from discharge from institutional settings,
- Detect and intervene in situations of domestic violence or abuse which may trigger individual or family homelessness,
- Stop unplanned moves in the event of relationship or family breakdown,
- Ensure an unwanted move does not result in homelessness and that alternative housing is available.[95]

While these systems are important, they need be established alongside 'rapid rehousing services and homelessness services' which can ensure that homelessness is only experienced for a short time.[96] Therefore, homeless prevention is intricately reliant on the creation of new homes through a social housing building programme.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and other housing entities, both statutory agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), can play a lead role in the initiation and implementation of actions on homelessness prevention. However, it is critical that they collaborate with other actors, such as those charged with domestic violence responses, family support services and organisations engaged with individuals at risk of homelessness on discharge from institutions. Therefore, a cross-government approach is critical in order to ensure that prevention work has a meaningful impact.

94 Nicholas Pleace, *Preventing Homelessness: A Review of the International Evidence* (Simon Communities of Ireland 2019) 7.

95 Nicholas Pleace, *Preventing Homelessness: A Review of the International Evidence* (Simon Communities of Ireland 2019) 7.

96 Nicholas Pleace, *Preventing Homelessness: A Review of the International Evidence* (Simon Communities of Ireland 2019) 7.

Preventing homelessness was a key priority action for the Government according to its last housing strategy, *Housing for All*.[97] However, there was a lack of specific actions or commitment to develop an action plan or framework as to how this will be delivered. An analysis of the expenditure for *Homeless Prevention, Tenancy Sustainment Resettlement Supports* shows that while the overall percentage of expenditure in this category has fallen from 10 per cent in 2013 to 5 per cent in 2024, the actual funding allocation has risen almost four-fold, from €5.7 million in 2013 to €21.4 million in 2024.[98] However, this ramping up of funding was insufficient to stem the tide of homelessness in 2024.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 sketches out what a framework for homelessness prevention could look like.[99] 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.[100]

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 identifies the involvement of a number of different actors, including government departments, state

97 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland* (DHLGP 2021) 50.

98 Eoin O'Sullivan, Emma Byrne & Mike Allen, *Focus on Homelessness* (Focus Ireland 2025) 9.

99 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.

100 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.

agencies, local authorities and NGOs.[101] 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.[102] While the commitment to developing a framework is welcome, there needs to be specific actions and timelines for implementation set out in a detailed plan.

What do children and young people need next?

While the commitment to develop a homeless prevention framework is welcome, there is no specific mention of children or families. There needs to be trackable actions to prevent child and family homelessness that can be monitored and evaluated over time. This is further emphasised in the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office's analysis of Budget 2026.[103] The documents notes that while Budget 2026 provides an increased level of funding to address homelessness, including preventative work, there is no specific detail on the amount of funding targeted towards children and families. [104] This is despite the disproportionate impact that homelessness is having on these households. The Government has committed to developing a new Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan. As part of this plan, specific actions to prevent homelessness using the framework to be developed by the Department could be identified.

In 2026, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will publish the homeless prevention framework. It is critical that the framework is accompanied by an implementation plan to allow for the monitoring and oversight of actions to prevent homelessness. Consideration should be given to what key performance indicators can be tracked over time in order to evaluate the impact that the strategy is having and whether adjustments need to be made to specific actions. This includes determining the impact that actions are having on preventing child and family homelessness specifically.

101 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.

102 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.

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

104 Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Wellbeing'* (Government of Ireland 2025).

Recommendations

- In 2026, publish the homeless prevention framework and an implementation plan that allows actions to be monitored and tracked over time. This includes specific actions that prevent children and families experiencing homelessness. These actions should also be captured in the new Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan with the aim of ultimately reducing the number of children and families exposed to the harm of homelessness.

Commitment

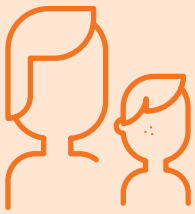
Emergency accommodation provision and special supports for children impacted by homelessness

Section Grade

A B C D E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

Since 2014, the number of children and families living in emergency accommodation has risen rapidly, and though this trend abated somewhat towards the end of 2019 and during part of the Covid-19 pandemic, it increased again and has continued to rise from the end of 2021.[105] Over the duration of the last *Programme for Government*, the number of children living in emergency accommodation increased by 2,005.[106] Correspondingly, family homelessness increased by 87 per cent.[107]



Over 50%

of families in emergency accommodation are headed by a lone parent

As negotiations for the new *Programme for Government* got underway in January 2025, the Department of Housing recorded that there were 4,510 children living in emergency accommodation.[108] By July the sustained increase in the number of children living in homeless accommodation meant the total had reached over 5,000 children.[109] By the end of 2025 this had risen to 5,188.[110] In parallel the number of families has increased from 2,164 in January[111] to 2,478 by December 2025[112] with over 50 per cent of all families in emergency accommodation consistently being headed by a lone parent.

105 See Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homelessness Data* https://bit.ly/4rNmp4v and Focus Ireland, *Knowledge Hub: Latest Figures,* https://bit.ly/3Z7s33f, accessed 29 January 2025.

106 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homelessness Report June 2020* and *November 2024* (DHLGP 2020 and 2024).

107 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Monthly Homelessness Report' (various years).

108 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Monthly Homelessness Report: December 2024* (DHLGP 2025).

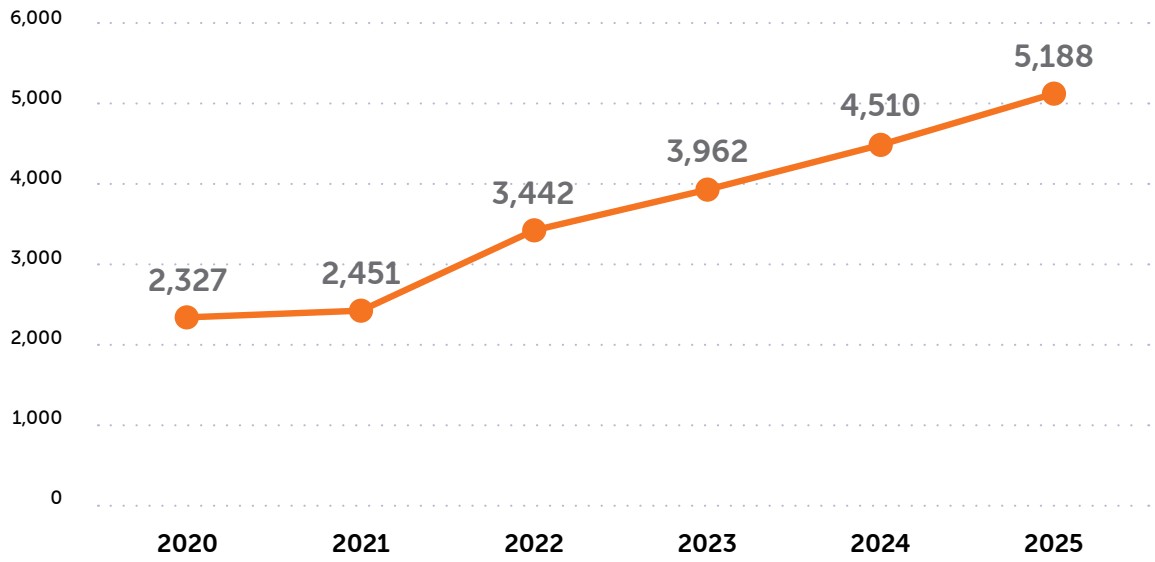
109 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homelessness Report July 2025* (DHLGH 2025).

110 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homelessness Report December 2025* (DHLGH 2026).

111 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homelessness Report January 2025* (DHLGH 2025).

112 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Monthly Homelessness Report December 2025* (DHLGH 2026).

Number of children living in Emergency Accommodation 2020-2025



Note: All data relates to December of each year.
Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Monthly Homelessness Report (various years – all data relates to December).

At the end of Quarter 1 2024, there were 2,000 families living in emergency accommodation[113] and by Quarter 4 2025, this had risen to 2,473 families.[114] Three-quarters of families in emergency accommodation at the end of 2025 were there for over six-months, meaning the vast majority of families are being trapped in long-term homelessness.

In response to the harm caused by homelessness and housing instability it is not surprising that there have been calls for targeted interventions for children living in emergency accommodation. This has included calls from charities working directly with children and families experiencing homelessness[115] and the Ombudsman for Children.[116] In 2019, two Joint Committees in the Houses

113 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Homeless Quarterly Progress Report – Quarter 1 2024' (DHLGH 2024).

114 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Homeless Quarterly Progress Report – Quarter 4 2025' (DHLGH 2026).

115 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.

116 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' (24 June 2025) https://bit.ly/4r1OP9T accessed 21 January 2026.

of the Oireachtas recommended increased supports for children living in such circumstances, including child support workers.[117]

Under the last housing strategy, *Housing for All*, Action 3.16 committed to enhance family support and prevention and early intervention services for children and their families through a multi-agency and coordinated response and to disseminate innovative practice.[118] Such interventions are critical as they provide tailored support to help children and their families deal with the trauma of homelessness and/or the challenges that they face before becoming homeless, or in some instances both of these contexts.[119] They also help children to address some of the negative impacts of homelessness, along with helping to reduce the pressure and stress on parents.[120]

The Department of the Taoiseach identifies family homelessness as one of the six priority areas in the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office.[121] Amongst the key issues that the Programme Office committed to focus on are actions to prevent and reduce the impact of homelessness for children as well as the role of family support services in helping families to transition to stable accommodation and promoting innovative solutions to address family homelessness.[122] Work undertaken by the Programme Office on the issue included the hosting of two cross-government workshops at senior level to take stock of current initiatives aimed at ending family homelessness.[123] The purpose of the workshops was to identify the challenges and opportunities in addressing family homelessness, and to explore responses to realise the ambition to end family homelessness.[124]

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117 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).

118 Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning *Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland* (DHLGP 2021) 55.

119 Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' https://bit.ly/42iT85F accessed 29 January 2024.

120 Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' https://bit.ly/42iT85F accessed 29 January 2024.

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

122 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023) 16.

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

124 Government of Ireland *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office* (Government of Ireland 2025) 28.

Children's Rights Alliance members working on the frontline with children and families experiencing homelessness have identified the need for these targeted interventions, dedicated and tailored to meet the needs of children and young people.[125] An estimated 10-to-20 per cent of families engaged in Focus Ireland services have more complex support needs, as these children will require a designated Child Support Worker to help them navigate their journey in homeless services and more importantly, their exit out of homelessness.[126]

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 reiterates the Government's commitment to the *Lisbon Declaration* to end homelessness by 2030.[127] 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 enhanced 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 in allocating 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.

125 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 4 March 2026; Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' https://bit.ly/42iT85F accessed 4 March 2026.

126 Focus Ireland *Pre-Budget Submission 2025* (Focus Ireland 2024).

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) 60.

- The plan also commits to improved data collection which will include capturing statistics on the number of children and families supported to exit homelessness each quarter along with data on families that spend the longest time in homeless emergency accommodation.[128]

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 April 2026.[129]

On 19 January 2026, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage published a public call for submissions on the key priority areas and additional measures to tackle child and family homelessness.
Just over one-third, or 36.6 per cent of those on the housing list were living with their parents, relatives, and/or friends.[130] While there is no further detail about how many individuals or families are experiencing overcrowding in such instances, it is becoming a growing issue with negative consequences for children and their families.

128 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.

129 David Kelly *Homelessness Discussion* 16 December 2025. Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage Houses of the Oireachtas.

130 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2024* (Government of Ireland 2025).

What do children and young people need next?

Over the lifetime of the last Government, the issues of child and family homelessness deepened with record numbers living in emergency accommodation. In the first year of the new *Programme for Government* these figures remained at record high levels and disappointingly, there has not even been a marginal decrease in numbers in emergency accommodation. The passing of the threshold of over 5,000 children living in emergency accommodation in 2025 is an indication of how deeply entrenched this crisis is. The latest data on the numbers living in emergency accommodation shows a seasonal dip for December, given that many families may temporarily be in accommodation with family and friends for Christmas.[131]

In 2026, the Government needs to focus on identifying ways to mitigate the harm being caused to children and families experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

One approach that could be considered in the development of the new Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan is to mirror the European Commission's Recommendation *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage.* The recommendation sets out a concrete roadmap for addressing child poverty which draws on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[132] It provides European Union Member States with a common framework to ensure synergies across policy areas along with considering the specific local, regional and national needs. The recommendation sets out a three-pillar approach which focuses on adequate resources and affordable quality services and the right to participate. Adopting such an approach could have measurable impact on both children currently living in emergency accommodation and insecure housing situations. It would map out the needs of children across Government and provide specific actions for state agencies and departments to deliver on.

131 Keith Adams, 'Homelessness: Why Do The Figures Drop in December?', Blog post 3 February 2023, (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland).

132 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C(2013) 778.

Recommendations

- Develop a comprehensive child and family homelessness action plan which includes actions across all Government departments and agencies that impact on children's lives. This should include an implementation plan which allows for monitoring of key actions, capturing the impact that they have on both reducing the number and the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on children and their families. The scope of a dedicated strategy should take account of other situations of housing inadequacy having a detrimental impact on children, young people and their families.

Commitment

Implementation of the Youth Homelessness Strategy

Section Grade

A B C D+ E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

The *Programme for Government* commits to implementing the Youth Homelessness Strategy. Evidence suggests that children and young people have a different pathway into homelessness than adults and they have their own distinct needs requiring their own strategies.[133] The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is also clear that homeless adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the experience of institutional and interpersonal violence and that States must provide special protections to these children to mitigate risk of abuse and exploitation.[134] The Committee emphasises that interventions on youth homelessness are most beneficial when the children are active partners in assessing needs and devising solutions, rather than passive beneficiaries. Authorities and decision-makers should recognise that children living on the streets, while vulnerable, can also be highly resilient, and must consider children's views.[135]

For many young people experiencing homelessness, addressing intersectionality is key.[136] Young people from the LGBTI+ community, those with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, and young women are all groups that are identified as having an increased risk of homelessness.[137] As a result, there is a need for services to address their unique needs.[138] Complexity in family relationships, challenges around mental health and addiction, and discrimination in relation to housing supply are further challenges to addressing youth homelessness.[139]

133 FEANTSA, *European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness* (FEANTSA 2019) 4 <https://bit.ly/4qGUQsT> accessed 21 January 2026.

134 UNCRC, General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent health and development in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC/GC/2003/4, paras 23, 36.

135 UNCRC, General Comment No. 21 (2017) on children in street situations, CRC/C/GC/21, para 3

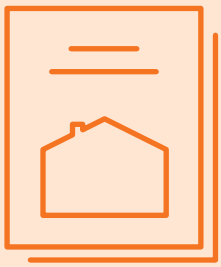
136 FEANTSA, *European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness* (FEANTSA 2019) 4 https://bit.ly/4qGUQs accessed 21 January 2026.

137 FEANTSA, *European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness* (FEANTSA 2019) 4 https://bit.ly/4qGUQsT accessed 21 January 2026.

138 FEANTSA, *European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness* (FEANTSA 2019) 4 https://bit.ly/4qGUQsT accessed 21 January 2026.

139 FEANTSA, *European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness* (FEANTSA 2019) 4 https://bit.ly/4qGUQsT accessed 21 January 2026.

In November 2022, the Government published the *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025*. The development of the *Strategy* included consultations with young people who have experience of homelessness.[140] This Strategy establishes a holistic approach to tackling the issue of youth homelessness with clear cross government actions to be delivered with the potential of having a positive impact on reducing youth homelessness. It addresses three goals:



Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025

1. **Prevent Young People Entering Homelessness.**
2. **Improve the Experiences of Young People in Emergency Accommodation.**
3. **Assist Young People Exiting Homelessness.**

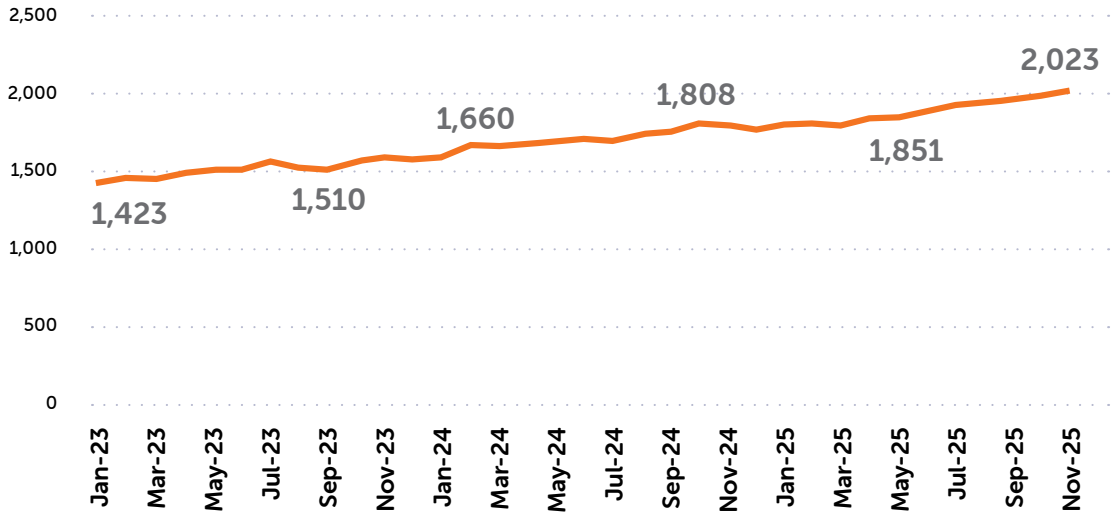
The *Strategy* identifies specific actions for target groups such as Travellers, members of the LGBTI+ community, care leavers, disabled people and individuals leaving prison services.[141]

In the two years following the publication of the *Strategy*, the number of young people living in emergency accommodation rose from 1,423 in January 2023 to 1,775 in December 2024 and to 2,017 in December 2025.

140 A total of 25 young people, between 19 and 26 years of age engaged in the consultation process. Nine of those consulted were from the Traveller community. Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 8 December 2022.

141 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 8 December 2022.

Young People (18-24 years) in Emergency Accommodation 2023 to 2025



Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Monthly Homelessness Reports (2023, 2024 and 2023).

The National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC) was set up following the publication of the last housing strategy, *Housing for All*.[142] In 2023, the key priority areas for NHAC included the actions contained in the National Youth Homelessness Strategy alongside homelessness prevention.[143] In order to oversee the implementation of the *National Youth Homelessness Strategy*, a Steering Group was established in January 2023.[144] An implementation plan was developed by this group which was updated on progress on an ongoing basis. [145]

In June 2024, an 18-month progress report on the implementation of the *Strategy* was published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.[146] At the time of the progress report's publication all 27 actions under

142 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 28 January 2022.

143 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 12 January 2024.

144 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 14 January 2025.

145 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 14 January 2025.

146 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025 18-month Progress Report* (Government of Ireland 2024).

the *Strategy* had commenced.[147] However, at this mid-point in the lifetime of the strategy, just four actions had been completed.[148] Completed actions included the finalisation of Tusla's *Strategic Plan for Aftercare 2023-2025* which was published in 2023;[149] the inclusion of young people in Regional Homelessness Action Plans; a review of supports that could be made available to young pregnant women in homelessness; and a guide on the supports available to young people leaving homelessness.[150] By February 2025, seven actions were completed.[151]

The NHAC continued to meet throughout 2025 and progress on the implementation of the *National Youth Homelessness Strategy* remained an agenda item for these meetings. The minutes of the Quarter 1 NHAC noted that 2025 marked the last year of the *Strategy* and there was a conscious effort to ensure that 'all measures have a lasting impact beyond the end of the Strategy'.[152] The latest available minutes relate to September 2025 whereby a recommendation was to be provided to the Minister as to what should happen to the strategy as it came to an end, with an acknowledgement from the Department that there was much more to achieve in this area.[153] Under *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030* Action 5.8 aims to mainstream actions from the Youth Homelessness Strategy across Government including the Supported Housing for Youth and Shared Accommodation Scheme. A sub-group of the NHAC will oversee progress and further action on youth homelessness.[154]

One of the key actions arising under Strategic Aim 3 is the Supported Housing for Youth (SHY) housing-led initiative. This commenced on a pilot basis in

147 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025 18-month Progress Report* (Government of Ireland 2024) 3.

148 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025 18-month Progress Report* (Government of Ireland 2024) 3.

149 Tusla, *Strategic Plan on Aftercare Services for Young Adults*, (TUSLA 2023).

150 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025 18-month Progress Report* (Government of Ireland 2024).

151 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 5 February 2025.

152 NHAC 'Minutes of Q1-25 Meeting' https://bit.ly/4biPdML accessed 27 January 2026.

153 NHAC 'Minutes of Q3-25 Meeting' https://bit.ly/4sUK9o2 accessed 27 January 2026.

154 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.

2024.[155] Under the pilot, 25 young people were to exit from emergency accommodation in the Dublin region to their own accommodation with wraparound supports.[156] The first anniversary of SHY occurred in October 2025. The pilot has been delivered through a partnership approach between Cluid Housing Association and Focus Ireland.[157] There were 15 young people from the age of 18-24 who moved into 'safe, stable homes after experiencing homelessness, including emergency accommodation' who benefited from the programme.[158] An independent evaluation of the pilot is currently underway and this is due to be finished in mid-2026.[159]

What do children and young people need next?

The National Youth Homeless Strategy was due to conclude in 2025 and over the course of the year youth homelessness has continued to rise. A renewed focus on youth homelessness is very much needed under the new Programme for Government. Over the 12-month period in 2025, the number of young people living in emergency accommodation continued to rise against the backdrop of the strategy coming to its end date. There has been some success under the strategy with the piloting of the SHY initiative. However, the number of young people benefitting from this pilot is significantly lower than even the growth in youth homelessness in 2025. The forthcoming evaluation of SHY could provide important evidence base as to how the Government can increase its impact and develop it as an important means of support for young people in or at risk of homelessness. Further evidence is also needed to evaluate the impact of the National Youth Homeless Strategy and to examine whether the actions contained within it are adequate to address the scale of the problem. The commissioning of an independent evaluation of the strategy would help to inform the future direction needed to tackle youth homelessness.

155 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 14 January 2025.

156 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 14 January 2025.

157 Cluid Housing 'Supported Housing for Youth marks its first anniversary', Press Release 23 October 2025.

158 Focus Ireland 'Focus Ireland Marks One Year of Supported Housing for Youth Programme Tackling Youth Homelessness, Press Release 23 October 2025.

159 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Minister Browne marks success of Supported Housing for Youth (SHY) initiative supporting young adults out of homelessness', Press Release 23 October 2025.

Recommendations

- Commission an independent evaluation of the National Youth Homelessness Strategy. If needed, adjust the implementation of the Strategy to address emerging challenges.
- Publish the evaluation of the Supported Housing for Youth (SHY) pilot and scale up the implementation of the project across the country.

3.B

International Protection Accommodation

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Delivering a fair, efficient, and sustainable model of accommodating applicants (for international protection). We will move away from the emergency use of hotels for housing and put in place facilities for those seeking protection on state land.	Limited	D

Commitment

Delivering a fair, efficient, and sustainable model of accommodating applicants (for international protection).

Section Grade

A B C **D** E F

Delivering a fair, efficient, and sustainable model of accommodating applicants (for international protection).

We will move away from the emergency use of hotels for housing and put in place facilities for those seeking protection on state land.

Introduction

The system for providing accommodation to international protection applicants, known as Direct Provision, was introduced in Ireland in April 2000. It is a system of housing and subsistence provided through segregated, institutional accommodation centres. It has historically been a mix of state-owned permanent International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) centres, commercial permanent IPAS centres and commercial emergency accommodation.[160] In January 2026, there were 49 permanent IPAS centres (this could be both state-owned and commercial), 260 emergency accommodation centres, one national reception centre, the Citywest transit hub and two tented accommodation centres.[161] They accommodate 33,288 international protection applicants, of whom 9,831 are children.[162] The International Protection Accommodation Service moved from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth during the term of the previous Government, to the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration during the current Government.

49 permanent IPAS centres

260 emergency accommodation centres

1 national reception centres

2 tented accommodation centres

160 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

161 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 4 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4kgHcKz> accessed 30 January 2026.

162 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 4 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4kgHcKz> accessed 30 January 2026.

There has been repeated and sustained criticism of the Direct Provision system on human rights grounds since its introduction, by domestic bodies, as well as the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.[163] Criticism centred on interference with children's rights to private and family life[164] and breaches to the right to an adequate standard of living,[165] the right to survival and to the highest attainable standard of nutrition.[166] Criticism also focused on the institutionalisation associated with living in the Direct Provision system and how it adversely impacts a child's mental wellbeing and physical development.[167] The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires States to assist all children seeking refugee status and to ensure they can access the full range of convention rights, including the right to housing.[168] The UN Committee states that to ensure children in the context of international migration have a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual and moral development, States must take appropriate measures to implement this right, including by providing material assistance with housing.[169] State parties should also develop detailed guidelines on standards of reception facilities, ensuring adequate space and privacy for

163 UNHCR, IHREC Designate*, Roundtable on the Asylum process and Direct Provision System: Challenges and Solutions from a Human Rights and Equality Perspective* (2014). Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), *Report on inspection of the child protection and welfare services provided to children living in Direct Provision accommodation under the National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children, and Section 8(1) (c) of the Health Act 2007* (2015); Department of Justice and Equality, *Working Group to Report to Government Working Group on the Protection Process on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers* (2015); Office of the Ombudsman, Annual Report 2018: Delivering Outcomes (Office of the Ombudsman 2018); Professor Geoffrey Shannon, Eleventh Report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection (DCYA 2018); Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, *Report on Direct Provision and the International Protection Application Process* (2019); Irish Centre for Human Rights, *Direct Provisions impact on Children: A human rights analysis* (NUI Galway 2020); UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4, para 66 and UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 40.

164 Bunreacht na hÉireann, Art 41(1) and Art 42(1), European Convention on Human Rights, Art 8 and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 16.

165 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/ RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 27.

166 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/ RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Arts 6, 24 and 27.

167 Irish Centre for Human Rights, *Direct Provision's Impact on Children: A Human Rights Analysis* (NUI Galway 2020) 10, Irish Refugee Council, State-Sanctioned Child Poverty and Exclusion (2012) 16–20, 22–24.

168 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/ RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 22.

169 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 49.

children and their families.[170] The Committee also urged Ireland to ensure independent inspections of all refugee accommodation centres.[171]

This criticism and related advocacy led to a series of policy reforms, including the transposition of the EU Recast Reception Conditions Directive[172] into Irish law in 2018, which set out binding minimum standards for reception conditions. These include rights relating to healthcare, accommodation, employment and education.[173] *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process (National Standards)*[174] were introduced in 2019, aimed at standardising the quality of care in all accommodation centres, irrespective of location.

***National Standards* for accommodation offered to people in the protection process introduced to standardise the quality of care**

Both the transposition of the EU Recast Reception Conditions Directive into Irish law, and the introduction of the *National Standards* were crucial steps towards enabling policy reform through a rights-based approach. *The National Standards* are important as they provide a framework for the continual development of person-centred, high-quality, safe and effective services and supports for residents living in accommodation centres. They also provide a framework for inspections of accommodation. In general, standards, along with inspections, can and do act to drive consistency, improvement and safety in personal social services.[175] The *National Standards* address the rights and needs of children through, for example, the requirement to provide families with own-door accommodation, dedicated space for educational

170 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.

171 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4, para 66.

172 European Commission, 'Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of application for international protection (recast)' OJEU L180/96.

173 European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, SI 230/2018.

174 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (DOJE 2019).

175 Michele Clarke, *Briefing Paper on the Inspection of Direct Provision* (Department of Justice and Equality 2015) 3.

activities, access to cooking facilities and age-appropriate information, and engagement with children on matters affecting them.[176] Across all areas, service providers are also obliged to act in the best interests of the child, in line with the UNCRC.[177] The *National Standards* have the ability to improve quality, challenge underperformance, provide oversight, and are designed to help to ensure that there is uniformity in service provision.[178]

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is the body responsible for monitoring and inspecting IPAS centres against the *National Standards*. Inspections which began in January 2024.[179] The *National Standards* and HIQA inspections only apply to permanent IPAS centres and not to emergency centres.

White Paper to End Direct Provision

In February 2021 the Government published *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service (White Paper).* 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 new, more cost-effective not-for-profit model.[180] It proposed a two-phase approach to accommodating families in the international protection system, initially in a reception and integration centre for four months before moving on to own-door accommodation.[181] The *White Paper* stated the reception and integration centres would be State-owned and managed by not-for-profit organisations on the State's behalf.[182] In Phase Two all accommodation would be own-door and self-contained units and would be situated within the community.[183]

176 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (Department of Justice and Equality 2019) see Theme 4: Accommodation; Standard 4.6; Standard 6.1.9; Theme 5: Food, Cooking and Catering Facilities.

177 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 3.

178 Michele Clarke, *Briefing Paper on the Inspection of Direct Provision* (Department of Justice and Equality 2015) 7.

179 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 S.I. No. 649 of 2023.

180 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).

181 Government of Ireland, *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Government Publications 2021) 28.

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

183 Government of Ireland, *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Government Publications 2021) 29.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended in 2023 that Ireland 'prioritise measures to phase out the direct provision system by 2024, including through clearly defined targets, timelines and sufficient resources'.[184] The Committee further recommended that children seeking asylum should have access to social services including housing.[185] While there was a programme in place to purchase properties for Phase Two,[186] the accommodation provisions in the W*hite Paper* were not implemented. The *National Standards,*[187] in place from 2021, are now included in new or renewed contracts, as contractual obligations that must be met by permanent IPAS accommodation providers.

Number of international protection applicants accommodated by IPAS

6,887 December 2021 → **33,268** January 2026

One of the reasons for the lack of progress is the increase in numbers of international protection applicants from 2022 onwards, as well as the need of the Government to focus on accommodating beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine arriving in Ireland following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[188] The number of international protection applicants accommodated by IPAS increased from 6,887 in December 2021[189] to 33,268 by January 2026.[190] In January 2026, there were 20,060 beneficiaries of temporary protection in State-provided accommodation.[191] The situation was made more complex by the fact that when the need to accommodate refugees surged, the State still had an

184 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 40.

185 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 40.

186 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

187 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (DOJE 2019).

188 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 5 February 2025 [2670/25] and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 1.

189 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, International Protection Accommodation Services Monthly Report – December 2021 (DCEDIY December 2021) <https://bit.ly/4qjA81l> accessed 30 January 2026.

190 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 4 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4kgHcKz> accessed 30 January 2026.

191 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Accommodation of Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BOTPs) Weekly Statistics – 11 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) < https://bit.ly/3ZeQYDl> accessed 30 January 2026.

accommodation system not fit for purpose, albeit with reform planned. In tandem with this, the current constraints in the housing rental market mean that many residents in international protection accommodation remain living in accommodation centres long after they have gained status, creating blockages in the system.[192]

The underlying assumption in the *White Paper* was based on 3,500 new international protection applicant arrivals each year.[193] Given the increase in the numbers of arrivals, a review of the implementation approach for *the White Paper* took place. This resulted in the publication in March 2024 of *a Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants (Accommodation Strategy).*[194] The *Accommodation Strategy* states that it seeks to address the current accommodation shortfall and to 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.[195]

It is projected that the system will need to have capacity for up to 35,000 by the end of 2028.[196] This is assuming that an average of 13,000-16,000 people/individuals arrive between 2024 and 2028 and that people/individuals with status move from their accommodation after a specified time (currently one year after grant of status).[197] There were 13,162 applications for international

192 Currently persons granted status can remain in their accommodation centre for 12 months. See Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 7. IPAS works in collaboration with Depaul Ireland, the Peter McVerry Trust, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and local authorities to support residents with status to exit IPAS accommodation and access other housing options. See Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 25 February 2005 [9298/25].

193 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

194 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

195 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

196 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

197 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 4.

protection in 2025[198] and 18,561 in 2024.[199] The *Accommodation Strategy* states that it will scale up to meet this target through a blended model of state-owned accommodation, commercial accommodation, and temporary commercial emergency accommodation.[200] The inclusion of temporary emergency accommodation in this approach is problematic as the Government has not provided appropriate accommodation for children and families to date in this setting.[201]

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

The Government has committed 'to delivering a fair, efficient, and sustainable model of accommodating applicants for international protection, and will move away from the emergency use of hotels for housing and put in place facilities for those seeking protection on state land.'[202]

The 2024 *Accommodation Strategy*, underpinned by the fundamental principles of the 2021 *White Paper* is the current plan in place to guide delivery of this commitment. The fundamental principles of the *White Paper* are:

- Integration from day one: An approach that seeks to encourage integration from day one, respond to vulnerabilities, and to place people on the most successful pathway possible towards an independent life in Ireland, should their application prove successful.
- Human rights and equality based: The rights of applicants will guide the delivery of the model, with a particular focus on children's rights, dignity, respect, privacy and on access to the right information and support at all stages of the process.

198 International Protection Office, Monthly Statistical Report – December 2025 (IPO December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4tecx4B> accessed 30 January 2026.

199 International Protection Office, Monthly Statistical Report – December 2024 (IPO December 2024) <https://bit.ly/4r62ey0> accessed 30 January 2026.

200 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 4.

201 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision* (OCO 2021).

202 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 123.

- Delivery of high standards: The new model will be one characterised by the delivery of the best possible standards of support, services and assistance, which all international protection applicants can expect to receive. The delivery of new State-owned and commercial accommodation to specific standards at scale will allow for an overall increase in standards of support provided.
- Professional: Delivery will be undertaken by organisations experienced in delivering accommodation and /or services and which understand the need for equality, diversity, cultural competence and the particular requirements of those fleeing conflict and/or who have experienced trauma.
- Community engagement: Communities and not-for-profit organisations will be actively encouraged to become engaged in supporting applicants and their families at each stage of the process, while the inter-agency working groups will provide the framework for this engagement at local level.[203]

It is important that these principles are included in the *Accommodation Strategy* as they came out of a process including the Day Report which took a rights-based approach to delivering accommodation to international protection applicants, including children.

State-owned accommodation

The *Accommodation Strategy* proposes to build and contract 14,000 state-owned permanent beds.

This includes:

State-owned new reception and integration centres and accommodation centres	**→ 13,000**
In-community accommodation for vulnerable persons, state-owned operated in partnership with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)	**→ 1,000**[204]

203 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

204 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

Accommodation is being sourced and developed through a multi-strand approach including:

- Targeted purchase of medium and larger turnkey properties,
- Use of State land for prefabricated and modular units,
- Conversion of commercial buildings,
- Design and build of new reception and integration centres,
- Upgrading of existing IPAS centres,
- Supplemented by commercial providers, but phasing these out as more State services come on stream.[205]

The Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration committed in Budget 2026 to providing a capital budget of €40 million to allow for investment in state-owned accommodation options.[206] The Government's National Development Plan Review 2025 (*NDP Review*) for the justice sector published in December 2025 states that between 2026 and 2030 the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration will invest €200 million into international protection accommodation[207] in line with the plans in the *Accommodation Strategy*. The *NDP Review* also states that they will make proposals for further expenditure on an in-year basis where opportunities arise, which will meet the guiding principles of the *White Paper.*[208]

€40 million
in Budget 2026
to allow for state-owned accommodation options

The delivery of the 14,000 target for state-owned beds will be crucial in building a sustainable model of accommodating international protection applicants. On publication of the *Accommodation Strategy* in March 2024

205 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 7-9.

206 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 'Minister Jim O'Callaghan secures record allocation of over €6.17 billion for the Justice Sector in Budget 2026' <https://bit.ly/4qYVrX9> accessed 30 January 2026.

207 Government of Ireland, *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Justice Sector* (Government of Ireland 2025) 24. This includes a construction programme, including modular builds, property purchases, site acquisitions and maintenance, upgrades and refurbishments.

208 Government of Ireland, *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Justice Sector* (Government of Ireland 2025) 25.

there were 1,184 state-owned beds in the system.[209] In December 2025 this had risen to over 4,000 state-owned beds.[210] Examples of new state-owned beds are in the recently purchased Citywest campus in County Dublin[211] and the building of 40 modular units in Colum Barracks in County Westmeath.[212] State-owned sites have also been made available to IPAS for initially emergency tented accommodation and modular accommodation.[213] An expression of interest process for other potential purchases was launched in 2024 and received 134 submissions. These options were still being assessed in September 2025.[214] This progress to acquire state-owned beds in the IPAS system is welcome.

Contingency accommodation of up to 11,000, with commercial providers, will also be provided under the *Accommodation Strategy*.[215] This, along with the 14,000 state-owned accommodation beds, will comply with the *National Standards*.[216] 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.[217]

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209 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

210 Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Colm Brophy TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 December 2025 [68402/25].

211 Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Colm Brophy TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 December 2025 [68402/25].

212 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 11 February 2025 [4178/25].

213 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 11 February 2025 [4178/25]. Locations include Crooksling in Dublin, Thornton Hall in Dublin, Athlone, County Westmeath, River Lodge in Newtownmountkennedy, County Wicklow, Former Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, Dublin and Columb Barracks in County Westmeath.

214 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Jim O'Callaghan TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 24 September 2025 [50790/25].

215 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 8.

216 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 5.

217 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Jim O'Callaghan TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 29 July 2025 [42212/25].

Children are recognised as vulnerable by the Government[218] 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.[219] In light of this, the Government must re-examine the targets for in-community or own-door accommodation.

Emergency accommodation and the use of hotels

The *Accommodation Strategy* states that IPAS will end the use of unsuitable accommodation options currently relied upon, such as the sole hotel remaining in a given town. The degree of control given to the State by the creation of core supply of state-owned accommodation, of both emergency and permanent options, will increase as supply is delivered.[220] The *NDP Review* states that the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is moving away from full reliance on private providers to take greater control over location, standards and integration of services.[221] The increase in state-owned beds in the IPAS system should reduce the need to use hotels as emergency accommodation.

It is unclear with the increase to 4,000 state-owned beds whether there has been a reduction in the number of hotels used as emergency accommodation by IPAS. We know that IPAS is consolidating their accommodation portfolio with private providers, where possible, and that in 2025, 22 contracts were ended by the Department.[222] We do not know if this has meant there has

218 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Vulnerability Assessment Pilot Programme Policy (2022) accessed 10 January 2025.

219 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).

220 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 4.

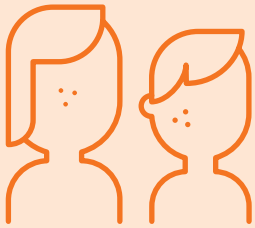
221 Government of Ireland, *National Development Plan Review 2025 Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Justice Sector* (Government of Ireland 2025) 25.

222 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Jim O'Callaghan TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 18 December 2025 [73740/25].

been a reduction in the numbers of hotels in use for international protection accommodation. It would be helpful if the Department periodically published this data. It would not need to disclose any commercially sensitive information.

The *Accommodation Strategy* also includes provision for up to 10,000 people in emergency accommodation, which will not comply with the *National Standards* or be subject to HIQA inspections.[223] This is of great concern given the experience that children and young people seeking protection have had in emergency settings to date.[224] The only way to guarantee the rights of all people in state-funded accommodation is to contract services that comply with a rules-based system and where inspections by a public body (HIQA, in this instance) take place. Ending the use of emergency accommodation centres was originally targeted for the end of 2022.

As of 4 January 2026, there were 7,529 children in emergency accommodation.[225] This is an annual increase of almost 10 per cent across 2025,[226] which is on top of an almost 100 per cent increase on the previous year.[227] The continued increase in the use of this form of accommodation in the past year is of concern. Of additional concern is the reduction from 45 to 30, over the course of 2025, of accommodation centres under HIQA's remit to inspect. HIQA states this is primarily because there has been a change in contract between service providers and the Department



7,526

Children in emergency accommodation (January 2026)

223 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 5.

224 Ombudsman for Children's Office Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision (OCO 2021).

225 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 4 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4kgHcKz> accessed 30 January 2026.

226 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 31 December 2024 (DCEDIY December 2023) <https://bit.ly/4u44O9Q> accessed 30 January 2026.

227 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 31 December 2023 (DCEDIY December 2023) <https://bit.ly/4hg7V7c> accessed 30 January 2026 and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 31 December 2024 (DCEDIY December 2024) <https://bit.ly/4l670JN> accessed 30 January 2026.

from providing permanent IPAS centres to providing another type of accommodation, such as emergency centres.[228]

While emergency centres are not subject to the *National Standards*, they are subject to the *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons and Family Type Accommodation (the Guidelines).*[229] The *Guidelines* contain standards to be followed for the structural condition, sanitation, heating facilities, food preparation and storage, ventilation and lighting, fire safety, and building control regulations to be followed by accommodation providers.[230] They are not a substitute for the rights-based *National Standards* specifically drafted with an understanding and consideration of the needs and rights of international protection applicants living in IPAS accommodation.

Standards in permanent IPAS accommodation

In January 2026 there were 2,237 children in permanent IPAS accommodation.[231] HIQA published its first overview report monitoring the inspection of accommodation centres for people seeking international protection in Ireland in March 2025.[232] The report details the monitoring and inspection work HIQA carried out in 51 International Protection Accommodation Service Centres under their remit in 2024. The centres are inspected against the *National Standards*. The report highlighted areas of good practice including that 78 per cent of all accommodation offered self-catering, so families could cook their own food[233] and that 92 per cent either complied or substantially complied with the standard to provide dedicated child-friendly, play and recreation facilities.[234]

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228 Health Information and Quality Authority, Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2025 (HIQA March 2026) 14.

229 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons and Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised in June 2023 and updated in October 2023).

230 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons and Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised in June 2023 and updated in October 2023).

231 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 4 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4kgHcKz> accessed 30 January 2026.

232 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025).

233 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 18.

234 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 63.

In addition, 91 per cent of providers either complied or substantially complied with providing adequate dedicated facilities and materials to support the educational development of each child and young person.[235] Access to nutritious food, to education supports and spaces to play are crucial to ensure the optimal development of children living in international protection accommodation.

HIQA 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. This is important because we know that when people live in congregated settings for long periods of time, they become institutionalised. Issues in relation to 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.[236] In addition to the *National Standards,* this does not comply with Section 63 of the Housing Act 1966.[237]

There are also HIQA inspection reports in 2025 that show providers are either in full compliance or substantially compliant with the *National Standards*.[238] This is welcome and demonstrates that providers can provide accommodation that meets the needs and rights of children and families. At the same time consideration should also be given to Government putting in place sanctions for centres that continue to be non-complaint with the *National Standards*.

235 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 64.

236 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 4-5 June 2025 (2025) 19; HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 18-19 June 2025 (2025) 17,20; HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 1-2 July 2025 (2025) 7 and HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 7-8 July 2025 (2025) 8,17.

237 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 4-5 June 2025 (2025) 19; HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 18-19 June 2025 (2025) 17,20; HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 1-2 July 2025 (2025) 7 and HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 7-8 July 2025 (2025) 8,17.

238 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).

Standards in emergency accommodation

In January 2026 there were 7,529 children in emergency accommodation for international protection applicants.[239] 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 indicating that they currently live with children and reporting that all family members shared a single bedroom[240] with access to dedicated family living space beyond bedrooms being very limited.[241] The majority of respondents who indicated that they currently live with children also did not live in own-door accommodation.[242] Parents highlighted the distress of being unable to prepare food for children and babies with specific medical needs in centres where they lived.[243] One parent said about cooking for their children, that they were 'not allowed to cook even soup or heating the milk'.[244] In contrast, those who had access to kitchens, described the ability to cook as restoring dignity, autonomy and family life.[245] Parents described being required to share a single room with multiple family members for prolonged periods, often exceeding one or two years.[246] 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.[247]

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239 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 4 January 2026 (DJHAM January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4kgHcKz> accessed 30 January 2026.

240 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) 92.

241 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) 92.

242 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) 92.

243 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.

244 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) 107.

245 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) 108.

246 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.

247 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) 120.

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Families and children 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.

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.'[248] 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.[249]

Emergency accommodation centres house the vast majority of children in the international protection system and continues to increase year on year.[250] 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.[251] The vast majority of all accommodation settings (278 or 86 per cent), providing 31,563 beds for people seeking international protection, are not required to comply with the *National Standards* and are not monitored by HIQA.[252] 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

248 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) 126.

249 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) 150.

250 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 31 December 2023 (DCEDIY December 2023) <https://bit.ly/4hg7V7c> accessed 30 January 2025.

251 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.

252 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 10.

emergency accommodation centres, supported by increased resources and system capacity and in the interim, develop a set of guidelines and standards for emergency centres.

Child protection and welfare

Tusla, in its role as the Child and Family Agency for the State, supports and promotes the development, welfare and protection of children.[253] Part of this role includes 'providing for the protection and care of children in circumstances where their parents have not given, or are unlikely to be able to give, adequate protection and care'. [254] Under the Children First Act 2015, relevant service providers must undertake an assessment of harm to children availing of their service and prepare a child safeguarding statement.[255] Both permanent IPAS centres and emergency accommodation centres are relevant service providers for the purpose of the Act.[256] The providers must undertake an assessment of harm to children availing of their service and prepare a child safeguarding statement.[257] Tusla has the authority to serve a service provider with a notice of non-compliance when they fail to provide them with a copy of their child safeguarding statement.[258]

In 2023, Tusla's Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit conducted a Child Safeguarding Statement Sector Compliance review of IPAS accommodation.[259] While many service providers achieved statutory compliance by the end of the review, Tusla expressed concern about the depth of understanding services have about the implementation of the statement, as well as concern about the absence of any powers of compellability to ensure enforcement of standards or implementation of the child safeguarding statement.[260] No follow-up review has taken place.

253 Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s8 (1)(b).

254 Child and Family Agency Act 2013 s8 (2).

255 Children First Act 2015 s11.

256 Children First Act 2015 Schedule 1.

257 Children First Act 2015 s11.

258 Children First Act 2015 s11(5)(b)(ii) and s12(6).

259 Tusla Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit, *Child Safeguarding Statement Sector Compliance Review: International Protection Accommodation Centres (IPAS)* (2023) 3.

260 Tusla Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit, *Child Safeguarding Statement Sector Compliance Review: International Protection Accommodation Centres (IPAS)* (2023) 3.

Since 2024, Tusla have been provided with funding to allocate family support practitioners to work with families living in international protection in all accommodation settings.[261] In 2025, there was a welcome increase in the number of practitioners allocated, rising from 17 to 20.[262] The 114 Tusla-led Child and Family Support Networks also support families living in IPAS accommodation. Network members work with social work teams and often identify issues early on and refer to child protection services or Tusla's Prevention Partnership and Family Support Service for additional supports as appropriate.[263]

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Tusla Family Support practitioners in 2025

HIQA's overview report, monitoring inspection of permanent IPAS centres, found that almost a third of service providers were not in compliance with the reasonable steps to protect children from abuse and neglect and did not promote children's safety and welfare.[264] It also states that 34 per cent of staff members are not properly vetted, including frontline staff and security staff, and called for urgent attention at a national and local level to ensure staff and managers in all accommodation centres are vetted appropriately.[265] This needs to be acted on immediately by the Government. HIQA also states that its findings show that child protection concerns exist in centres which are unknown to service providers and managers and therefore go unreported and unmanaged.[266] This can be due to, for example, child welfare and reporting policies lacking sufficient detail to guide staff in dealing with each stage of managing and reporting child safeguarding concerns.[267]

261 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 19 January 2026.

262 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 19 January 2026.

263 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 19 January 2026.

264 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 76.

265 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 97.

266 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Monitoring of International Protection Accommodation Service Centres in 2024* (HIQA March 2025) 96.

267 HIQA Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Service Centre, 1-2 July 2025 (2025) 23.

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HIQA's overview report, monitoring inspection of permanent IPAS centres, found that almost a third of service providers were not in compliance with the reasonable steps to protect children from abuse and neglect and did not promote children's safety and welfare.

One of the most serious examples of the lack of safeguarding was noted in a centre where staff were unaware of the whereabouts of four children for 15 days, while their parent was hospitalised.[268] Despite making required reports to Tusla and An Garda Síochána, the provider failed to take reasonable and proportionate interim measures to protect the children while they were in the centre. The issue was not promptly escalated internally, and when it was, no actions were taken by senior management.[269]

In 2021 and 2023 the Ombudsman for Children's Office stated that child protection obligations are "less robust" in temporary emergency accommodation centres than in other International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS).[270] This is because the *National Standards* and HIQA inspections do not apply. As a result of this, the extent of the issues for children and families in emergency centres is not known. While this is a serious concern for all issues, it is most worrying as it relates to child safeguarding.

What do children and young people need next?

Accommodation Strategy and state-owned beds

The Government needs to draft and publish an action plan on how they will acquire more state-owned beds and move away from emergency accommodation. The action plan should include targets, including specific targets on the reduction in the numbers of children in emergency accommodation. It should also include assigned responsibility for tasks, allocated resources and timelines for completing tasks. This could be done in tandem with updating the current *Accommodation Strategy*. This would demonstrate how the numbers of international accommodation applicants in emergency accommodation are decreasing. Specifically on the move away from hotels, it would be helpful if the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and

268 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 17–18 July 2024 (2024) 18.

269 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 17–18 July 2024 (2024) 18.

270 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision – An Investigation by the Ombudsman for Children's Office* (OCO 2021) 13 and Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Special Report: Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision* (October 2023).

Migration periodically published the numbers of hotels in use by IPAS, without disclosing any commercially sensitive information.

Own-Door Accommodation

The *Accommodation Strategy* does not commit to providing adequate numbers of own-door accommodation sufficient to meet the needs of all children and young people in the system. The Government needs to re-examine the targets for in-community or own-door accommodation in the *Strategy* and commit to providing more than 1,000 beds, in line with the provisions in the *White Paper* and the Government's definition of vulnerability (which includes children). Own-door accommodation, as outlined in the *White Paper* is appropriate child-friendly accommodation that can adequately meet the needs and rights of children. It is also a crucial measure to avoid the institutionalisation of children. It allows families to cook for themselves and enjoy family life as part of a community in which they live and promotes good physical development and mental wellbeing for children. It should not be abandoned.

Child Protection and Welfare

Given the concerning child protection and welfare issues highlighted in the HIQA inspection reports and the absence of *National Standards* or independent oversight and reporting on child safeguarding issues in emergency centres, consideration needs to be given to introducing a suite of measures to ensure the safety of all children and young people in IPAS accommodation. This includes establishing an informal working group in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, focused on child protection and welfare, where groups working with families in IPAS accommodation can bring issues and concerns to their attention. There is also a need to further increase the number of social workers in the IPAS division in the Department to ensure they have sufficient capacity to address issues as they arise. Following on from the review of Child Safety Statements conducted by Tusla's Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit (CSSU) in 2023, consideration should be given to expanding the powers of the CSSU to include compellability to ensure enforcement of standards and the implementation of child safeguarding statements.

EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

due to be implemented by June 2026

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (EU Pact), which the Government has signed up to, is due to be implemented by the Government in June 2026.[271] The International Protection Bill 2026, which will implement the provisions of the EU Pact, has been published, but does not contain any reference to standards in international protection accommodation or the inspection of same.[272] Ireland's National Implementation Plan for the EU Pact states that accommodation for international protection applicants will be provided in the screening procedure, in the border procedure and in the standard procedure.[273] There will also be basic needs accommodation centres and there may be specific return accommodation centres.[274] The Government intends to use and allocate the current international accommodation portfolio as outlined in the *Accommodation Strategy* for housing international protection applicants in the different procedures.[275] The *National Standards* or, if required, newly drafted standards appropriate to each new type of accommodation, 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. HIQA should be given the authority to inspect all accommodation centres against the relevant standards in a statutory instrument, as is the case with the authority they currently have.[276] Resources to HIQA should be increased as appropriate, to support its increased remit.

271 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.

272 International Protection Bill 2026.

273 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, *Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum* (March 2025) 68, 69.

274 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, *Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum* (March 2025) 69.

275 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, *Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum* (March 2025) 70.

276 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 S.I. No. 649 of 2023.

The EU Pact 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. 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.

The Voice of Children and Young People

The views of children and young people living in international protection accommodation must be considered and taken into account in issues that affect them.[277] Given that the last consultation of children and young people living in international protection accommodation took place in 2019,[278] serious consideration should now be given to conducting a new consultation. This is especially pressing because of the increased numbers of children and young people seeking international protection since then. The Child Participation Unit in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality is best placed to conduct this consultation.

Recommendations

- Publish an updated *Accommodation Strategy* for international protection accommodation to include an action plan focusing on the move away from emergency accommodation and the increase in state-owned beds. This should include specific targets on the reduction in the numbers of children in emergency accommodation.
- Periodically publish the numbers of hotels in use by IPAS.
- Increase the use of own-door accommodation for children and families in international protection accommodation to greater than 1,000 beds.

277 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 12.

278 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Report of DCYA Consultations with Children and Young people Living in Direct Provision*, (DCYA 2016) and Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Direct Division: Children's Views and Experiences of Living in Direct Provision*, (OCO 2020).

- Establish an informal working group in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration focused on child protection and welfare, where organisations working with families in IPAS accommodation can bring issues and concerns to their attention.
- Increase the number of social workers in the IPAS division in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to ensure they have sufficient capacity to address child welfare and safeguarding issues as they arise.
- Expand the powers of Tusla's Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit to include compellability to ensure enforcement of standards and implementation of child safeguarding statements.
- 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 accommodation, including emergency centres.
- Provide HIQA with the authority to inspect all accommodation, including emergency centres, against relevant rights-based standards.
- Conduct a consultation with children living in international protection accommodation through the Department of Children's Disability and Equality's Child Participation Unit.

4

Safeguarding, Welfare and Alternative Care

Section 4.A
Safeguarding, Welfare and Alternative Care

Section 4.B
Online Safety

4.A

Safeguarding, Welfare and Alternative Care

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Support Tusla and ensure their structures are robust, responsive and capable of safeguarding every child in need.	Steady	C
Ensure effective and mandatory cooperation between state agencies by putting the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children on a statutory footing.	Good	B-
Develop a national plan on alternative care to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future.	Good	C+
Establish a National Child Death Review Mechanism on a statutory basis.	Some	C-
Update the Child Care Act, 1991.	Steady	C

In the *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future*, the Government makes a series of ten commitments related to family support, child protection and alternative care, under the heading of "Strengthening Tusla and protecting children in State care".[1] The Alliance has selected five commitments to track:

- Support Tusla and ensure their structures are robust, responsive and capable of safeguarding every child in need.
- Ensure effective and mandatory cooperation between state agencies by putting the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children on a statutory footing.
- Develop a national plan on alternative care to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future.
- Establish a National Child Death Review Mechanism on a statutory basis.
- Update the Child Care Act, 1991.

While each of the five commitments is graded individually, taken together their implementation will strengthen the State's ability to ensure vulnerable children receive adequate care and protection in a timely manner.

1 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65. The other commitments are: Ensure Tusla is supported in recruiting and retaining vital frontline staff and foster carers; Increase training opportunities and support programmes for Tusla staff and carers to enhance service quality; Work with further and higher education institutions to increase the supply of graduates and allied health professionals, such as social care workers; Expand Barnahus nationally and strengthen measures aimed at preventing violence against children; and examine ways to further support all young people as they age out of state care and foster care.

The Government is awarded a 'C' grade for its commitment to support Tusla and ensure its structures are robust, responsive and capable of safeguarding every child in need. Our evaluation examines Government support to Tusla so it can respond to evolving demands for its services and act to prevent and respond effectively to risks of harm to children. In 2025, Tusla received an increase of 12.8 per cent on the previous year's budget allocation. To make progress on this commitment, further investment in early intervention and prevention is needed, alongside whole-of-Government initiatives on workforce capacity. Measures are also needed to increase the number and diverse the type of care placements available especially to children with complex needs.

The highest grade across this year's Report Card, a 'B-', is awarded to the Government for its commitment to ensure effective and mandatory cooperation between state agencies by putting the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children on a statutory footing. In 2025, the Minister for Children, Equality and Disability published a legislative proposal to establish a high-level inter-departmental and inter-agency committee, the Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee and to place a duty on relevant bodies to co-operate in the performance of their respective functions on child welfare, child protection and family support. This is a very welcome and long-awaited development.

The Government is awarded a 'C+' grade for its commitment to develop a national plan on alternative care to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future. During 2025, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality commenced development of Ireland's first National Policy Framework on Alternative Care, with a series of consultations taking place, including with care-experienced

young people. The expected publication date for the Framework is summer 2026.

The commitment to establish a National Child Death Review Mechanism on a statutory basis receives a 'C-' grade. Little visible progress was made on this commitment. No lead department has been assigned responsibility for progressing this commitment. However, in a welcome development in December 2025, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality committed to place the National Review Panel (NRP) which conducts reviews of serious incidents and deaths of children in care and known to the child protection system on a statutory footing. How the new mechanism will operate alongside existing mechanisms, such as the NRP, is not yet clear.

Finally, the Government is awarded a 'C' grade for its commitment to update the Child Care Act, 1991. This commitment is broadly stated. Our evaluation examines whether proposed updates fulfil Ireland's international human rights obligations to children and whether outstanding gaps are addressed. In 2025, the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 was published. The Bill successfully addresses weaknesses in the Child Care Act 1991. It strengthens the legal framework underpinning the care system – Ireland's safety net for vulnerable children.

Commitment

Support Tusla and ensure their structures are robust, responsive and capable of safeguarding every child in need.

Section Grade

A B **C** D E F

Introduction

Established in 2014, the Child and Family Agency – known as Tusla[2] – is the statutory body responsible for supporting and promoting the development, welfare and protection of children, and for supporting and encouraging the effective functioning of families.[3] Tusla has statutory obligations in relation to education welfare,[4] discharged through its Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)[5] and Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS).[6] It is also the regulator for early years services, including childminders.[7] Tusla's functions and powers are set out in various statutes, including the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, the Child Care Act 1991, the Children First Act 2015, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and the Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022. It provides universal and targeted services across six thematic areas: family support; child protection and welfare; alternative care; birth information and tracing, and adoption; children's services regulation; and education support service.[8]

Tusla operates under the aegis of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality and is governed by a Board comprising a Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and up to nine Ordinary Board Members.[9] The Minister for Children, Disability and Equality and the Minister for Education and Youth[10]

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2 The word 'Tusla' borrows the Irish words for 'beginning' and 'day', 'tús' and 'lá', and seeks to reflect a shared desire for a new beginning <https://bit.ly/4rARzLv> accessed 18 March 2026.

3 Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s 8(1)(b) and (c).

4 Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s 8(1)(a).

5 TESS comprises the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and two school support services, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP) <https://bit.ly/4dsdLDU> accessed 18 March 2026.

6 AEARS registers and assesses children who are home-educated or attending non-recognised schools as required by Education (Welfare) Act 2000, s 14 <https://bit.ly/4sTdSNq> accessed 18 March 2026.

7 See Early Years Regulations webpage: <https://bit.ly/4bwvDLv> accessed 18 March 2026.

8 As of 1 January 2024, responsibility for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services transferred from Tusla to a new statutory agency Cuan, under the remit of the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. See the webpage for Cuan <https://bit.ly/4sZ8zMB> accessed 18 March 2026. In addition, during 2025, DCDE progressed the establishment of a Guardian *ad litem* National Service. The service is due to commence in June 2026. Among other things, responsibility for discharging of fees for Guardians *ad litem*, and the associated budget, will be transferred from Tusla to the new service. See the webpage for the Guardian ad litem National Service <https://bit.ly/3PfUM5C> accessed 18 March 2026.

9 These appointments are made by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality with the consent of the Minister of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

10 The Minister for Education and Youth provides direction in relation to TESS and AEARS.

provide Tusla with policy guidance, direction and prioritisation parameters for the preparation of its corporate plan, prepared every three years.[11] Funding for Tusla is allocated through both departments. Tusla is required to provide the Minister with an annual 'Review of Services' report,[12] which the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 proposes to replace with an 'annual service performance and activity report', supplemented by a thematic report every three years.[13]

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In the *Programme for Government*, the Government commits to support Tusla and ensure their structures are robust, responsive and capable of safeguarding every child in need.[14]

The term 'robust' is defined as 'strong' or 'resilient'[15] and "capable of performing without failure under a wide range of conditions".[16] An organisation's resilience has been defined by the OECD, drawing on the work of Linkov et al, as "the capacity of systems to absorb a disturbance, recover from disruptions and adapt to changing conditions while retaining essentially the same function as prior to the disruptive shock".[17] This definition covers four important stages that organisations have to go through when facing unexpected, adverse events: planning and preparation, absorption, recovery and adaptation.[18]

11 Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s 41 (Performance framework).

12 Child Care Act 1991, s 8.

13 Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, s 29(c).

14 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

15 Oxford University Press (2011) *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 1244. The Collins Dictionary defines 'robust' as "very strong or healthy" <https://bit.ly/40ElNSI> accessed 18 March 2026.

16 The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'robust' as "capable of performing without failure under a wide range of conditions" <https://bit.ly/4uDk5yK> accessed 18 March 2026.

17 OECD, *More Resilient Public Administrations after COVID-19: Lessons from Using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) 2020* (OECD Public Governance Policy Papers No 29, 2023) 15. The OECD report cites Linkov I, Trump B and Hynes W, 'Resilience-Based Strategies and Policies to Address Systemic Risks' (OECD Conference Centre, Paris, 17-18 September 2019).

18 OECD, *More Resilient Public Administrations after COVID-19: Lessons from Using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) 2020* (OECD Public Governance Policy Papers No 29, 2023) 15.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) places a clear duty on States to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child" from all forms of harm.[19] The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that child protection must begin with proactive prevention of violence in all its forms.[20] Under the UNCRC, protective measures are defined broadly, encompassing child and family support programmes alongside prevention, identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of child maltreatment, with judicial involvement where appropriate.[21] The UN Committee has interpreted the UNCRC as requiring an "integrated, cohesive, interdisciplinary and coordinated system" for preventing and responding to all forms of violence.[22] Child protection services must conform to standards concerning safety, health, staffing levels, suitability of staff, and competent supervision.[23]

At a European level, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has identified five obligations on States arising from the right to protection from harm: effective deterrence, preventive measures to protect against foreseeable risks, responding to known abuse or neglect, effective investigation and remedies against the State.[24] Where State authorities knew, had reason to suspect, or ought to have known that abuse was occurring and failed to act, the ECtHR has found a violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which guarantees freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment.[25]

Drawing on these human rights provisions, robust organisational structures in the context of child safeguarding can be understood to be institutional arrangements that are adequately resourced, coordinated, supervised and operationally capable of preventing and responding effectively to risks of harm

19 UNCRC, Art 19(1).

20 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 13 (2011): The Right of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence CRC/C/GC/13' (2011) para 46.

21 UNCRC, Art 19(2).

22 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 13 (2011): The Right of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence CRC/C/GC/13' (2011) para 4.

23 UNCRC, Art 3(3).

24 Conor O'Mahony, 'Child Protection and the ECHR: Making Sense of Positive and Procedural Obligations' (2019) 27 *International Journal of Children's Rights* 660.

25 *Z v UK* (2002) 34 EHRR 3 and *DP & JC v UK* (2003) 36 EHRR 14.

to children.[26] Robustness requires that institutional arrangements operate effectively in practice, enabling the State to fulfil its positive obligation to prevent foreseeable harm and to respond appropriately once risk becomes known.[27] The phrase "responsive and capable" of safeguarding every child in need is taken to mean quick to respond and able to address safeguarding issues for every child.[28]

In this context, we refer specifically to Tusla's role within the child protection and welfare system. To fulfil this role effectively, Tusla must be both responsive and agile, capable of anticipating and adapting to the evolving demands placed upon its services. This requires not only sufficient resources, but also the institutional capacity to identify, assess, and act on concerns in a timely and decisive manner — intervening proactively where necessary, rather than solely in response to crisis.

Budget 2026

In October 2025, Budget 2026 was announced, with Tusla being allocated €1.47 billion, an increase of 12.8 per cent (€189 million) on the previous year's allocation.[29] A third of this budget was directed to staff pay for Tusla's 5,000 staff.[30] To support delivery of its services, Tusla partners with a range of community and voluntary organisations and private providers.

Tusla's financial statements report expenditure by programme and service line. However, for analytical and policy purposes, Tusla has prepared a breakdown of its total spend grouped by theme for 2024.[31] Nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of Tusla's total expenditure of €1.1 billion in that year was spent on child

26 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 13 (2011): The Right of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence CRC/C/GC/13' (2011) paras 5, 37 and 42.

27 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 13 (2011): The Right of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence CRC/C/GC/13' (2011), para 43; *Z v UK* (2002) 34 EHRR 3 and *DP & JC v UK* (2003) 36 EHRR 14.

28 UNCRC, Arts 2 and 19.

29 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

30 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026. Of 1.47 billion 2026 allocation, 495 million was allocated to pay and pension. In addition, a further 20 million was allocated to 'Agency Pay'.

31 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

protection and alternative care – services that are needs-driven and crisis-led. This comprised €520 million (47.3 per cent) on alternative care and aftercare services and €270 million (24.5 per cent) on child protection and welfare. Only 18 per cent (€200 million) was directed to early intervention and prevention through family support services, with smaller allocations to education support service (€60 million, 5.5 per cent) and regulation, corporate and enabling services (€50 million, 4.5 per cent).

Demand Drivers and Structural Responsiveness

Tusla is engaged in an Integrated Reform Programme to support services that are child-centred, equitable, integrated and responsive to emerging needs, to support staff and to strengthen public confidence.[32] On 1 January 2026, Tusla commenced the latest phase of its reform programme which included the introduction of a model of geographical networks. Tusla has now moved from 17 Areas in six regions to 30 Networks Areas in six regions, based on evidence and data related to population needs, deprivation and service demand.[33] A new Case Management System was also introduced providing a single child record for all services, which for the first time provides visibility on family support and early intervention and data reporting.

In addition, the reform programme reconfigured how Tusla staff are organised under a Local Integrated Service Delivery (LISD) Model.[34] This redesign aims to ensure equality in service access and a more responsive and integrated service, and to strengthen governance and accountability.[35] The LISD model introduces a widened and unified 'Front Door' to Network Services, a single point of access for early intervention, family support and child protection services. It also creates Local Integrated Teams where staff will work as part of multidisciplinary teams to meet the needs of children and families in line with presenting need.[36] The LISD model includes for the first time dedicated Early Support and Intervention

32 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 3 March 2026 [731, 732 and 733]; Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report 2024 Spotlight Stories* (Tusla 2025).

33 Information on Tusla's new Area offices and points of contact are available at <https://bit.ly/4bxgUzY> accessed 18 March 2026.

34 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report 2024 Spotlight Stories* (Tusla 2025).

35 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report 2024 Spotlight Stories* (Tusla 2025).

36 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report 2024 Spotlight Stories* (Tusla 2025).

Teams, with dedicated family support team leaders.[37]
The objective of this phrase of the reform programme is to create a more equitable distribution of work across the 30 Networks with more consistent structures and spans of control, and an open and transparent approach to more equitable resource allocation (internal and external).[38] It also aims to ensure a range of professionals with different skills are available to respond to the needs of children, young people and families in the right way at the right time, ensuring that children and families across the country receive better access to the most appropriate services.[39]

The Integrated Reform Programme remains ongoing, with the latest phase commencing on 1 January 2026 introducing significant structural changes across the organisation. Reform of this scale inevitably generates disruption and friction, and one media report highlighted concerns raised by senior social workers about the impact and timing of the roll-out on children and families.[40]

Demand for Tusla's services is shaped by the socio-economic environment being experienced by children and families. Factors that play a role include poverty, homelessness, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, drugs, criminality and exploitation, along with the impact of new technologies and the global movement of people.[41] The high number of children growing up in homelessness (5,321 children are living in State-funded emergency accommodation),[42] and the extensive waiting lists for assessments and support services for disability, mental health and therapeutic services for children may be factors in demand for Tusla's services now or in the near future.[43]

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37 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 16 March 2026.

38 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 3 March 2026 [731, 732 and 733].

39 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 3 March 2026 [731, 732 and 733].

40 Eimer McAuley, 'Over 100 Senior Tusla Workers Told CEO Reform Timeline Put Kids "at Significant Risk of Harm"' *The Journal* (8 January 2026).

41 See for example: Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 3.

42 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Monthly Homelessness Report: January 2026* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2026) 2 <https://bit.ly/4uCWEWe> accessed 18 March 2026.

43 See for example, Harry McGee, 'Child waits 11 years for psychology assessment, another waits nine for occupational therapy' *The Irish Times* (14 January 2026).

One area where there has been a sharp rise in demand is that since 2022 Tusla has responded to a 500 per cent increase in separated children seeking international protection (SCSIPs), many fleeing the war in Ukraine.[44] As of December 2025, Tusla was supporting 607 separated children seeking international protection (SCSIPs), 75 per cent of whom were being accommodated under Section 5 and the remaining 25 per cent had been taken into care.[45] Tusla is to be commended for meeting these children's care and accommodation needs in challenging circumstances. Sustained Government support for Tusla is needed to ensure it can continue this work and scale up its services in a timely manner to meet unknown future demand.

Workforce Capacity

As of December 2025, Tusla employed 1,731 whole-time equivalent social workers and 1,421 whole-time equivalent social care workers, representing its highest staffing levels to date.[46] All funded posts were filled.[47]

Workforce is a critical enabler of timely identification and effective action on safeguarding children. Despite significant progress made in recent years, Tusla has acknowledged that the agency remains challenged by workforce supply issues, particularly in social work and social care.[48] Tusla estimated that approximately 400 additional frontline staff are required to meet current presenting demand and to ensure that all children and young people receive timely and high-quality services.[49]

In May 2025, Tusla published its second People Strategy (2025–2027) aimed at attracting, retaining and growing a diverse workforce.[50] In December 2025,

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44 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 3.

45 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13 <https://bit.ly/4lVBxL3> accessed 18 March 2026.

46 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 16 March 2026.

47 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

48 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 2.

49 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 4.

50 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Tusla People Strategy 2025-2027* (Tusla 2025).

the Minister for Health published a paper on 'Ireland's Future Health and Social Care Workforce', identifying projected shortfalls and setting a strategic direction for the next 15 years of workforce planning across health and social care professions.[51]

Staff retention is a critical lever in meeting workforce challenges. Tusla's retention rate was 93 per cent in 2024 and remained consistent throughout 2025.[52] Tusla attributes this success in part to its Career Pathways for Health and Social Care Professionals which resulted in 597 Social Work/Social Care Workers progressing to a senior position between May 2024 and November 2025.[53] However, there are specific areas where retention continues to be problematic, including special care which is a unique and often challenging workplace.[54]

Tusla has undertaken a range of innovative recruitment and development initiatives to address workforce shortages by among other things, addressing financial barriers to training. These include offering employment to final-year students before graduation (108 social work graduates and eight social care graduates accepted offers in 2025);[55] a 24-month paid Social Work Masters' Level Apprenticeship with University College Cork, with 71 students in the second cohort (September 2025)[56] and funding secured for 100 in 2026;[57] and a part-time sponsored social work programme with Robert Gordon University in Scotland. In September 2025, a six-month paid work-based learning programme was introduced for social care candidates, with permanent contracts in a special care unit offered upon completion.[58] International recruitment has resulted in 65 overseas social workers and social care workers

51 Department of Health, *Ireland's Future Health and Social Care Workforce* (Department of Health 2025).

52 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 16 March 2026.

53 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 71.

54 'The Irish Times view on special care for children: State is failing the most vulnerable', *The Irish Times* (22 January 2026).

55 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

56 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026. In September 2024, 36 students commenced the programme, the intake numbers doubled to 71 students in September 2025.

57 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 4.

58 See Tusla's Work Based Learning Programme webpage <https://bit.ly/4duS7Pt> accessed 18 March 2026.

commencing employment, with further cohorts to follow.[59] Tusla also supports Traveller and Roma students through paid summer placements.[60]

Child Welfare and Protection

Under the Children First Act 2015, Tusla receives and assesses referrals of concerns about suspected harm or risk of harm to children from members of the public, and reports of harm from mandated professionals. There has been a year-on-year increase in child protection and welfare referrals, with a 106 per cent increase over the ten-year period from 2014 to 2024 (from 43,630 to 96,666 referrals).[61] This upward trend has continued during 2025,[62] with Tusla receiving 106,444 referrals during 2025.[63] Tusla states that the complexity of cases has 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.[64]

While the volume of referrals likely reflects growing awareness of safeguarding reporting obligations, referrals do not directly measure actual harm to children. Referrals may include duplicate reports, ineligible cases and historic abuse allegations and must be considered alongside population growth.

The vast majority of referrals were made by mandated persons (90 per cent) rather than members of the public.[65] The most common source of referrals was from members of An Garda Síochána (34 per cent), followed to a lesser extent by teachers (12 per cent), safeguarding officers (11 per cent) and social workers (10 per cent).[66]

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59 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

60 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

61 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.

62 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 4.

63 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 16 March 2026.

64 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 29.

65 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 14 < https://bit.ly/4dvE5wZ> accessed 18 March 2026.

66 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 14.

A welfare concern was the most common referral type received (55 per cent) with the remaining relating to emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect and sexual abuse.[67]

A three-step referral process is employed by Tusla. Of the 26,064 referrals received in the third quarter of 2025, over half were closed following the first stage (screening), a quarter progressed to the second stage (preliminary enquiry) and less than nine per cent (2,264 referrals) progressed to the third stage (initial assessment).[68] The outcome of this final stage saw half requiring no further action or diversion to another service with 632 cases being subject to child protection and safety planning and 52 children being admitted to care.[69]

Of note, over a fifth (21 per cent) of referrals are re-referrals of a child for whom a previous open case was closed within the past year.[70]

As of end December 2025, there were 23,612 cases open to a social worker.[71] Of these 77 per cent (18,214) had been allocated a case worker, an improvement from 75 per cent the previous year.[72]

Until recently, a referral which met the eligibility criteria was allocated a social worker. Workforce shortages means 18 per cent of referrals are allocated to a professional other than a social worker, with considerable regional variation (from 3 to 35 per cent).[73] A further 5,398 cases were awaiting allocation,

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67 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

68 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 17.

69 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 18.

70 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Review on the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services Available 2024* (Tusla, 2025) 15.

71 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 4. Open cases include, all cases held on duty, allocated and unallocated child protection and welfare cases including children in care.

72 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 4 and Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024* (Tusla, 4 February 2025) 3.

73 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 5.

including 232 high-priority cases.[74] At the end of 2025, four per cent of unallocated cases were high priority cases, an improvement over a figure of nine per cent at the end of 2024.[75]

Following an initial assessment of a referral, a Child Protection Conference (CPC) may be held and if it determines that the child is at ongoing risk of significant abuse or neglect a child protection plan will be developed and the child will be listed on the Child Protection Notification System (CPNS).[76] At the end of 2025, 1,173 children were listed as 'active' on the CPNS.[77]

Two overview reports published by HIQA in 2025 provided a mixed picture of Tusla's child protection and welfare services.[78] On a positive note, children at serious and immediate risk of harm continued to receive an appropriate and timely response — a consistent finding over the past decade.[79] However, a risk-based review of ten Tusla service areas, selected because at least a quarter of children had not been allocated a social worker, painted a less reassuring picture.[80] Significant inconsistencies were found in screening, referral processes, and safety planning, with gaps in oversight particularly acute for unallocated cases.[81] Critically, these failings were largely attributable

74 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 6. Five areas accounted for 73 per cent of all high priority cases awaiting allocation: Dublin South Central (65), Cork (32), Midlands (28), Louth/Meath (27) and Donegal (18).

75 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 6 and Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024* (Tusla, 4 February 2025) 5.

76 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Review on the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services Available 2024* (Tusla, 2025) 53.

77 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 17.

78 *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) and 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 Health Information and Quality Authority.

79 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children's Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 17.

80 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025).

81 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 71-74 and 80.

to staffing capacity issues, which meant Tusla was unable to fulfil its statutory safeguarding responsibilities effectively for all children.[82]

Family Support

Irish law places a positive duty on Tusla "to identify children who are not receiving adequate care and protection"[83] and to "support and encourage the effective functioning of families."[84] Under the umbrella term of family support services, Tusla provides or commissions a range of early intervention and prevention supports, including under its Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) programme.[85]

During 2025, at least 50,571 children were referred to family support services.[86] Across the country, 69 per cent of children referred received a service, with some outliers bringing down this average.[87] At the end of 2025, two per cent of the child population were in receipt of family support services.[88] In 2025, the most common source of referrals to family support services was parents/guardians, accounting for 27 per cent of referrals followed by Tusla social workers (26 per cent), schools (12 per cent) and HSE Officers (9 per cent).[89]

Tusla funds voluntary organisations to deliver counselling, psychotherapy and related supports.[90] It also commissions family support services, including 121 Family Resource Centres providing community-based services and

82 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 80.

83 Child Care Act 1991, s 3(2)(a).

84 Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s 8(1)(c).

85 See Tusla's Family and Community Support webpage <https://bit.ly/4btMzSD> access 18 March 2026.

86 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 69.

87 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 70. The percentage who received a service ranged from 92 per cent (Kerry) to 34 per cent (Dublin South West/Kildare/West Wicklow). Eleven areas reported a percentage equal to or higher than the national average of 69 per cent.

88 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.

89 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 69.

90 See webpage on Tusla services <https://bit.ly/47SoEey> accessed 18 March 2026.

information[91] and 114 Child and Family Support Networks,[92] which function as local inter-agency networks designed to signpost referral pathways on a 'No Wrong Door' basis. Operating within these networks, the Meitheal process provides a multi-agency response, where structured support is needed (but the case does not meet statutory social work thresholds). In 2025, Tusla received 2,667 Meitheal processes requests, the most common pathway for requests (65 per cent) was direct access coming from parents and schools, followed by social work diversion (25 per cent).[93]

Alternative Care

Tusla has a statutory duty to act to protect a child in need of care or protection.[94] As of the end of December 2025, there were 5,879 children in care, the vast majority (86 per cent) in foster care, with the remainder in residential care (10 per cent) or other placements (4 per cent).[95] There is much to celebrate in our alternative care system. The majority of children in care are in family-based foster care. Residential care is provided in small group homes and most children in care are engaged in education.[96] Based on its inspections during 2024, HIQA found that children living in alternative care settings "were receiving good quality safe care".[97]

Under national standards, every child in care is entitled to an allocated social worker.[98] The allocated social worker is the primary statutory professional responsible for a child in care. They have a range of delegated statutory duties,

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91 See the website of the Family Resource Centre National Forum <https://bit.ly/4lDagNa> accessed 18 March 2026 .

92 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 37.

93 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 71.

94 Child Care Act, ss 3, 4, 16.

95 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

96 Central Statistics Office, *Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018–2024* (CSO 2024) <https://bit.ly/4bwyzrf> accessed 18 March 2026. Approximately nine in ten children who left care (and aged 18–23 years in January 2024) were in substantial employment or enrolled in education for each of the years 2019–2022, similar to all children.

97 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.

98 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.

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.[99]

By the end of December 2025, 98 per cent of children had an allocated caseworker, with 102 children still awaiting allocation.[100] This represents significant progress over the course of 2025, with the allocation rate rising by 12 percentage points from 86 per cent in December 2024.[101]

However, staff shortages have led to children in care now also being allocated to other professionals, such as social care workers, overseen by social work management. Of those allocated a worker, 89 per cent were allocated to social workers and 11 per cent to another professionals.[102] There is significant variation in this national picture, ranging from four areas where all children in care were allocated to a social worker, to one area (Carlow/Kilkenny/South Tipperary) where a significant proportion of children in care were allocated another professional (42 per cent).[103]

Every child in care has a statutory entitlement to an up-to-date care plan, developed following a child-in-care review.[104] As of December 2025, 84 per cent of children in care had an up-to-date care plan, leaving 955 children without one.[105] This represents a marginal improvement on the December 2024 figure of 83 per cent.[106]

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99 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.

100 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 4.

101 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 15 and Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024* (Tusla, 4 February 2025) 14.

102 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 15.

103 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 15.

104 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.

105 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 16.

106 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2024* (Tusla, 4 February 2025) 14.

Care Placement Capacity

Care placements are governed by a suite of Regulations[107] and National Standards[108] that, in several cases, are now decades old. A comprehensive review of this regulatory framework is required to ensure it reflects contemporary practice, enables innovation, and supports the timely expansion of placement capacity.

Care placement may be provided directly by Tusla or commissioned through the community and voluntary sector or from private providers. Nearly one in five children in care (19 per cent) are in placements with private providers.[109] Tusla has stated its ambition to reduce its reliance on private residential care providers, noting that this is unsustainable and carries significant risks.[110]

The majority of children in care are in foster care. At the end of 2025, there were 3,782 approved foster carers on the panel,[111] compared to 3,809 for the end of 2024.[112] Tusla has been progressing its Strategic Plan for Foster Care 2022-2025, including by establishing a National Fostering Recruitment Team, launching a Foster Care Digital Hub, introducing a pilot peer support model and induction programme, and developing a Charter for Tusla Staff and Foster Carers to clarify roles, responsibilities and communication expectations.[113]

Despite these positive initiatives, and a 21 per cent increase in new foster carers approved in 2024 compared to 2023,[114] the availability of sufficient

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107 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.

108 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).

109 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 31.

110 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Strategic Plan for Residential Care Services for Children and Young People 2022-2025* (Tusla 2022) 2.

111 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 47. The approved foster care panel includes all types except for Brussels II Regulation cases.

112 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2024* (Tusla, 21 February 2025) 6.

113 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Strategic Plan for Foster Care Services for Children and Young People 2022-2025* (Tusla 2022).

114 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024: A Decade of Progress, Building a Better Future Together* (Tusla 2025) 92.

numbers of foster carers to meet demand remains a challenge.[115] HIQA found that in some areas the shortage of available foster carers impacted on the matching process, meaning children may not be placed with carers best suited to their needs.[116] Of particular concern are reported incidences of young children being placed in residential care, due to a lack of foster carers.[117]

Foster carers are entitled to a Foster Care Allowance, the rate of which is set by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. The previous Government provided increases to the Foster Care Allowance after many years of stagnation. The weekly allowance is currently €400 for a child aged under 12 and €425 for those over 12 years.[118] Budget 2026 provided additional funding to Tusla to expand foster carer peer support programmes and to support foster carer recruitment teams but gave no increase in direct payments to foster carers. The Irish Foster Care Association has identified as challenges the non-recognition of foster care time towards contributory pension entitlement, the adequacy of financial supports and aftercare, along with respite provision.[119]

Residential care is a key component of the suite of care options but there has been an historic under-investment in state-provided residential care. Additional funding over the past three years is beginning to make an impact. Four Tusla residential centres opened in 2025 — the first since 2018 — and Tusla is on track to open a further eight centres in 2026.[120] It takes 12 to 18 months from point of purchase of a property for Tusla to open a residential care centre meeting the necessary regulatory requirements.[121] Tusla acknowledges capacity challenges in its supply of registered and regulated residential placements, primarily due to property and workforce shortages and

115 See for example: Health Information and Quality Authority, 'Children's services publication statement 21 January 2026' (21 January 2026).

116 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children's Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 39.

117 Child Law Project, *Falling through the Cracks: An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024* (Child Law Project 2024) 3.

118 Citizens Information webpage on fostering <https://bit.ly/4biZhVx> accessed 18 March 2026.

119 Irish Foster Care Association, *Submission to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality Consultation on the New Alternative Care Policy Framework* (Irish Foster Care Association 2025) <https://bit.ly/4duSY2D> accessed 18 March 2026.

120 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 4.

121 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 4.

the complex needs of young people in care, particularly those aged 16 to 18 who have substance misuse, criminal activity or mental health issues.[122]

Special care is a specialised category of residential care. The High Court may grant a special care order by which an older child is detained for a limited time in a secure unit as a therapeutic intervention. Demand for special care beds has consistently outstripped supply. As of end 2025, the State's three special care units were operating at only 58 per cent of their combined bed capacity (15 of 26 beds).[123] The shortage of special care beds has been the subject of High Court proceedings.[124] It was also the focus of an external review commissioned by Tusla, published in 2025, which recommended the establishment of a Centre for Excellence for special care services in one geographical campus along with the re-introduction of high support units for children at the edge of special care.[125]

A new Special Care Worker grade was approved in late 2024, but recruitment has yielded limited results so far. In 2025, 31 new workers were recruited, but 24 were lost so there was a net gain of just seven staff, enabling one additional bed to open.[126] Opening the remaining 11 special care beds would require 77 additional special care workers.[127] In October 2025 in Budget 2026, the Government provided an additional €6 million funding to Tusla for special care to increase capacity and enhance provision by funding new special care staff grades, staff wellbeing initiatives and additional therapeutic supports.[128] This funding includes €1.3 million to provide an enhanced multi-disciplinary therapeutic service to children on the edge of special care, in special care,

122 Kate Duggan, 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Equality Opening Statement' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025) 3.

123 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

124 See for example, Fiachra Gallagher 'Contempt ruling sought against Tusla for failing to place children in special care', *The Irish Times* (18 December 2025).

125 Gerry 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, 30 April 2025) 104 and 110.

126 'The Irish Times view on special care for children: State is failing the most vulnerable', *The Irish Times* (22 January 2026).

127 Kitty Holland, 'Eleven Special Care Beds for At-Risk Children Remain Empty, High Court Hears' *The Irish Times* (21 January 2026). According to ratios set by HIQA, each special care bed requires a minimum of seven staff.

128 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 March 2026. This brings the budget for special care to €26 million.

and transitioning from a special care environment.[129] This is a welcome development.

A shortage of placements has left Tusla with no option but to place some children in unregistered settings in order to fulfil its statutory duty to provide alternative care. These placements are known as Special Emergency Arrangements (SEAs). SEAs fall outside established inspection and governance regimes, although Tusla does monitor the quality of these services.[130]

Over the course of 2025, 1,121 children were placed in SEAs.[131] As of November 2025, 185 children were in SEAs, of whom 68 per cent were separated children seeking international protection, and six children aged 12 or under from mainstream care were also accommodated in these arrangements.[132] While HIQA has no regulatory remit in relation to SEAs, it has raised concern that the insufficient availability of placements in some areas has resulted in increased use of SEAs, which are resource-intensive in terms of both cost and staffing.[133] In relation to Cork specifically, HIQA was very concerned about the lack of provision for especially vulnerable children who remained at high risk of harm and continued to reside in unregulated settings.[134] SEAs have also been the subject of sustained criticism from the judiciary, the Ombudsman for Children and others.[135]

The shortage of appropriate care placements — particularly for children with complex needs — gives rise to a range of serious issues: delays in admitting

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129 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 March 2026.

130 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 5 February 2025 [981].

131 Aisling Kenny, '1,121 Children in Tusla Care Placed in Unregulated Emergency Settings Last Year' *RTÉ News* (11 March 2026) <https://bit.ly/40Avf9L> accessed 18 March 2026.

132 Kitty Holland 'Tusla paid private firms €36m to house children in an unregulated system', *The Irish Times* (5 January 2026).

133 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 80-81.

134 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Governance of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) Child Protection and Welfare and Foster Care Services* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 80-81.

135 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 18 March 2026.

children and young people to care; difficulties in matching placements to individual needs; the placement of children in unsuitable settings, including SEAs; multiple placement moves; and extended waiting times for both admission to and discharge from special care centres.[136]

Finally, Tusla has a statutory obligation to provide accommodation to children who it identifies as being homeless.[137] No figure exists for the total number of children provided with emergency accommodation, but we know 457 separated children seeking international protection were accommodated under this provision at the end of the year.[138]

Aftercare

The 2025 *Programme for Government* commits the Government to "examine ways to further support all young people as they age out of state care and foster care".[139] Tusla has a duty to determine whether a care leaver has a need for assistance and if eligible to offer support to that young person.[140] In December 2025, 2,985 young people were in receipt of aftercare services.[141] Tusla provides financial support, a weekly aftercare allowance of €300, to eligible care leavers who are engaged in a qualifying educational course or training programme. This standardised national rate has not been increased since its introduction in 2018. Care leavers may also be eligible for specific housing and educational supports.[142] There has been an increase in the number of young people receiving aftercare in the last decade, but there is a scarcity of data on the nature of the aftercare services provided.

A closer look at those aged 18 to 22 years in receipt of aftercare supports shows that the majority (84 per cent) were in education or training.[143]

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136 See for example Child Law Project, *Falling through the Cracks: An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024* (Child Law Project 2024) 87-88.

137 Child Care Act 1991, s 5.

138 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

139 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

140 Child Care Act 1991, s 45.

141 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 38.

142 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 10 April 2025 [351].

143 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 38.

A considerable number (43.5 per cent) had remained living with their foster carers.[144] A further eight per cent had returned to live in their family home. The remainder were living outside of a family setting: 23 per cent in independent living and 18 per cent in residential care, supported lodgings, Designated Care Leavers Accommodation or 'other'. Most concerning, 7.5 per cent (157 young people) were recorded as homeless.[145]

What do children and young people need next?

Tusla is a large and complex agency, operating in a pressured environment, but as noted by HIQA despite the challenges it faces, managers and staff have remained committed to continuing to improve their services and, in general, HIQA found that there was a high level of compliance in respect to children's rights.[146]

Tusla's capacity to anticipate and respond to evolving demand is constrained by, among other things, the structural imbalance between its crisis-led and preventative expenditure, the time needed to open a residential care unit and by the shortage of foster carers.

To enable Tusla to fulfil its positive obligation to prevent foreseeable harm to a child, further investment in early intervention and prevention is needed. Effective community-based child and family supports should over time reduce the number and complexity of referrals to Tusla. Yet, as the budget breakdown above shows, approximately 18 per cent of Tusla's total spend is directed towards early intervention and prevention, while over 70 per cent is spent on crisis-related services of child welfare and protection and alternative care. It is not possible to reallocate resources, as child welfare and protection and alternative care are demand-led services which Tusla is under a legal obligation to provide, and their budgets cannot simply be redirected to family support. The challenge is to grow the proportion directed to upstream

144 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 42.

145 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Quarter 4 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 42.

146 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.

prevention over time, through ring-fenced annual increases, so that the system gradually shifts away from a downstream, crisis-driven response model. While this work has already begun, more is needed.

In addition, in the event of a tightening of public expenditure, it is essential the budget resources for early intervention and prevention are protected as if not it may lead to an escalation of matters and the potential of risk being missed. In addition, continued investment in research, evaluation and data analysis is needed to understand the geographical spread of family support services, identify gaps and to document the most effective interventions.

To enable Tusla to be capable of responding effectively to risks of harm to a child and support children in care, further investment is needed in its workforce. While acknowledging the efforts and achievements to date in recruitment and building a pipeline of future workers, as of 2025 Tusla's workforce was challenged to meet the demand for its services. The agency needs approximately 400 additional frontline staff to ensure that all children and young people receive timely and high-quality services. In addition, given the centrality of relational work to both social work and social care, the publication of further disaggregated data on retention would allow for a better understanding of the turnover rate of allocated staff to a child or young person.

To enable Tusla to fulfil its statutory duty to provide alternative care and to reduce its exposure to legal challenge, there is an urgent need to increase the number of appropriate regulated placements. No published figure exists indicating the precise number of additional placements required. However, it can be estimated that at least 185 additional registered placements are needed — whether by registering existing SEAs or opening new units — alongside additional special care placements. To ensure Tusla can safeguard every child in need, there is also a pressing need to diversify the type of care placements available. High support foster and residential care enhanced with access to multidisciplinary therapeutic support has been identified as essential to meet the needs of children with complex needs, including those on the edge of special care, in special care, and transitioning from a special care environment.

Recommendations

- Ring-fence and track a year-on-year increase in the Government's budget allocation to Tusla for family support, to shift over time the proportion of expenditure directed towards early intervention and prevention, compared to crisis-led services. Support this work by increased investment in research to identify the most effective interventions.
- Continue to support Tusla to invest in a range of retention and recruitment activities to protect and grow its workforce, supplemented by whole-of-government initiatives.
- Provide additional funding to Tusla to commission community-based supports in geographical areas where there is a shortage of social workers, as an interim measure, to support vulnerable children and young people.
- Commission a comprehensive review of the regulatory framework, including the process and timeframe for registering residential care units.
- Publish a timeline for ending the use of special emergency arrangements.
- Diversify care options to provide a range of high support placements for children with complex needs and those at the edge of special care, and invest in the development of a Centre for Excellence for special care services.
- Increase investment in research on child protection, child welfare and alternative care, including to examine the nature and outcomes of child protection and welfare referrals and trends in alternative care, communicating the findings widely and feeding them into service planning.

Commitment

Ensure effective and mandatory cooperation between state agencies by putting the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children on a statutory footing.

Section Grade

A **B-** C D E F

Introduction

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises that "effective implementation of the Convention requires visible cross-sectoral coordination to recognize and realize children's rights across Government, between different levels of government and between Government and civil society - including in particular children and young people themselves".[147]

In its concluding observations on Ireland in 2023, the Committee recommended that Ireland "review the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for facilitating inter-agency coordination on activities affecting children and identify measures to strengthen the monitoring and coordination of all activities related to the implementation of the Convention across all sectors".[148]

A review was subsequently commissioned of Ireland's governance of children's services and in its 2024 report the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommended that Ireland enhance inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination on policy planning and service delivery by among other things: "Creating effective and accountable coordination structures at senior levels across all relevant public agencies."[149] The OECD recommends that this should include, in particular, Tusla and the HSE as well as agencies under the respective aegis of the Departments of Education, Social Protection, and Justice. In 2025, HIQA's overview report highlighted the need for an inter-departmental approach "to strategically plan for the resourcing and delivery of children's services into the future".[150]

The phrase 'vulnerable children' used in the *Programme for Government* commitment is not defined in Irish law but *Young Ireland* describes vulnerable cohorts of children to include those experiencing poverty, homelessness, those with disabilities, mental health issues, a parent in prison, Travellers,

147 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 5 (2003) General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44, Para. 6) CRC/GC/2003/5' (2003), para 27.

148 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.

149 OECD, *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework* (OECD Public Governance Reviews 2024) 17.

150 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.

victims and witnesses of crime,[151] those who are carers[152] and those who are in care.[153]

Responsibility for the delivery of services to vulnerable children and young people is shared across multiple government departments and agencies: including the Departments of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE); Health; Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; Social Protection; Education and Youth; Housing, Local Government and Heritage as well as their agencies, including the Health Service Executive, An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service and Cuan.

As far back as the 1993 Kilkenny incest case, difficulties with inter-agency cooperation have been identified as a risk to effective child safeguarding in Ireland.[154] To support its work, Tusla has agreed thematic protocols for interagency collaboration with the HSE,[155] An Garda Síochána[156] and the Housing Authorities.[157] Despite these protocols, difficulties persist and there have been reported examples of failures to adhere fully or in a timely manner to these protocols.[158]

In 2024, in recognition of the need to foster greater inter-agency collaboration, the then Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth set up, on an administrative basis, an Interagency Group for

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151 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (Government of Ireland 2023) 94.

152 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028 (2023)* 8-9.

153 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (2023) 89.

154 Catherine McGuinness and others, *Report of the Kilkenny Incest Investigation Case* (South Eastern Health Board 1993).

155 Joint Protocol for Interagency Collaboration Between the Health Service Executive and Tusla – Child and Family Agency to Promote the Best Interests of Children and Families (Health Service Executive and Child and Family Agency, Tusla, 2020).

156 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Joint Working Protocol for An Garda Síochána/Tusla – Child and Family Agency Liaison* (Tusla) <https://bit.ly/40EDjWY> accessed 18 March 2026; Child and Family Agency – Tusla, Data Protection Notice for data sharing between Tusla and An Garda Síochána (AGS) <https://bit.ly/4cPLgzU> accessed 18 March 2026.

157 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Revised Joint Working Protocol between Tusla and Housing Authorities Young People Leaving State Care* (Housing Circular 20/2025, 27 June 2025) <https://bit.ly/4rJmk0T> accessed 18 March 2026.

158 Ombudsman for Children, *Nowhere to Turn: Children with disabilities left with no support* (Ombudsman for Children 2023) and Child Law Project, *Falling through the Cracks: An Analysis of Child Care Proceedings from 2021 to 2024* (Child Law Project 2024).

Vulnerable Children (referred to as a committee in the *Programme for Government* commitment). The Group, which meets quarterly, comprises representatives from DCDE, the Department of Health, the HSE and Tusla and was set up to "identify and address a range of challenges in the delivery of State services to a cohort of vulnerable children and young people".[159]

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In the *Programme for Government*, the Government commits to ensure effective and mandatory cooperation between state agencies by putting the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children on a statutory footing.[160]

In 2025, the Interagency Group for Vulnerable Children continued its work. Since its establishment, the Group has engaged on issues related to mental health and disability services and is assisting in the ongoing review and updating of the 2020 Joint Protocol for Interagency Collaboration between Tusla and the HSE.[161]

In a very welcome development, in December 2025, the Minister for Children, Equality and Disability published the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025. The Bill establishes a high-level inter-departmental and inter-agency committee, the Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee.[162] It will comprise nominees from seven Departments of State, Tusla, the HSE and An Garda Síochána and other nominees if deemed appropriate.[163] The Committee will provide a mechanism to enable nominating bodies to work together in planning and delivering services to the following groups: children not receiving adequate care and protection; children in care; young people

159 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 January 2026.

160 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

161 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 January 2026.

162 Section 10 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 inserts new provisions after section 6 of the Child Care Act, 1991.

163 Section 6C as inserted by section 10 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.

in receipt of aftercare services; and children in receipt of child care and family support services.[164]

The Committee's functions include to develop and implement solutions to any identified barriers experienced in accessing services by the groups listed above; to keep the operation and effectiveness of the implementation of the Act under review; and to provide advice, and make proposals, to the Minister.[165] An annual report on the Committee's activities will be presented to the Oireachtas.[166]

The Bill also addresses another aspect of interagency cooperation by placing a duty on relevant bodies to cooperate with each other in the performance of their respective functions on child welfare, child protection and family support.[167] It defines cooperation to include collaborating in the planning and delivery of relevant services and activities. Relevant bodies are defined as including a broad range of statutory and State-funded bodies.[168] It also expressly permits relevant bodies to share information, including personal data, with another relevant body, once this is necessary and proportionate to perform its functions.[169] It is hoped that this will ease anxiety about potential breaches of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, which may hinder interagency cooperation.[170] This new provision may need to be supported by inter-agency Data Protection Notices, similar to the Notice between Tusla and An Garda Síochána published in early 2026.[171]

These two reforms are very welcome and long-awaited.

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164 Section 6B(1) as inserted by section 10 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.

165 Section 6B(2) as inserted by section 10 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.

166 Section 6G as inserted by section 10 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.

167 Section 11B of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 inserts a new provision after section 11 of Child Care Act, 1991.

168 Section 2 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 defines "relevant bodies" to include Tusla, An Garda Síochána, the HSE, a Department of State, schools, higher education institutions, Oberstown Detention Campus, section 38 and 39 bodies, private hospitals, a safety partnership, a local authority, a Local Community Development Committee.

169 It is noted that the Bill does not provide for the sharing of personal data between the Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee members and relevant bodies.

170 Órla Ryan, Social workers 'afraid' to share information about children due to GDPR concerns *The Irish Times* (21 September 2025).

171 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, Data Protection Notice for data sharing between Tusla and An Garda Síochána (AGS) <https://bit.ly/4cPLgzU> accessed 18 March 2026. This notice outlines the data sharing between Tusla and the AGS, describing the purpose, types of personal data, and to whom information may be shared.

What do children and young people need next?

There is an urgent need to put in place a robust infrastructure for interagency collaboration on the planning and delivering of services on vulnerable children. The profile and needs of children and young people who are in receipt of family support, child protection or alternative care services vary but they often present with multi-dimensional needs which cut across departmental and agency remits.

Taking as an example, children in or seeking admission to special care, their profiles highlight the complexities involved. Common features of this cohort, identified by the External Review on Special Care, include exposure to significant and ongoing trauma, a very difficult and often intergenerational family history, admission to care due to parental addiction, and multiple placement breakdowns.[172] Diagnoses frequently included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and intellectual disabilities, alongside mental health difficulties, addiction, neurodivergence, poor educational attainment and poor communication skills.[173] Grounds for admission typically included emotional and behavioural difficulties, self-harm, suicidal ideation and a range of high-risk behaviours including absconding, substance misuse, involvement in drug dealing and criminality, and violence towards others. Concerns about grooming by criminal gangs, sexual exploitation and physical health were also commonly cited.[174]

The timely enactment and commencement of sections 10 and 11B of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 must be a priority. This will provide for the establishment of a national interagency committee to plan for and deliver an integrated service response to vulnerable children and families, and to permit the exchange of information needed to facilitate this work.

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172 Gerry 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, 30 April 2025) 17.

173 Gerry 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, 30 April 2025) 17.

174 Gerry 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, 30 April 2025) 16.

In advance of the formal establishment of the Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee, preparatory work could begin immediately. The membership of the existing Interagency Group for Vulnerable Children could be expanded to lay the groundwork, and an initial work plan developed, aligned with relevant commitments in the *Programme for Government*, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* and the forthcoming National Policy Framework on Alternative Care.[175] Transparency and accountability could be provided through an annual report or a presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Children and Equality.

Since 2016, the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group has promoted departmental compliance with obligations under the Children First Act 2015 and the Children First National Guidance, with a focus on identifying and reporting child protection concerns and developing Sectoral Implementation Plans.[176] The experience gained and lessons learned from the operation of this Group should be drawn on in developing the work plan and terms of operation of the Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee.

Finally, considerations could be given as to how the Committee's work will be informed by and report into other national structures including the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education,[177] monitoring mechanisms for *Young Ireland*: *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*,[178] the work of the Department of an Taoiseach's Child Poverty and

175 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (2023). This is the overarching policy on children and young people up to 24 years of age.

176 Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth, *Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group: Annual Report 2023* (Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth 2024).

177 Membership includes the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence; Minister for Health, Minister for Children, Equality and Disability; Minister for Education; Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; Minister for Finance; Minister for Social Protection and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. See: <https://bit.ly/3PdpUTn> accessed 18 March 2026. It has responsibility for overseeing the implementation of relevant Programme for Government commitments and for implementation of *Young Ireland*: *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*.

178 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028* (2023). Young Ireland is the overarching policy on children and young people up to 24 years of age.

Well-Being Programme Office and at local level, with the 27 county-level Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC).[179]

To drive these initiatives, there continues to be a need for political leadership to create a cultural shift in which state bodies truly operationalise the concept that 'child safeguarding is everyone's businesses. Initiatives such as budget pooling could be examined, to see how best to support bodies to move away from placing exclusionary criteria on their services to 'protect' their own budgets.

Recommendations

- Establish a statutory Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee, through the enactment of Section 10 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.
- Place a statutory duty on relevant bodies to cooperate, including by sharing personal information, through the enactment of sections 11B of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.
- Provide an annual update on the work of the Interagency Group for Vulnerable Children.

179 CYPSCs bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people. <https://bit.ly/4cVBoEQ> accessed 18 March 2016.

Commitment

Develop a national plan on alternative care to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future.

Section Grade

A B **C+** D E F

Introduction

The Constitution of Ireland, European and international law provides for a child's right to alternative care.[180] Under the UNCRC, the State is obliged to take all appropriate measures to protect the child from all forms of harm while in the care of their parent[181] and to provide a child deprived of his or her family environment with special protection and assistance.[182] A care placement must be reviewed periodically.[183]

The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children set out key principles governing alternative care: children should remain as close as possible to their home community to facilitate family contact and continuity of their educational and social life,[184] while stability, safe attachment to caregivers and permanency should be central goals.[185] Children in care must be treated with dignity and protected from harm in all care settings,[186] and their broader rights — including access to education, health, identity and freedom of religion — must be safeguarded.[187] Siblings should not be separated unless clearly necessary,[188] and every child must have the support of a legal guardian or responsible adult at all times.[189] Residential care is to be used only where it is specifically appropriate and in the child's best interests, with family-based settings required for young children, particularly those under three years of age.[190]

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child commends the "development of a comprehensive national strategy or national plan of action for children, built on the framework of the Convention." It emphasises the need for it

180 Bunreacht na hÉireann – Constitution of Ireland, Article 42A.

181 UNCRC art 19(1).

182 UNCRC art 20(1).

183 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFREU) art 24(1); RESC art 17(1)(c); UNCRC art 25; CRPD art 23(5); and Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, A/Res/64/142, 24 February 2010, para 14.

184 UN General Assembly, 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children Res A/RES/64/142' (2010), para 11.

185 ibid, para 12.

186 ibid, para 13.

187 ibid, para 16.

188 ibid, para 17.

189 ibid, para 19.

190 ibid, paras 21–22. Exceptions to this principle may be warranted to prevent the separation of siblings and in cases where the placement is of an emergency nature or is for a predetermined and very limited duration, with planned family reintegration or other appropriate long-term care solution as its outcome.

to be developed through a process of consultation, including meaningful consultation with children, which requires special child-sensitive materials and processes.[191]

While Tusla has a suite of strategies on its alternative care services,[192] these are agency level plans, so are restricted to matters that fall within the remit of Tusla. Ireland lacks an inter-agency national policy or strategy on child protection and alternative care.

In Ireland, alternative care is governed by the Child Care Act 1991, which provides for four types of formal alternative care placements: foster care, foster care provided by relatives, residential care and special care, each subject to a set of Regulations[193] and governed by National Standards.[194] Operational responsibility rests with Tusla. However, Tusla alone cannot address all the issues that lead to a child or young person coming into care, nor can they provide for all the services a child or young person in care will need, along with their families. Responsibility for these services fall to other Departments and State agencies. There is a need for engagement by HSE mental health, disability and addition services, as well as engagement with an Garda Síochána. In addition, early years settings, schools, hospitals, GPs, medical and therapeutic services, the courts, guardians ad litem (GALs) and, in some cases, immigration services play a role in meeting the needs and vindicate the rights of children in care. A whole-of-government response is clearly needed for any national policy on alternative care to succeed.

As of December 2025, there were 5,879 children in care in Ireland.[195] The vast majority (86 per cent) were in foster care, with the remainder in residential

191 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General Comment No 5 (2003) General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44, Para. 6) CRC/GC/2003/5' (2003), para 29.

192 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Strategic Plan for Foster Care Services for Children and Young People 2022-2025* (Tusla 2022); Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Strategic Plan for Residential Care Services for Children and Young People 2022-2025* (Tusla 2022); and Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Strategic Plan for Aftercare Services for Children and Young People 2023–2026* (Tusla 2023).

193 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.

194 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).

195 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

care (10 per cent) or in 'other' placements (4 per cent). The high proportion of children in family-based care with foster carers in Ireland is good by international standards. Children enter care for a myriad of reasons. These include: parental neglect and abuse; the child's own presentation of emotional or behavioural difficulties; and the child has no parent/guardian in the State, such as separated children seeking international protection.

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In the *Programme for Government*, the Government commits to develop a national plan on alternative care, to include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future.[196]

In early 2025, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) commenced work on the development of Ireland's first National Policy Framework on Alternative Care, with an expected publication date of summer 2026.

The Minister described the aim of the National Policy Framework as being "to articulate a future and Whole of Government vision of alternative care in Ireland" and stated that it "represents a significant opportunity to improve the experiences and outcomes for our young people in care and those who have left our care system".[197]

Since late 2025, DCDE has been undertaking a series of consultations to inform the development of the Framework. In November 2025, DCDE officials met with the Care Experienced Expert Panel (CEEP), whose insights have guided consultation agendas and informed discussions with other groups.[198]

196 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

197 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).

198 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 January 2026.

DCDE has convened focus groups with a diverse range of key stakeholders and issued an invitation for submissions from stakeholders. On 6 February 2026, the Minister launched a public consultation to inform the development of the National Policy Framework on Alternative Care.[199]

Alternative Care, as defined by the UN, relates to any care arrangements formal or informal.[200] In Ireland, informal care arrangements include informal kinship care and private family arrangements.[201] In the 2025 *Programme for Government*, the Government commits to: "Improve support for kinship care to enhance outcomes for kinship families".[202] DCDE is currently developing a national policy on informal kinship care. It is hoped this policy will map out pathways for kinship carers to access information and support and to provide pathways by which legal guardianship can be established, where appropriate, between children and their kinship carers.

What do children and young people need next?

The development of a whole-of-government National Policy Framework is an opportunity to orientate State investment and legal and policy reform, with the goal of breaking the intergenerational cycle of children from the same communities entering care and to ensure that those in care are supported to achieve their full potential.

At the same time, there is much to celebrate in our current system: most children in care are in family-based foster care; residential care is provided in small group homes; and most children in care are engaged in education.[203] These positive aspects need to be reflected and protected within the Framework.

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199 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Public Consultation on the National Policy Framework for Alternative Care' (6 February 2026) <https://bit.ly/3NHWtZ4> accessed 18 March 2026.

200 UN General Assembly, 'Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children Res A/RES/64/142' (2010), 11.

201 See the website of Kinship Care Ireland <https://bit.ly/4uC9JiD> accessed 18 March 2026.

202 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 64.

203 Central Statistics Office, *Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018–2024* (CSO 2024) <https://bit.ly/4bwyzrf> accessed 18 March 2026. Approximately nine in ten children who left care (and aged 18–23 years in January 2024) were in substantial employment or enrolled in education for each of the years 2019–2022, similar to all children.

The development of the Framework needs to be informed by a child welfare inequalities approach which recognises the association between poverty and admission to care,[204] and a Social Model of protecting children,[205] which puts the lived experience of children and parents at the centre, while understanding and tackling the root causes of child protection. It should reflect in its vision and objectives key principles. These should reflect the full 'life journey' of children through the care system – from prevention and early intervention through alternative care placement to aftercare supports. It should also promote compliance with constitutional, European and international human rights law, be trauma-informed and informed by the views of care-experienced children and young people.

The Framework is an opportunity to explore the drivers of trends and geographical variations within alternative care. The rate of children in care varies geographically, but the overall rate is 4.7 children in care per 1,000 children. It ranges from a high of 10.3 per 1,000 children in Dublin North City to 2.1 in Dublin South East/Wicklow.[206]

There is a downward trend in the total number of children in care (an 8 per cent decrease between 2016 and 2025),[207] despite a rise in referrals and population growth. It is not clear what is driving this downward trend, but it is likely a mixture of both positive and negative factors. Family support is likely diverting some children from the care system, but concern exists that the lack of appropriate placements and use of private family arrangements may be hiding a population which would, in previous times, have been taken into care.

There has also been a rise in instability within a cohort of the care population, with 5.7 per cent of the care population experiencing three or more placement

204 See for example: Paul Bywaters and the Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, *The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report* (Child Welfare Inequalities Project 2020).

205 Featherstone and others, *Re-Imagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families* (Policy Press 2014).

206 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13.

207 Child and Family Agency – Tusla, Monthly Performance and Activity Dashboard July 2016 <https://bit.ly/4lD2jaz> accessed on 18 March 2026; and Child and Family Agency – Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report December 2025* (Tusla, 27 February 2026) 13. There were 5,879 children in care at the end of 2025 and 6,372 children in care in July 2016.

moves in 2024, up from 3.1 per cent in 2020.[208] The UN Guidelines on Alternative Care state that: "Frequent changes in care settings are detrimental to the child's development and ability to form attachments, and should be avoided."[209]

Expanding the continuum of care options is another area the Framework could usefully address. This should include a commitment to introduce specialist high support foster and residential placements for children with complex needs — such as victims of trafficking or those presenting with high levels of distress, including self-harm. Access to multidisciplinary therapeutic support within such placements has been identified as essential for children on the edge of special care, in special care, or transitioning from it.[210]

The Framework could also resolve a long-standing anomaly whereby alternative care is subject to a two-tier inspection regime. HIQA registers and regulates Tusla's special care units and inspects Tusla's child protection and welfare, out-of-hours social work services, services for separated children and all foster care services.[211] It also inspects statutory residential care centres run by Tusla, but does not have a remit to inspect non-statutory residential care centres run by voluntary and private providers that Tusla commissions. These non-statutory residential care centres are registered and inspected by Tusla.[212] This is problematic, because only 15 per cent of residential care centres are subject to HIQA inspections. Tusla is therefore required to play a dual role of provider and inspector of services, and although both bodies inspect residential settings against the same National Regulations and Standards, their approach and compliance categorisations differ.[213] There is no rationale

208 Ann Murphy, 'Stability of care system queried as 320 children put in three or more placements last year' *Irish Examiner* (12 October 2025).

209 United Nations General Assembly, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, A/Res/64/142 (24 February 2010) para 60.

210 Gerry 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, 30 April 2025).

211 Health Information and Quality Authority, *Overview Report on the Regulation and Monitoring of Children's Services in 2024* (Health Information and Quality Authority 2025) 64. HIQA's remit is provided for under section 69 of the Child Care Act 1991 as amended by Child Care (Amendment) Act 2011 and publishes inspection reports and annual reports on their website.

212 This work is carried out by Tusla's Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service, which publishes its reports on its website < <https://bit.ly/4btjAOR> accessed 18 March 2026.

213 HIQA and Tusla both inspect alternative care services against the National Standards for Children's Residential Centres (2018), but Tusla also refers to previous standards in its inspections, as these may still apply for centres registered under such frameworks. The two bodies use different compliance categorisations.

to maintain this two-tier regime. HIQA's remit could be expanded, by way of an amendment to the Health Act 2007, to allow it to inspect non-statutory residential care centres.

Finally, other key areas requiring attention in the Framework include the shortage of care placements, the use of unregulated placements, the needs and rights of separated children seeking international protection, workforce challenges, poor inter-agency cooperation and inadequate aftercare supports, each of which is discussed elsewhere in this chapter. The Framework represents a significant opportunity to address these long-standing deficits in a coherent and sustained way; that opportunity should not be missed.

Recommendations

- Publish a comprehensive whole-of-government National Policy Framework on Alternative Care, grounded in children's rights and informed by the views of care-experienced children and young people.
- Establish an effective monitoring mechanism for the implementation of the National Policy Framework on Alternative Care, with annual reporting on progress to the Oireachtas.

Commitment

Establish a National Child Death Review Mechanism on a statutory basis.

Section Grade

A B C- D E F

Introduction

European and international human rights law recognises an individual's right to life and places a positive duty on States to take appropriate preventive measures to safeguard the lives of those within its jurisdiction. The UNCRC places an obligation on the State to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and development of the child[214] and the European Convention on Human Rights holds that everyone's right to life shall be protected by law.[215] The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has commented on child deaths, including recommending to the UK authorities in 2023 that they conduct an independent inquiry into the unexpected deaths of children in alternative care, custody, mental health care and the military and ensure the regular collection and publication of disaggregated data on child deaths in all institutional settings.[216] In addition, the UN has also emphasised the importance of providing an independent inquiry into the cause of death of any child in detention.[217]

International law and best practice guidance holds, that regardless of the cause of the child's death, the principle applies that we should seek to learn from such deaths to prevent future ones. UNICEF note that where States have set up systematic procedures for investigating all child deaths, many more deaths have been revealed in which some form of violence or neglect is implicated and that adequate investigation informs preventive strategies.[218]

Ireland lacks a centralised system for notifying child deaths. While the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and National Paediatric Mortality Register (NPMR) partially address this gap, both have limitations. The CSO publishes annual statistics on child deaths by age, sex and cause, though with a time lag — the latest figures, for 2023, record 290 deaths of children under 18.[219]

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214 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, art 6.

215 European Convention on Human Rights, art 2.

216 Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Concluding Observations on the Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' (2023) CRC/C/GBR/CO/6–7, para 22.

217 OHCHR, *United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty* (OHCHR 1990) Rule 57. It also holds that an inquiry should also be made when the death of a juvenile occurs within six months from the date of his or her release from the detention facility and there is reason to believe that the death is related to the period of detention.

218 UNICEF, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF 2007) 92–93.

219 See the website of the Central Statistics Office <https://bit.ly/4sU1xZs> accessed 18 March 2026.

The NPMR retrospectively compiles and analyses child death data, but has identified shortcomings in existing datasets, including the quality of data on cause of death.[220]

Ireland also lacks a national review mechanism responsible for examining the circumstances of unnatural or unexpected child deaths and on making recommendations to prevent future deaths. While the National Review Panel reviews deaths of children in care, care-leavers and those known to Tusla, and other mechanisms play a role,[221] nobody holds overarching responsibility for child death reviews across the population.

There have been calls over the past twenty years for the establishment of a national, statutory mechanism to register and review child deaths, including by the Children's Rights Alliance in its 2006 report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.[222] At that time, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children published a scoping paper in February 2009.[223] In July 2009, the Government published an Implementation Plan to respond to the findings of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan Report) which recommended the need for reviews of deaths and serious incidences of children.[224] As a consequence, the National Review Panel was established in 2010.

In 2012, the report of the Independent Child Death Review Group was published.[225] It examined files relating to the deaths of 196 children in care,

220 National Paediatric Mortality Register, *Annual Report 2025: Data from 1st January 2019 to 31st December 2023* (National Paediatric Mortality Register 2025) 85. The NPMR operates under the National Office of Clinical Audit (NOCA) which is funded by the HSE and operationally supported by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

221 Of relevance are the Coroners, HSE Incident Management Framework 2020, the HSE National Independent Review Panel, the Tusla Incident Management Policy 2022 and the Health Information Quality Authority. For further discussion see: Ombudsman for Children, *Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland* (Ombudsman for Children 2025) 10–13.

222 Children's Rights Alliance, *From Rhetoric to Rights: Second Shadow Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child* (Children's Rights Alliance 2006) 38.

223 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Child Death Review Options Paper* (Ombudsman for Children's Office 2009).

224 *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009 Implementation Plan* (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and Department of Health and Children 2009) 36-37 and 68.

225 Geoffrey Shannon and Norah Gibbons, *Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group* (Government Publications 2012).

aftercare or known to child protection services between 2000 and 2010, and recommended the establishment of a statutory Child Death Review Unit and the creation of a register of all child deaths.[226] These recommendations were not implemented.

More recently, in 2022, in a parallel but related process, the Department of Justice published *A Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews*, which included a recommendation to establish a domestic and family violence death review process within the governance structures of the Office of the Ombudsman.[227]

In 2025, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) returned to this issue, with the publication of its report, *Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland.*[228] The report identifies six key challenges: inadequate family involvement and support; no standardised methodology; a review system insufficient to prevent further deaths; lack of statutory underpinning; data gaps; and poor inter-agency cooperation.[229] It welcomes the *Programme for Government* commitment, urges it be progressed without delay and sets out recommended interim measures.

The OCO call for the child death review mechanism to be given:

> *the dual purpose of reviewing individual cases which can bring to light systemic problems that place children at risk and from which lessons can be learned, as well as gathering data relating to the total number of child deaths; identifying the leading causes of preventable deaths; and the groups of children and young people most affected*.[230]

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226 Geoffrey Shannon and Norah Gibbons, *Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group* (Government Publications 2012) 401.

227 Maura Butler, *Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews* (Government of Ireland 2023) <https://bit.ly/4bzi7a0> accessed 18 March 2026.

228 Ombudsman for Children, *Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland* (Ombudsman for Children 2025).

229 Ombudsman for Children, *Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland* (Ombudsman for Children 2025) 30-40.

230 Ombudsman for Children, *Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland* (Ombudsman for Children 2025) 41.

The OCO calls for the mechanism to complement rather than duplicate existing processes, for the views of affected families to inform its development, and for consideration to be given as to whether it is established within an existing body or as a separate entity.

National Review Panel

Since 2010, the National Review Panel (NRP) has conducted reviews of serious incidents and deaths of children in care and known to the child protection system. It produces "reports that are factually based and identify points of learning with a view to improving the quality of services provided to children and families."[231] The NRP is commissioned by Tusla, it is functionally independent with its own independent Chair and panel members. It operates under 2021 interim guidance issued by the then Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for Tusla.[232] Under this guidance, Tusla is obliged to report deaths and serious incidents to the NRP within three working days and may, at its discretion, refer cases carrying a high level of public concern.[233] The NRP decides which cases to review.[234] The power to publish reports rests with Tusla, subject to any legal or other constraining factors.[235]

As of January 2026, Tusla had received 145 reports from the NRP: 121 related to child deaths, 14 to serious incidents and the remaining ten were composite reports concerning more than one child.[236] In over a third of cases (38 per cent) the report has not been published.[237]

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231 See the website of the National Review Panel <https://bit.ly/4dukn4l> access 18 March 2026.

232 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Interim Guidance for Tusla on the Operation of the National Review Panel* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2021).

233 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Interim Guidance for Tusla on the Operation of the National Review Panel* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2021) 3.

234 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Interim Guidance for Tusla on the Operation of the National Review Panel* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2021) 4.

235 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Interim Guidance for Tusla on the Operation of the National Review Panel* (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2021) 7.

236 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

237 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Child and Family Agency – Tusla, 19 January 2026.

While acknowledging the work of the NRP over the past fifteen years, its current configuration is limited. It does not have a statutory basis nor the power to compel witnesses or access information. As far back as 2018, the then Government recognised this as a difficulty and agreed to establish the NRP as an independent statutory body.[238]

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In the *Programme for Government*, the Government commits to establish a National Child Death Review Mechanism on a statutory basis.[239]

Little visible progress was made on this commitment in 2025, though DCDE officials have indicated that they are engaging with other relevant Departments to support delivery of the mechanism over the lifetime of the Government.[240] The remit of the proposed statutory National Child Death Review Mechanism is not yet clear.

In a welcome development in December 2025, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality committed to place the NRP on a statutory footing.[241] In January 2026, she stated her intention to bring forward proposals "to enhance the power and status of the national review panel and place it on a statutory footing," by way of Government amendments to the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, which is currently before the Oireachtas.[242] DCDE stated that the aim of this reform is to "further enhance the work of the National Review Panel, as well as strengthening its governance and independence and its ability to compel information and witnesses in respect of all reviews that it undertakes."[243] It is not clear whether the intention is to maintain the

238 Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 20 February 2019, 3 March 2026 [222, 223 and 224].

239 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

240 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 January 2026.

241 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, 18 December 2025 [1078/3].

242 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, 27 January 2026 [1079/4].

243 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 16 January 2026.

NRP alongside a new mechanism or to amalgamate the NRP into the new mechanism.

The significance of these institutional developments is best understood against the backdrop of a number of devastating cases of child death that came to public attention in the past two years. In two of these deaths, the child's remains were concealed, and authorities were not aware that the child was missing for several years. In the first case, from early 2024, Tusla were concerned about the wellbeing of Kyran Durnin and made efforts to confirm his whereabouts and wellbeing. He was later declared missing by his family on 30 August 2024 and on 17 October the Gardaí upgraded the case to a murder investigation. Gardaí believe Kyran was killed in mid-2022 when he was six years of age. Despite extensive searches, Kyran's remains have not been found.

In a second case, concerns were raised about the whereabouts of a young child, Daniel Aruebose, on 29 August 2025. After a lengthy search, Daniel's remains were discovered on open ground in Donabate, County Dublin on 17 September 2025. The Gardaí commenced a homicide investigation into the death of the three-year-old boy on 11 December 2025, and two arrests have been made to date. In a third case, on 15 October 2025, a 17-year-old Ukrainian teenager, Vadym Davydenko, was fatally stabbed in a care unit in Donaghmede, Dublin. Another teenager has been charged with his murder.

In addition, a case of filicide was reported in the media in September 2025, that of a five-year-old girl, Julia Daczkowska,[244] and in early January 2026, a second case of filicide was reported in the media – that of a 12-year-old-boy, Oísin Reddin.[245]

In four of these five cases the child or family was known to Tusla services. In two cases Tusla was engaged in providing family support, while in another the child had previously been in care before being returned to his family. In the final case the child was being provided with emergency accommodation by Tusla. The cases of Kyran Durnin, Daniel Aruebose, Vadym Davydenko and Oísin Reddin have been referred by Tusla to the NRP.

244 Tim O'Brien and Conor Gallagher, 'Finglas residents struggle to make sense of deaths of father and five-year-old daughter', *The Irish Times* (29 September 2025).

245 Conor Lally, 'Relatives feared for safety of Oísin Reddin (12) in ongoing custody battle with father', *The Irish Times* (9 January 2026).

On 29 October 2025, the NRP completed its review of Kyran Durnin's death. Legal considerations prevented Tusla from publishing the report, but the Attorney General advised that its recommendations may be published, which took place on 3 December.[246] The DCDE press release cited the Chair of the NRP Dr Helen Buckley's statement that: "The over-arching conclusion of this review is that the serious incident which elicited it could not have been anticipated from knowledge that was available to the Tusla Social Work Department at the time. While the review identifies practice and policy weaknesses, it does not infer a direct or causal link between them and the outcome for Kyran."[247]

What do children and young people need next?

Several departments could lead on establishing a child death review mechanism, including the Department of Children, Disability and Equality; the Department of Health; or the Department of the Taoiseach. Regardless of which Department takes the lead, the Alliance echoes the Ombudsman for Children's recommendation that a cross-departmental working group should be set up to progress this work and the lead Department should report its progress to the Cabinet Committee on Children, Disability and Education.[248]

The statutory National Child Death Review Mechanism should, in line with the Ombudsman for Children's recommendation, have a remit to review certain individual deaths, with a particular focus on unnatural or untimely deaths, cases of filicide and deaths of children and young people known to Tusla, as well as gathering and analysing relevant data with the objective of identifying trends and possible learnings. It should have the power to compel public bodies to engage with its reviews, publish its reports and ensure that its recommendations are acted upon. The design of the mechanism should be informed by international best practice and children's rights and by the views of families who have experienced other review mechanisms in Ireland.

246 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Publication of National Review Panel Recommendations' (press release, 3 December 2025).

247 Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 'Publication of National Review Panel Recommendations' (press release, 3 December 2025).

248 Ombudsman for Children, *Child Death Review: The Case for a National Statutory Review Mechanism for the Deaths of Children in Ireland* (Ombudsman for Children 2025) 41 and 42.

Recommendations

- Take steps to establish a National Child Death Review Mechanism by nominating a lead Department, supported by a cross-departmental working group, to drive this work forward as a matter of urgency. A scoping paper on the remit, powers and governance of the mechanism should be prepared and opened to stakeholder consultation.
- Place the National Review Panel on a statutory footing in line with the commitment of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality.

Commitment

Update the Child Care Act, 1991.

Section Grade

A B **C** D E F

Introduction

The principal legislation governing child protection is the Child Care Act 1991, which has been amended and expanded by several statutes and statutory instruments. The enactment of the 1991 Act predates the introduction into Irish law of key international and European human rights instruments and Article 42A of the Constitution. In 2017, the Department of Children commenced a review of the Child Care Act 1991 and engaged in a series of consultations.[249]

Since the commencement of the review, the Government has enacted two amendment statutes. The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 gives statutory effect to the provisions under Article 42A of the Constitution in relation to the best interests principle and hearing the views of children. It also provides for the establishment of a national guardian *ad litem* service, the provisions of which are not yet commenced.

In 2023, the then Minister for Children published the Heads and General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023 and these underwent pre-legislative scrutiny with the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth publishing their report in June 2024.[250] In April 2024, the Government agreed to separate the Child Care (Amendment) Bill into two separate bills. The first of these, the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2024, related to childminders and early years services, was enacted in July 2024. The aspects of the Bill related to child welfare and protection were not progressed during the lifetime of that Government. The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, published in December 2024, is the second Bill emanating from the General Scheme. It amends provisions on child welfare and protection, as well as some other technical amendments.

The *Programme for Government* commitment to "Update the Child Care Act, 1991" is broadly stated. In evaluating the Government's progress on this commitment, we examine whether proposed updates to the Child Care Act

249 See the Department of Children, Disability and Equality webpage: Submissions to the Written Consultation on the Review of the Child Care Act 1991 <https://bit.ly/4cPJQ8y> accessed 18 March 2026.

250 Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Report on Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2024) 33/CDEI/15.

fulfil Ireland's international human rights obligations to children and whether any outstanding gaps are addressed.

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In the *Programme for Government*, the Government commits to update the Child Care Act, 1991.[251]

On 9 December 2025, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality published the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, which completed second stage in the Oireachtas by the end of January 2026. DCDE have communicated that its review of the Act is still ongoing.

The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 contains 29 sections across four parts. Its key provisions include the establishment of a Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee,[252] the introduction of guiding principles, [253] and grant Tusla power to prepare and publish guidelines — a provision expected to place the Child Abuse Substantiation Procedure (CASP) on a statutory footing.[254] The Bill also imposes a duty on relevant bodies to collaborate on service planning and delivery,[255] and expressly permits relevant bodies to share information, including personal data, with another relevant body, once this is necessary and proportionate to perform its functions.[256] It is hoped that this will ease anxiety about potential breaches of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, which may hinder interagency cooperation.[257] It requires relevant bodies to cooperate with the Court when directed.[258] The Minister has also indicated her intention to place

251 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

252 Section 10 of Bill inserts new provision after section 6 of Act.

253 Section 11 of Bill inserts new provision after section 11 of Act.

254 Section 5 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 inserts a new provision into section 3 of the Child Care Act 1991.

255 Section 11A of Bill inserts new provision after section 11 of Act.

256 It is noted that the Bill does not provide for the sharing of personal data between the Child Care Implementation and Inter-Agency Committee members and relevant bodies.

257 Órla Ryan, 'Social Workers "Afraid" to Share Information about Children due to GDPR Concerns' *The Irish Times* (21 September 2025).

258 Section 18 of the Bill inserts new provision after section 25 of Act.

the National Review Panel on a statutory footing by way of amendment to this Bill.[259]

Poor inter-agency cooperation has long been a source of concern, with vulnerable children left waiting for support as agencies defer responsibility to one another. The Bill's provisions on inter-agency cooperation are therefore to be warmly welcomed. The high-level inter-departmental and interagency Committee will seek to bridge the gap between a range of bodies and improve the planning and implementation of child and family support, alternative care and aftercare services. Underpinning this is a legal duty on relevant bodies to cooperate and collaborate with Tusla in the planning and delivery of services to children and families — a provision that, if properly enforced, has the potential to bring about meaningful change.

On child protection interventions, the Bill extends Emergency Care Orders from eight to up to 15 days,[260] introduces a structured framework for Interim Care Orders capped at 18 months,[261] and strengthens Supervision Orders to encompass a child's health and development alongside welfare.[262] Foster carers may now apply for enhanced rights after three rather than five years.[263] The Bill also amends the criteria for a child to be made a party to proceedings.[264] While this is a welcome development, it remains to be seen whether the new wording will have the desired impact in practice.

The Bill addresses a number of longstanding weaknesses in the Child Care Act 1991 and strengthens the legal framework governing our care system. It refocuses voluntary care as a temporary family support measure requiring informed, written parental consent in all cases, sets out procedures for

259 Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, 18 December 2025 [1078/3].

260 Section 13 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 13(c) of the Child Care Act 1991 - Emergency Care Order.

261 Section 14 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 17 of the Child Care Act 1991 - Interim Care Orders.

262 Section 15 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 19 of the Child Care Act 1991 - Supervision Orders.

263 Section 23 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 43A of the Child Care Act 1991 - Enhanced rights for foster carers.

264 Section 17 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 25 of the Child Care Act 1991 - Party to proceedings.

withdrawal of consent, and requires a case review at least every six months.[265] The timeframes imposed on Interim Care Orders will provide children with greater stability and should reduce the courts' workload. The clarification and strengthening of Tusla's powers under Supervision Orders is also significant — given the current limitations on Tusla's ability to confirm a child's safety or wellbeing. This change has the potential to make these orders a much more effective safeguarding tool.

What do children and young people need next?

The provisions in the Bill as published and with the promised amendment placing the National Review Panel on a statutory footing will have a positive impact on vulnerable children and young people and consideration of its enactment should be prioritised by the Oireachtas.

Accommodation for Homeless Children Amendment: There is much to celebrate in the Bill, but its provisions on homeless children need strengthening. The Bill substitutes a new section 5 of the 1991 Act,[266] retaining Tusla's duty to provide accommodation to a child who appears homeless and is not taken into care.[267] Two new duties are added: Tusla must make reasonable efforts to engage with the child and family to support the child's return home where possible, and must review the provision of accommodation at least every six months to assess whether the child should be returned to their parent or taken into care.

For the first time, the Bill empowers the Minister to make regulations governing the provision of homeless accommodation, including conditions and requirements, and differentiated provision based on a child's age, vulnerability or risk.[268] This is welcome in principle. However, the Bill could benefit from safeguards on the use of this power, including a minimum age below which section 5 may be applied. Children accommodated under

265 Sections 6 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 4 of the Child Care Act 1991 – Voluntary Care.

266 Section 7 of Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 amends section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 – Accommodation for homeless children.

267 The Bill clarifies that this duty only applies while the person remains a child.

268 Section 8 of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 inserts a new provision after section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991.

section 5 are not in Tusla's care, so the statutory protections afforded to children in care do not apply. They have no entitlement to an allocated social worker, a care plan, or aftercare supports, and there is no judicial oversight or independent mechanism to hear their views. Tusla is under a duty to provide the child with accommodation only.

The Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 does not address issues that have been raised as gaps, and which require urgent attention.

Separated Children: The Child Care Act 1991 does not provide guidance on which provisions to use for unaccompanied minors and separated children seeking international protection (SCSIPs). In its pre-legislative scrutiny, the Joint Committee recommended that the Bill include explicit provisions for unaccompanied minors — that their status alone should be sufficient to allow them into care, and that they should be eligible for aftercare on reaching 18 regardless of their international protection status.[269] In practice, the majority of SCSIPs are not taken into care but are instead placed in homeless accommodation under section 5 of the 1991 Act, and this practice is likely to continue under the Bill.[270]

Aftercare: The current legal framework is leaving some young people without support at a point in their lives when they face heightened vulnerability and precarious circumstances after leaving care. Under the Child Care Act 1991, as amended in 2015, a care leaver is eligible for an aftercare assessment of need where they spent at least 12 cumulative months in care between the ages of 13 and 18.[271]

If eligible, an aftercare plan is developed and appropriate supports provided. Eligibility may extend to age 21, or to 23 where the young person has not completed their education or training course.[272] Two concerns arise from this framework. First, the 12-month eligibility threshold excludes young people who may have been known to Tusla for many years but entered care late,

269 Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Report on Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 28 June 2024) 33/CDEI/15, 82.

270 The revised voluntary care provision is unlikely to be used for SCSIP, given the criteria for informed written parental consent.

271 Child Care Act 1991, ss 2(1) and 45A.

272 Child Care Act 1991, s 45(4).

as well as those accommodated under section 5, those subject to child protection or welfare plans but never in care — meaning some young people who grew up in precarious circumstances may receive no support on turning 18.

Second, the extension of supports beyond 21 is conditional on engagement in education or training, leaving those not in such programmes without recourse after that age. The 2023 General Scheme contained some aftercare provision, and the Joint Committee's *Pre-Legislative Scrutiny Report* recommended further reforms, including removing discrimination in the allocation of aftercare based on participation in further and higher education, and extending supports to age 26 on the basis of assessed need.[273]

Recommendations

- Enact the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025.
- Introduce an amendment to the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 to place the National Review Panel on a statutory footing.
- Introduce an amendment to the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 to strengthen the protections for children provided with homeless accommodation under section 5.
- Continue the examination of the Child Care Act to address areas, such as eligibility for aftercare support and the provisions for unaccompanied and separated children seeking international protection.

273 Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Report on Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2023* (Houses of the Oireachtas, 28 June 2024) 33/CDEI/15, 74–76.

4.B

Online Safety

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Work to deliver a new EU Child Sexual Abuse Directive that protects children and young people and holds digital platforms to account.	Good	C+
Ensure that children are safe online and implement the recommendations of the new Online Health Taskforce.	Slow	C+
Support and fund Coimisiún na Meán in enforcing the Online Safety Code.	Good	C+

'Securing Ireland's Future', the new *Programme for Government* has provided a clear focus surrounding children in the digital environment, their access to the online world, and importantly, their safety in the online world.

The Government receives a 'C+' grade for progress against its commitment to support and fund Coimisiún na Meán in enforcing the Online Safety Code. The enforcement of the Online Safety Code will hold platforms accountable by imposing a variety of obligations on online service providers to ensure children's safety. Coimisiún na Meán has commenced multiple investigations into certain online platforms to assess their compliance with the Online Safety Code, but the process of these investigations moves slowly. Given that the Online Safety Code only came into full effect in July 2025, it is too early to ascertain whether its enforcement has had a positive impact on the lives of children in Ireland yet.

The Government receives 'C+' for work under its commitment to deliver a new EU Child Sexual Abuse Directive that protects children and young people and holds online platforms to account. Government has been actively negotiating at EU level on the progression of the draft Directive. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has commenced an audit on Ireland's existing laws to identify any gaps or amendments that may be necessary so that when such a Directive does come into force, Ireland's legislation will be up-to-date and compliant with the Directive's obligations. In this first year of Government, it is clear that most of the relevant actors have taken their tasks seriously, but only limited progress has been made. Government's active work on this commitment is welcome, but it has not been delivered in 2025, and children's right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse is being infringed.

The Government receives a 'C+' for its efforts to ensure that children are safe online and in implementing the recommendations of the new Online Health Taskforce. Government has been active on the matter of children's online safety and has announced Online Safety as a priority under the EU presidency. The Online Health Taskforce met all its timelines for the publishing of the Taskforce Report, which submits a wide range of recommendations that will protect children's rights in the digital environment. The Taskforce Report was published in December 2025, but further action is needed as there has been no publicised progress on the implementation of these recommendations.

This section of Report Card focuses specifically on the safety of children and young people in the context of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. It will grade the Government based on its progress in fulfilling the above commitments, and to what degree fulfilling these commitments has made children safe from online sexual abuse and exploitation.

As the context for the commitments is similar, this chapter begins with an overarching context section, against which all three commitments will be graded. It will then examine each commitment separately regarding progress in 2025 and what needs to happen next.

Introduction

Children's rights are equally as applicable in the online world as in the offline world. Children's access and use of the digital environment can be considered as reinforcing their rights to information, education and participation.[1] However, it also presents serious risks to children's wellbeing, safety, and security, thus affecting their right to privacy and right to protection from harm.[2] In this digital age, the access of children in Ireland to the internet has greatly increased, with 93 per cent of children aged 8-12 and 99 per cent of children

1 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Arts 12, 17, 28.

2 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Arts 16, 19.

aged 12-15 having their own smart devices,[3] the most popular of which are tablets, games consoles, smartphones or laptops. Due to a lack of 'Safety by Design' measures embedded across platforms that would safeguard children's rights online, and their often relatively unfettered access to materials on platforms, children are unduly exposed to online harm.

One significant aspect of harm is online child sexual abuse and exploitation. This is widely recognised as not just extremely harmful, but as illegal in most jurisdictions. It constitutes a serious breach of children's fundamental rights. Article 34 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC) spells out a child's right to be protected from sexual abuse or exploitation.[4] It reminds States that they have a positive obligation to take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse.[5] Article 37 of the same convention specifies the child's right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.[6]

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is not just a phenomenon of the internet. It happens in the physical world as well as online. Sometimes, the abuse and exploitation of children by offenders will have online and offline elements.[7] With the advancements in digital technologies and capabilities, child sexual exploitation and abuse can be facilitated more easily, can adopt new formats, can be amplified and can spread more widely.[8] With smart devices this harm can now happen to children in more situations and more privately than ever before. Any digital device with internet access is capable of being a potential pathway for offenders seeking to sexually exploit children, due to the rapid expansion and evolution of digital technology, together with easier access for children.[9]

In creating its General Comment 25, *Children in the Digital Environment* in 2021, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognised that every

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3 CyberSafeKids, *A Life Behind The Screens* Trends and Usage Report 2024-2025, 5.

4 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 34.

5 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 34.

6 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 37.

7 ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer, *'Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors Perspectives in Colombia'* (2021) 6.

8 UNICEF, '*Protecting children from violence and exploitation in relation to the digital environment*' (2024) 8.

9 We Protect Global Alliance, 'The Issue' <https://bit.ly/4sK0LOB> accessed 12 January 2026

single right that a child has under the UNCRC applies equally in the physical and the digital worlds. Therefore, children's right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in the offline world unequivocally applies equally in the online world.[10]

There is a wide variety of issues covered by the terms **child sexual abuse** and **child sexual exploitation**, but all forms violate children's rights. Among the forms of abuse that perpetrators engage in against children are:

- **Abuse or involvement in the production of child sexual abuse material**; The production, distribution, dissemination, importing, exporting, offering, selling, possession of, or knowingly obtaining access to child sexual abuse material online.[11]
- **Sexual exploitation online**; Identifying and/or grooming children via online technology with a view to exploiting them sexually.[12]
- **Generation and/or distribution of child intimate images online**; While this is facilitated by digital technology generally, artificial intelligence (AI) has caused an additional dimension of harm in this regard, through the manipulation of child images to create sexually explicit materials.[13]
- **Exposure of children to pornographic or sexually explicit material online**; The proliferation of pornographic or sexually explicit content online may be further amplified using ranking algorithms in search engines or recommender systems, as such exploitative recommender systems pushing sexually explicit or 'shocking' content to children to achieve more engagement.[14]

10 Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 34, UNCRC General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (2021) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/25.

11 ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer, *'Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors Perspectives in Colombia'* (2021) 6.

12 ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer, *'Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors Perspectives in Colombia'* (2021) 6.

13 Daly C, '*AI and Child Safeguarding – An Urgent Priority'* Irish Child and Family Law Online (2024) 2.

14 Irish Examiner, 'Irish experts warn AI algorithms are pushing toxic, violent and sexual content to children online' (23 September 2025) <https://bit.ly/3P19MUS> accessed 12 January 2026.

Globally, an estimated one in eight children is a victim of image-based child sexual violence.[15] This is also a national issue for Ireland. Childlight, a Child Safety Institute within the University of Edinburgh concerned with child abuse and exploitation and which monitors reports to internet hotlines on a global scale, analysed a total of 29,219 reports of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) from Ireland in 2024.[16] The Irish internet reporting hotline, known as Hotline.ie received 17, 267 actioned reports of CSAM, child grooming and intimate image abuse in 2024.[17] In October 2025, Gardaí noted that in the previous year-and-a-half, an Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau identified and safeguarded 39 child victims of online sexual abuse in Ireland.[18] An additional 52 possible child victims globally are currently being identified by Gardaí, after reviewing more than 30,000 videos and photographs.[19]

In the context of the scale and seriousness of the issues relating to Child Sexual Abuse that have to be addressed, the *Programme for Government* commits to delivering a new EU Child Sexual Abuse Directive that protects children and young people and holds digital platforms to account,[20] to implementing the recommendations of the new Online Health Taskforce to keep children safe online,[21] and to supporting and funding Coimisiún na Meán, the regulatory authority in Ireland. All three of these commitments, if fulfilled, can advance the safety and rights of children in Ireland.

Regulating the Online World

Ireland's Online Safety Framework[22] consists of an Irish Online Safety Code (enacted 2024), the EU-wide Digital Services Act (enacted 2022) and the EU-wide Terrorist Content Online Regulation (enacted 2021), all of which regulate

15 Childlight, 'Over 300 million children a year are victims of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse' (4 December 2024) <https://bit.ly/3P19MUS> accessed 12 January 2026.

16 Childlight, '*Into the Light Index: Ireland*' (2024) <https://bit.ly/4s505mLhttps://www.childlight.org/into-the-light/country/ireland> accessed 14 December 2025. See particularly: CSAM Availability 5-Year Reports.

17 Hotline.ie, *Annual Report 2024: Building a Safer Digital Future* (Hotline 2025) 11.

18 An Garda Siochána, 'Ongoing Investigations into Identification and Safeguarding Victims of Online Child Sexual Abuse in Ireland' (17 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/4sfSbHe> accessed 7 January 2026.

19 An Garda Siochána, 'Ongoing Investigations into Identification and Safeguarding Victims of Online Child Sexual Abuse in Ireland' (17 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/4sfSbHe> accessed 7 January 2026.

20 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 65.

21 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 88.

22 Coimisiún na Mean, 'Online Safety Framework' <https://bit.ly/4rp05wK> accessed 3 December 2025.

various online platforms and search engines. For the purpose of regulating the online safety of children from sexual abuse and exploitation, the Online Safety Code and the Digital Services Act are the most relevant.

At national level, Ireland has taken significant steps forward in recent years, transforming an almost regulation-free online world to one with a significant framework of law and regulation. In 2023, the Government established a regulator (Coimisiún na Meán), with a dedicated Online Safety Commissioner and a Digital Services Commissioner among the five Commissioners. A Youth Advisory Committee was established and is consulted on a number of matters under Coimisiún na Mean's remit.

2023

Coimisiún na Meán established Youth Advisory Committee established.

2024

Digital Services Act (DSA 2022) comes into effect. EU AI Act enacted. Part A of Ireland's Online Safety Code comes into effect.

2025

European Commission Guidelines issued. Part B of Ireland's Online Safety Code comes into effect.

The Digital Services Act (DSA 2022), an EU Regulation with responsibility for regulating actions of a wide variety of platforms, which is directly applicable in Ireland, came into effect in February 2024.[23] Article 28 of that Act specifically applies to the protection of minors – that is those under 18 years of age across the EU. In July 2025, the European Commission issued Guidelines to the platforms it governs on the interpretation of Article 28.[24] The Guidelines aim to further support platforms to comply with their obligations under the DSA to keep children and young people safe online. These include interpretations of Safety by Design, modification of recommender systems and the prohibition of downloading of content posted by minors to prevent the unwanted distribution of sexualised or intimate content and sexual extortion. They also provide for more robust age restrictions in particular to deny access to children

23 Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act).

24 European Commission, Guidelines on measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors online, pursuant to Article 28(4) of Regulation (EU) 2022/2065.

to age-inappropriate content online, such as gambling and pornography, or from being exposed to other risks, such as grooming.[25]

A further piece of EU-wide, directly applicable legislation, the EU AI Act, was enacted in 2024 to regulate aspects of artificial intelligence. It is gradually coming into effect. That Act is hampered by the slow pace of implementation and by the move towards 'simplification' of regulation at central EU level, as well as the limited range of AI systems that it regulates.[26] While the EU AI Act specifically acknowledges the risk to children in two recitals of that Act,[27] the proposed implementation of the Act, as well as likely being delayed, also fails to recognise nudification apps as material that should be prohibited[28] and 'deepfakes' as material that should be categorised as high risk[29] and therefore subject to close supervision and scrutiny.

Ireland's Online Safety Code (OSC 2024), authored by Coimisiún na Meán, imposes legally binding obligations on certain video-sharing platform services that have their EU headquarters in Ireland.[30] The designated video-sharing platform providers currently regulated by the OSC (2024) are YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Udemy, LinkedIn and X.[31] Under the OSC (2024), video sharing providers terms and conditions must preclude the uploading or sharing of restricted content (such as CSAM or child trafficking content) or adult only content (such as pornography).[32] The OSC (2024) provides that if the platforms' own terms and conditions do not preclude

25 European Commission, Guidelines on measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors online, pursuant to Article 28(4) of Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 25.

26 EuroNews, 'European Commission proposes delaying full implementation of AI Act to 2027' (19 November 2025) <https://bit.ly/46UcRMA> accessed 20 January 2026

27 Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act), 9, 48.

28 Commission Guidelines on prohibited artificial intelligence practices established by Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 (AI Act)

29 Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act), Annex III.

30 Coimisiún na Meán, 'Register of Designated Online Services' <https://bit.ly/3Nhacpq> accessed 02 December 2025.

31 Coimisiún na Meán, 'Online Safety Framework/Legislation explained' <https://bit.ly/4beLXjH> accessed 02 December 2025.

32 Online Safety Code, Part B s12.1, s12.2.

adult-only content then they must have effective age assurance mechanisms to ensure adult-only content cannot be seen by children.[33] However, it does not prescribe the age assurance mechanisms that platforms must use.[34] Part A of the OSC (2024) came into effect in November 2024, with the more directive Part B only becoming effective in July 2025.

Under the Online Safety Framework, most of the attention to date has been on the Online Safety Code (2024) and on Article 28 of the DSA (2022) and its Guidelines (2025). However, while a substantial framework of regulation is in place, Coimisiún na Meán as regulator has only had powers to regulate for about two years, with some of the more direct guidance and regulation not yet in place for six months by the end of 2025.

It is notable that within its first two years, Coimisiún na Meán has already initiated its own investigations in Ireland – two of which investigating whether or not TikTok and LinkedIn have effective complaint systems.[35] Coimisiún na Meán has also been assisting the EU Commission with regulatory investigations into the adequacy of the measures in place to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for children.

Criminal Legislation

Apart from regulatory action, child sexual abuse and exploitation is illegal in Ireland. Whether online or offline, or any combination of both, it is criminal behaviour. Several Irish statutes[36] specifically ban sharing of intimate images, exploitation of children for sexual purposes, retention of Child Sexual Abuse Material, and grooming of children. However, as much of this legislation pre-dates the technology now available, there is an urgent need to review the legal provisions to ensure that current digital harms are covered by the law. Ireland is not alone in this. It has been recognised that because digital crimes can occur in ways that pre-digital legislation never considered, and because crimes of child sexual abuse and exploitation can be perpetrated

33 Online Safety Code, Part B s12.10.

34 Coimisiún na Meán, 'Online Safety Framework/Legislation explained' <https://bit.ly/40Xa5m7> accessed 2 December 2025.

35 Coimisiún na Meán, 'Coimisiún na Meán commences investigations into TikTok and LinkedIn' <https://bit.ly/40lAZnH> accessed 2 December 2025.

36 Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, Harassment and Harmful Communications Act (2020); Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998; Sex Offenders Act 2001.

trans-nationally, there is a need to update and harmonise national and EU legislation to ensure crimes are adequately covered by legislation, and that law enforcement and judicial processes can be facilitated across the EU.

Online Harms

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)[37]

By the end of 2024, an estimated one in eight children was a victim of image-based child sexual violence.[38] The Internet Watch Foundation found that 62 per cent of all CSAM webpages in 2024 were traced to an EU country.[39] INHOPE Network, the global hotline, described 2024 as its most challenging year on record, with hotlines processing nearly 2.5 million suspected online records of CSAM - a staggering 218 per cent increase from the previous year.[40] In the first half of 2025 alone, INHOPE received well over two million CSAM-related reports.[41]

Childlight[42] represents its data through a 'CSAM Rate', which aims to capture the availability of CSAM. This is calculated based on the availability of CSAM from a specific country whether being reported from that country, hosted or showing it as a geolocation. This data is calculated based on reported volumes of CSAM (notices sent or reports received by each country) divided by the total volume sent globally and by the total volume per UNICEF region. In 2023, Ireland's CSAM rate was 6 per cent (14,564 reports), but by 2024 this had jumped to 53.5 per cent (29,219 reports).[43] Out of the 34 Western

37 Following the 'Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation' Second Edition, the term "child sexual abuse material" has increasingly been used to replace the term "child pornography", as also recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 2019 Guidelines regarding the implementation of the OPSC. This switch of terminology is based on the argument that sexualised material that depicts or otherwise represents children is indeed a representation, and a form, of child sexual abuse, and should not be described as 'pornography'.

38 Childlight, 'Over 300 million children a year are victims of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse' (4 December 2024) <https://bit.ly/4cBdT3I> accessed 12 January 2026.

39 Internet Watch Foundation, 'Charity raises alarm over surge in level of child sexual abuse imagery hosted in EU' (23 April 2025) <https://bit.ly/4sDcJJC> accessed 12 January 2026.

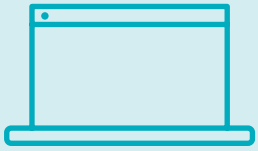
40 INHOPE, 'INHOPE Release Annual Report 2024' (3 April 2025) <https://bit.ly/3MXJ2UJ> accessed 3 December 2025.

41 EU Better Internet for Kids, 'January to June 2025 in review: continued growth in hotline reports' (25 September 2025) <https://bit.ly/3P3hiyz> accessed 3 December 2025.

42 Childlight, Global Safety Initiative, University of Edinburgh.

43 Childlight, '*Into the Light Index, Ireland*' (2024) <https://bit.ly/4rt1tPg> accessed 14 December 2025.

European countries represented in the data, Ireland went from being placed 34th (last) with the lowest CSAM rate, to 8th in a matter of two years.[44] This coincides with the data of Ireland's watchdog, Hotline.ie, which processed 44,955 reports of CSAM, representing a substantial 55 per cent increase from 2023. As of November 2025, An Garda Síochána identified more than 30,000 videos and photographs defined as CSAM. This content was reviewed by the team and uploaded to Interpol's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database – and included almost 900 files which involved previously unknown victims.[45]



44,955

CSAM reports processed by Hotline.ie in 2024

Image-based child sexual abuse can have profound and devastating long-term impacts, with 91 per cent of victims/survivors[46] reporting negative physical, psychological and social consequences.[47] Online sexual abuse can seriously impact a child's development, social life, and overall wellbeing. This can also have a ripple effect extending to their families - parents especially - who may struggle with the overwhelming emotional burden, societal stigma, and complex criminal and healing processes.[48] Furthermore, if CSAM cannot be detected or reported, this manifestly reduces the likelihood of the material being removed, resulting in the cycle of re-victimisation to continue.

Ireland's laws criminalise and prohibit the holding, sharing or deletion, without reporting of child sexual abuse material.[49] The current legal term of 'child pornography' to cover child sexual abuse material itself is broad in its application, largely because it applies to capturing any visual representations or audio representations of a child or someone being depicted as being a

44 Childlight, '*Into the Light Index, Ireland*' (2024) <https://bit.ly/4rt1tPg> accessed 14 December 2025.

45 An Garda Siochána, 'Ongoing Investigations into Identification and Safeguarding Victims of Online Child Sexual Abuse in Ireland' (17 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/40lFQoV> accessed 7 January 2026.

46 Some of those who experience child sexual abuse recognise themselves as victims, others as survivors. Where possible, we will use the term with which the child identifies.

47 Protect Children, '*Through the Lens: Insights into Image-Based Child Sexual Violence*' (Protect Children 2025) 7.

48 Leivo, K., Nieminen, N., Insoll, T., Ovaska, A., & Vaaranen-Valkonen, N. *'Insights from Parents and Caregivers of Child Victims of Online Sexual Abuse'.* (Project 2KNOW, 2024) 8.

49 Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 [as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017].

child. It also considers whether the individual is engaged in or is depicted as being engaged in real sexual activity, simulated sexually explicit activity, or witnessing sexually explicit activity.[50]

Online Sexual Exploitation

Online child sexual exploitation is understood as the identifying and/or preparing of children via online technology with a view to exploiting them sexually.[51] This may include shifting a conversation from a public to a private messaging forum. Often these conversations are moved to applications using end-to-end encryption (E2EE) or those lacking built-in detection tools.[52] Sexual exploitation can also refer to the coercion, threat or deception of a child into sexual activities that are transmitted ('streamed') live via the internet for viewing by others remotely.[53]

In 2024, the UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children noted an 89 per cent rise in online grooming crimes.[54] It has been estimated that 45 minutes is the average time for a child to be locked into a high-risk grooming conversation while gaming online – but it can take as little as 19 seconds.[55] Given that messaging services are now embedded across gaming and social media platforms, it has become all too easy for predators to contact children, and to pose as children. Predators also use these platforms to make initial contact with children and will often convince them to move to encrypted channels of communication.

45 minutes

average time for a child to be locked into a high-risk grooming conversation while gaming online

50 Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 [as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017] s2(1)(a).

51 ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer, *'Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors Perspectives in Colombia'* (2021) 6.

52 We Protect Global Alliance, 'Online Grooming' (22 November 2021) <https://bit.ly/4sCAphh> accessed 13 November 2025.

53 ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer, *'Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors Perspectives in Colombia'* (2021) 6.

54 NSPCC, 'Online grooming crimes against children increase by 89% in six years' (1 November 2024) <https://bit.ly/4b5GQDP> accessed 15 November 2025.

55 We Protect Global Alliance, *'Global Threat Assessment 2023: Assessing the scale and scope of child sexual abuse online'* (24 November 2024) <https://bit.ly/3NbpNXM> accessed 6 December 2025.

This is referred to as 'offboarding'.[56] Gaming platforms have also become spaces where perpetrators initiate contact, often using in-game chat or social features to build trust with younger users.[57]

The Internet Watch Foundation reported a 129 per cent increase in reports related to imagery which had been created of children aged seven to ten years old who were tricked or groomed into performing sexual acts on camera by an online predator since 2021.[58] Investigating this specific crime and collecting data in this regard has become increasingly difficult, given that it generally occurs in private chats and messaging services on platforms. Identification of such materials online is complex and will require vigilance from all platforms.[59]

End-to-end encryption (E2EE) is described as a mechanism which encrypts communications, ensuring they are only read by the user sending the communication and the user receiving the information, while preventing any third-party from being able to see such exchanges.[60] It is also stated that the service provider – *the platform* – is not able to see any part of the communication either. Given that most of the large, encrypted platforms will have capacity to spot malware in messages, or even to spell check a message, there clearly is some capacity for monitoring by the platforms. End-to-end encryption also provides a high level of data security. It encrypts data on the sender's device, keeps it encrypted during transmission and decrypts it only when it reaches the recipient's endpoint.[61] Some commonly known apps with end-to-end encryption embedded are Telegram, WhatsApp, Signal, Session, and Discord.[62] Increasingly, encryption is now embedded as a chat feature users can choose to enable across most mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X.

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56 We Protect Global Alliance, 'Online Grooming' (22 November 2021) <https://bit.ly/4cHqmmq> accessed 13 November 2025.

57 Hotline.ie, *Annual Report 2024: Building a Safer Digital Future* (Hotline 2025) 32.

58 Internet Watch Foundation, 'IWF Annual Data and Insights Report 2024' (IWF 2024) <https://bit.ly/4ulrGBO> accessed 7 January 2025.

59 Protect Children, 'Encrypted platforms are quickly becoming a safe haven for child sexual abuse' (4 June 2024) <https://bit.ly/4b5HMYR> accessed 13 November 2025.

60 IBM, 'What is end to end encryption?' <https://bit.ly/4b49oxl> accessed 14 November 2025.

61 IBM, 'What is end to end encryption?' <https://bit.ly/4b49oxl> accessed 14 November 2025.

62 *Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry.* 'Tech Platforms Used by Online Child Sexual Abuse Offenders: Research Report with Actionable Recommendations for the Tech Industry' (2024) 14.

There may be small differences in description, for example in the case of social media platform Instagram, which says that end-to-end encryption provides "extra security and protection to messages and calls which in certain environments"[63] and says that this is "positive." However, the risk of such encryption is that bad actors are also protected, including perpetrators of online child sexual abuse and exploitation, facilitating them to commit crimes and potentially to reduce the capacity of detection and law enforcement. By their own descriptions, it also means that platforms may not detect and remove CSAM.[64]

Internationally, a key trend in a decrease in the reporting of online child sexual abuse and exploitation from online platforms themselves. The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), an organisation which tracks global cases of online child sexual abuse reports, received 36.2 million separate reports in 2023 to its Cybertipline from online platforms.[65] In 2024, the organisation received 29.2 million separate incident reports to Cybertipline, roughly seven million fewer incidents than in the previous year.[66] Of the 2024 reports, 8 per cent submitted by the tech industry contained so little information that it was not possible for NCMEC to determine where the offence occurred or what was the appropriate law enforcement agency to receive the report. This was an increase from 3.8 percent of reports containing inadequate information in 2023.[67]

This timeline is contemporaneous with end-to-end encryption being implemented across a wide range of platforms. While the reasons for this decrease are not entirely clear, NCMEC is reported as suggesting that it is due at least in part to platforms moving towards end-to-end encryption, which in

63 Instagram Help Centre, 'What is end to end encryption on Instagram' <https://bit.ly/4deQB3J> accessed 14 November 2025.

64 *Insoll, T., Soloveva, V., Díaz Bethencourt, E., Nieminen, N., Leivo, K., Ovaska, A., & Vaaranen-Valkonen, N. 'What Drives Online Child Sexual Abuse Offending? Understanding Motivations, Facilitators, Situational Factors, and Barriers'* (2KNOW Project, 2024) 14.

65 National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, *CyberTipline: Global Annual Report 2023* (NCMEC 2023) 3.

66 National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, *CyberTipline: Global Annual Report 2024* (NCMEC 2024) 5.

67 National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, *CyberTipline: Global Annual Report 2023* (NCMEC 2023) 9.

turn is preventing detection.[68] Meta's Facebook alone sent 6.9 million fewer reports in 2024.[69]

With the ever-increasing capacity of technology to solicit, groom and otherwise sexually abuse and exploit children online at a time when large platforms seem increasingly drawn towards encryption, children are at significant risk of harm. Several of the larger platforms operating in Europe have agreed to a voluntary arrangement for detecting child sexual abuse material, but there are no common standards. Efforts to build a new regulation at EU level to require platforms to monitor their platforms for child sexual abuse material are proceeding slowly. Even if a new regulation is enacted, it is likely that it will not apply to encrypted messaging apps and services, due to concerns raised that it would interfere with the rights of users to privacy, a right which, at European debate level, has long received far more prominence than children's rights to protection and freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, such as CSAM.[70]

By contrast, a 2023 Eurobarometer survey showed that over three quarters of Europeans interviewed were in favour of EU regulation of online child sexual abuse and exploitation – a far less polarised position than has been seen in EU debates in Brussels. In the survey, 82 per cent of respondents agreed that tools like parental controls are not enough to keep children safe online. The vast majority (78 per cent) supported regulation which would provide for stronger child protection and targeted detection where necessary.[71]

78%

of people support regulation for stronger child protection and targeted detection where necessary (EU Barometer 2023)

68 NBC News, 'Child exploitation watchdog says Meta encryption led to sharp decrease in tips and reports' (9 May 2025) <https://bit.ly/3NmWZLM> accessed 14 November 2025.

69 National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, *CyberTipline: Global Annual Report 2024* (NCMEC 2024) 6.

70 European Newsroom, 'Privacy vs. child protection: EU's "chat control" plans split member states' (15 0ctober 2025) <https://bit.ly/40pPHtS> accessed 14 November 2025.

71 Europa, 'EU Barometer, Protection of children against online sexual abuse' (European Union, July 2023) <https://bit.ly/4lqt0zd> accessed 15 July 2025.

Furthermore, 83 per cent indicated their support for the detection of online child sexual abuse in end-to-end encrypted messages.[72]

Much of the discourse at EU level on the proposed CSAM Regulation has centred on how to address the threat encryption poses to children's right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and the balancing of their rights to safety with the right to privacy and freedom of speech. The 2024 Digital Services Act's Article 28 Guidelines provide certain stipulations, in that minor accounts should not be visible or contactable by stranger accounts. However, as these are guidelines, the method of compliance is at the online platform's discretion, giving a degree of choice which is of concern in the context of children's rights to safety and protection.[73]

Intimate Images

The creation, broadcast, possession, publication or sharing of intimate images of a child is seen as child sexual abuse and is illegal in Ireland.[74] For everyone, including children, the sharing of, or threatening to share intimate images without a person's consent, with or without intent to cause harm to the victim, is also illegal.[75]

While the dissemination of intimate images was an existing problem in Ireland, artificial intelligence (AI) has exacerbated this issue substantially. Many generative AI tools are available to anyone with access to the internet and many are free to use and require no technical expertise.[76]

This technology can be exploited to create synthetic but extremely realistic CSAM.[77] Furthermore, AI-generated CSAM creates a particular difficulty,

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72 Europa, 'EU Barometer, Protection of children against online sexual abuse' (European Union, July 2023) <https://bit.ly/4lqt0zd> accessed 15 July 2025.

73 Twitter International Unlimited Company v Coimsiún na Meán H.JR.2024.1424, Meta Platforms Ireland Limited v. Coimisiún Na Mean H.JR.2026.0000017, Whatsapp Ireland Limited v. Coimisiún Na Mean H.JR.2025.0000855.

74 Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 [as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017] s2(1)(a).

75 Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Coco's Law).

76 WeProtect Global Alliance, 'Artificial Intelligence and 'Gen AI' <https://bit.ly/4uinlK9> accessed 15 January 2025.

77 WeProtect Global Alliance, 'Artificial Intelligence and 'Gen AI' <https://bit.ly/4rqY4QK> accessed 15 January 2025.

because it enables rapid and increasingly profitable exploitation of children.[78] This has also been reported to embolden and encourage offenders, creating an environment of collaboration legitimising and facilitating the exploitation of children.[79]

In its 2025 *Policy Spotlight on AI* report, the Ombudsman for Children reported that children and young people had highlighted the emotional impact of deepfakes and called on the Government to deal with possible gaps in legislation that deepfakes have exposed.[80]

A manifestation of the problem emerged in early January 2026 when An Garda Síochána confirmed that it was actively investigating 200 reports of potential CSAM or CSAM-indicative material generated via 'Grok', a chatbot embedded across X, and on a separate website. At the end of December 2025, the app faced international outrage as it came to light that it had been generating images for X-users based on pictures of real people which were then sexualised, many of whom were children. According to X, it had stopped its Grok feature from editing pictures of real people to show them undressed or partially dressed, by 14 January 2026.[81] However, further reports revealed Grok AI generated about three million sexualised images in less than two weeks, including 23,000 that appeared to depict children.[82] Grok is just one of many apps which facilitate perpetrators to generate hundreds of abuse images from just one piece of 'self-generated sexual material' or manipulate a standard picture using 'nudification' apps to make it explicit. Therefore, there can be overlaps between AI-generated child sexual abuse and related crimes, such as online grooming or sexual extortion of children.[83]

In recognition of the potential of AI applications and products to violate fundamental human rights, the EU AI Act (2024) requires Member States

78 London School of Economics, 'Parenting for a Digital Future' (18 June 2025) <https://bit.ly/4upKLCP> accessed 14 November 2025.

79 London School of Economics, 'Parenting for a Digital Future' (18 June 2025) <https://bit.ly/4upKLCP> accessed 14 November 2025.

80 Ombudsman for Children, '*Policy spotlight on AI: A Children's Rights Review*' (September 2025) 74.

81 The Guardian, 'Musk's X to block Grok AI tool from creating sexualised images of real people' (15 January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4b3M0QD> accessed 23 January.

82 The Guardian, 'Musk's X to block Grok AI tool from creating sexualised images of real people' (15 January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4b3M0QD> accessed 23 January

83 WeProtect Global Alliance, 'Artificial Intelligence and 'Gen AI' <https://bit.ly/3Nsq3Sh> accessed 15 January 2025.

to designate bodies with powers to investigate and supervise to ensure non-violation of fundamental human rights.[84] The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment designated nine bodies, including the Ombudsman for Children, Coimisiún na Meán and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in October 2024.[85] However, no further substantial announcements appear to have been made about how to allow children, their caregivers or the designated bodies to carry out this function, or what specific resources, training or direction they have received to exercise extensive investigation powers and to make children and the general public aware of their role.

Exposure to Pornography or Sexually Explicit Material Online

Children's exposure to pornographic content online, and the role of social media platforms in this exposure, has been a focus of regulatory reform. Research shows that rather than intentional consumption, initial exposure to pornography is often accidental or something children 'stumble' upon online.[86] CyberSafeKids reported that 16 per cent of eight - 12-year-olds who had been bothered by something online, reported the offending material as relating to nudity/sexual content or contact in games/apps. That percentage rose to 21 per cent for 12–16-year-olds.[87]

The role of AI in creating 'chatbots' or so-called 'companions' exacerbates an existing problem. AI apps such as Replika and Character.ai can create an 'AI girlfriend or boyfriend' experience which includes highly sexualised content. Allegations – which have been denied by the company - have been made in the US that a Meta AI system permitted engagement of children in sensual and inappropriate sexual conversation.[88] OpenAI, a large-scale AI operating system announced it would introduce an erotic AI chatbot in December 2025. While these functions are meant to be for users over the age of 18 only,

84 European Parliament and Council, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 on artificial intelligence [2024] OJ L 123/1 Article 77.

85 Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, 'EU Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act' <https://bit.ly/40Klq9n> accessed 10 February 2026.

86 Breslin, R., and O'Connor, M., *Facing Reality: Addressing the Role of Pornography in the Pandemic of Violence Against Women and Girls'* (SERP Institute 2024) 39.

87 Cybersafe Kids, *A life behind the Screens: Trends and Uses Report 2024-2025,* (Cybersafe Kids, 2025) 5.

88 BBC, 'Meta investigated over AI having 'sensual' chats with children' (18 June 2025). <https://bit.ly/4dfImo4> accessed 20 January 2026.

weak or slow regulation and inadequate age assurance mechanisms risk their accessibility to children.

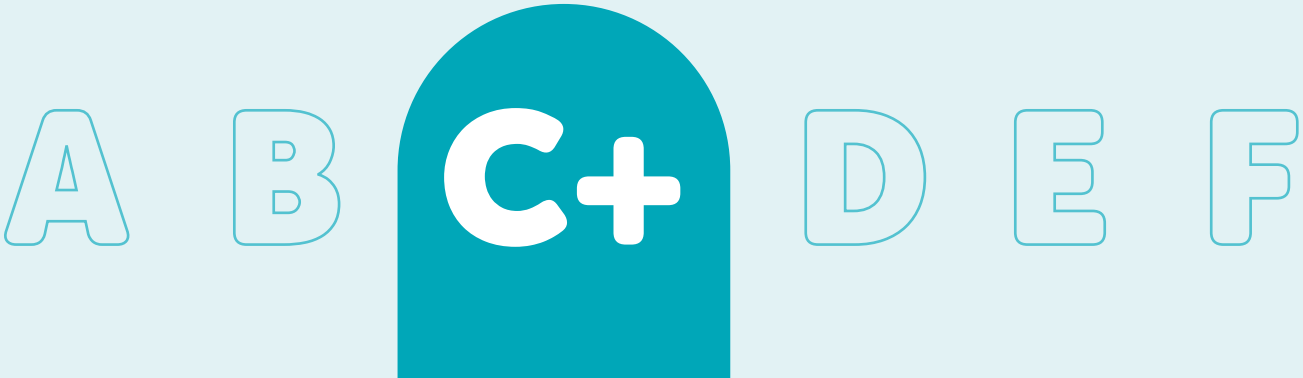
At national and EU levels, work is progressing on putting an effective, privacy-preserving age assurance function or app in place, in an effort to limit children's and young people's access to illegal content, pornography and other inappropriate sexual materials. In the meantime, online platforms that produce or allow such materials on their sites are bound by law, and particularly by the Online Safety Code and Article 28 of the DSA and its Guidelines, to take all necessary steps to ensure that if children and young people under the age of 18 are accessing an online platform, they do so with high levels of privacy, safety and security. It is the responsibility of Coimisiún na Meán and the EU Commission to monitor compliance with this obligation. The regulators have already taken steps in this regard at Irish and EU level, including the launch in October 2025 of investigations into several companies where the EU Commission is concerned that age assurance measures are inadaquate.[89]

89 European Commission, 'Commission scrutinises safeguards for minors on Snapchat, YouTube, Apple App Store and Google Play under the Digital Services Act' (10 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/4103kA0> accessed 20 November 2025.

Commitment

Work to deliver a new EU Child Sexual Abuse Directive that protects children and young people and holds digital platforms to account.

Section Grade



What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

To meet this commitment, the Government must work with its EU colleagues to deliver a revised Child Sexual Abuse Directive to update the criminal law to ensure that it is fit to detect, prosecute and hold perpetrators of online child sexual abuse material and exploitation accountable for their actions. For several years now, the EU has aimed to update its existing frameworks, including the proposed revision of the 2011 Child Sexual Abuse Directive (formerly known as the Directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children). This Directive seeks to harmonise EU criminal legislation and procedures to ensure that all forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, including those enabled or facilitated by technological developments, are criminalised, to amend law-enforcement procedures, support victims better, and to provide better co-ordination across the EU.[90]A motion approving Ireland's participation in the adoption of this Directive was approved by the Dáil in May 2024.[91] At the end of 2025, Ireland continued to engage in EU level negotiations to finalise the Directive text.

At home, the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is reviewing existing legislation and processes to ascertain what new measures may need to be introduced to meet the requirements of the new Directive.[92] This is a useful exercise that will mean that the State can enact legislation it finds it needs to counter these crimes and will be well placed to comply with the Directive terms when it comes into being. At the conclusion of 2025 that examination was still ongoing. The Department has also commissioned a review from Dublin City University (DCU) to enhance the understanding of how emerging technologies influence Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), including the rise of deepfakes and 'nudification' apps, and the consequential offline harms in an Irish context.[93] The Department of Justice, Home Affairs

90 Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and European Council on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse material and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA (recast)

91 Minister of State at the Department of Justice James Browne T.D., Dail Debate, *EU Directive Motion*, 29 May 2024.

92 Communication from Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration by the Children's Rights Alliance on 27 February 2026.

93 Communication from Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration by the Children's Rights Alliance on 27 February 2026.

and Migration has indicated that the intended outcome of this work is to provide robust evidence-based policy recommendations, identify emerging trends, and facilitate stakeholder engagement, as informed by international best practice frameworks and with reference to ongoing European legislative developments.[94]

There has otherwise been some progress on the removal of the term 'Child Pornography' from legislation. Pursuant to the widely recognised Luxembourg *Guidelines on Terminology*, 'child sexual abuse material/ child sexual exploitation material' is recommended, as it can be used without stigmatising children.[95] This change of terminology is agreed by child rights experts and advocates, given that sexualised material that depicts or otherwise represents children is itself a representation, and a form, of child sexual abuse, and should not be described as 'pornography'.[96] While a Private Members Bill to change all references from 'child pornography' to 'child sexual abuse material' in Irish law was not accepted by Government in the format presented to Seanad Eireann[97], the Government has since approved the general scheme for the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences, Domestic Violence and International Instruments) Bill 2025[98], which, if passed and commenced, will delete the terms 'child pornography' and 'pornographic performance' throughout the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 and replace them with 'child sexual abuse material' and 'child sexual abuse performance', respectively.

The Government's commitment under discussion also included a commitment to hold platforms accountable. This has led to consideration over the past few years of a further Regulation aimed at requiring platforms to report and takedown Child Sexual Abuse Material. This draft CSAM regulation is aimed at imposing mandatory obligations on Online Platforms to detect, report and remove CSAM, among other things. Currently, certain platforms

94 Communication from Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration by the Children's Rights Alliance on 27 February 2026.

95 ECPAT International, Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2nd Edition, ECPAT International 2021) 38.

96 ECPAT International, Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2nd Edition, ECPAT International 2021) 35-40.

97 Senator Eileen Flynn, Seanad Debate, *Child Trafficking and Child Sexual Exploitation Material (Amendment) Bill 2022: Report Stage,* 5 November 2025.

98 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 'Minister Jim O'Callaghan secures government approval to progress the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences, Domestic Violence and International Instruments) Bill 2025' (21 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/46QXtka> accessed 30 October 2025.

have agreed voluntarily to detect CSAM, but the platforms themselves decide their own standards, and what they will monitor. While a regulatory proposal has been broadly welcomed, the debate on the measure became polarised,[99] principally because of concerns about its interference with data protection and privacy.[100] The right to privacy has so far prevailed, with a current draft of the regulation proposing that platforms continue to monitor CSAM on a voluntary basis, and that encrypted material be excluded.[101]

What do children and young people need next?

As Ireland takes over the EU presidency in the second half of 2026, the Irish Government will have an opportunity to advance both the Directive and Regulation, advancing the discussion and bringing about an understanding of the need to protect children and young people from abuse and exploitation, while maintaining a reasonable balance with the rights of all, including children, to privacy and security.

Focusing on the criminal law aspects, there is an urgency to ensure that any legislative gaps that would permit offenders to escape justice are plugged. This requires timely examination of existing laws and systems, identifying and publishing the legislative gaps and amending legislation to address them. It must also work to complete the passage of legislation that moves the description of crimes from the derogatory child pornography – which implies child collusion – to the more accurate child sexual abuse material.

The Government must continue to engage with its EU partners in completing the harmonising Directive and bringing that into full effect. Equally, following from the Danish Presidency, during Ireland's EU Presidency, it will have the opportunity to build the strongest possible Regulation to require platforms to take this form of crime seriously, and to implement strong, effective oversight.[102]

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99 Euractive, 'Danish Presidency backs away from chat control' (30 October 2025) <https://bit.ly/4bj5gbw> accessed 2 November 2025.

100 European Parliament, 'EN Combating child sexual abuse online:' PE 738.224 (January 2026). <https://bit.ly/4cBKCpz> accessed 3 February 2026.

101 Council of the European Union, 'Child sexual abuse: Council reaches position on law protecting children from online abuse' (26 November 2025) <https://bit.ly/40qIR7i> accessed 27 November 2025.

102 Eurochild, 'Eurochild reacts to the Council's position on the Regulation to Prevent and Combat Child Sexual Abuse' (8 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/47DCLUW> accessed 14 January 2026.

As the home to several large digital industry headquarters, including social media companies, Ireland has the added obligation to ensure that its laws and regulations adequately regulate the systems and products of those companies to keep children across the EU safe from physical, moral and mental harm. As an EU member state, Ireland has accepted that, to be effective, it must act on a transnational basis, hence the policy of legislating and regulating primarily through EU instruments and cooperation. Advancing EU legislation to a high level of child protection could be a significant step towards keeping children safe online. This is possible through working with EU partners to ensure children's fundamental rights are adequately protected in this age of digital innovation across the EU.

Commitment

Ensure that children are safe online and implement the recommendations of the new Online Health Taskforce.

Section Grade

A B C+ D E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

In response to the growing body of evidence from Ireland and internationally, showing the link between online activity and its detrimental impacts to physical and mental health, the Minister for Health established an Online Health Taskforce in 2024.[103] The purpose of this Taskforce was to develop a public health response to harms caused to children and young people by certain types of online activity.[104] The right to health is a basic human right for children; one that is being increasingly recognised as being impacted by children's interaction with the digital world.[105]

The establishment of the Taskforce was a positive move that recognised online safety as a public health issue. In its work, the Taskforce paid particular consideration to children and young people's experiences online and the risks posed to their health and wellbeing.[106]

The Online Health Taskforce published its Interim Report in June 2025[107] and its final report in December 2025.[108] To inform its reports and recommendations, the Taskforce drew on multiple streams of evidence and stakeholder perspectives through literary review, consultations with young people and open consultations for stakeholder inputs.[109]

The Final Report of the Online Health Taskforce stated that decision-making processes needs to shift towards a Children and Young People's Rights approach. This involves balancing the potential and actual benefits of digital products and services for young people with recognising the potential and actual harms of those digital products and services. It recommended that the

103 Department of Health, 'Online Health Taskforce' (04 September 2024) <https://bit.ly/4lqHM9e> accessed 14 January 2026.

104 Department of Health, 'Online Health Taskforce' (04 September 2024) <https://bit.ly/4lqHM9e> accessed 14 January 2026.

105 UNCRC, *General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment* (2021) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/25.

106 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 6.

107 Department of Health, '*Interim Report*' (June 2025).

108 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 2.

109 Department of Health, '*Interim Report*' (June 2025) 10.

Irish Government mobilise existing mechanisms, or if necessary, develop new ones for meaningful consultations with children.[110]

The Final Report also recommended that the principles underpinning 'Child Rights by Design' be incorporated across all digital products and services. This centres on ensuring that the design, features or functionality of digital products or services do not infringe on the rights of children and young people.

The recommendations overall outline a robust response to certain harms faced by children online. They provide a roadmap for action from a public health perspective. While centering on children's rights, this roadmap also necessitates a whole of Government approach. The recommendations come within the responsibility of several government departments. The report recommends that to be successful, departmental collaboration across Government on the roadmap will be necessary at every step.

While the Final Report was not published until December 2025, the lack of a Governmental implementation plan to accompany it means that there is no information to date on how and when the Government proposes to implement the recommendations of the Final Online Health Taskforce Report.

Independently of the report, but in line with the EU Digital Identity Framework Regulation of 2024,[111] Government has been working on the development of a digital age verification mechanism.[112] The development of this 'digital wallet' is led by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer under the framework of the EU eIDAS Regulation (2024).[113] It is working with the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport on including such an age verification tool within the digital wallet.[114] It has written to platforms to invite

110 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 25.

111 Regulation (EU) 2024/1183 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 amending Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 as regards establishing the European Digital Identity Framework.

112 Government of Ireland, 'Government Digital Wallet' (09 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4sKwCid> accessed 14 January 2025.

113 Regulation (EU) 2024/1183 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 amending Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 as regards establishing the European Digital Identity Framework.

114 RTE, 'Uncontrolled' internet access like serving children 'gin and tonic' – Minister' (10 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4b4UNSl> accessed 12 December 2025.

them to participate.[115] Though still in development, the mechanism is intended to be used to verify the ages of social media users without sharing their personal data with internet platforms.[116] A pilot scheme involving around 2,000 participants was reported tdue for roll-out in the first three months of 2026,[117] and the legislative requirements are being considered at present.[118] The results of the pilot are expected to inform the final shape of this initiative and the stemming legislation that may be necessary.[119]

It should be noted that the Digital Wallet is not intended to be the only option for age verification, but rather one option that will provide a privacy preserving and secure option that respects users' rights and helps to safeguard children.[120] Although less satisfactory than safe design, this digital ID is part of a solution to protect children from exposure to unwanted and inappropriate sexual content and contact online. However, while the development of a State furnished authorisation is helpful for those who wish to use it, the State must also quickly develop systems to set standards and to authorise secure, privacy-protecting third party providers to provide valid digital ID for those who prefer not to share their information with the State.

What do children and young people need next?

As Government develops its Digital Wallet as a solution to age verification, it should ensure that this mechanism is privacy-preserving for children's data and protection. The Taskforce Report includes specific recommendation on how to do this effectively. Its recommendation stipulates that this must include the development of a two-stage regulatory approach, building on

115 Minister for Culture, Communication and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 13 January 2026 [1084/26].

116 The Journal, "Digital wallet" pilot to be rolled out next year to verify age of social media users' (10 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4b3OUov> accessed 15 December 2025.

117 The Journal, "Digital wallet" pilot to be rolled out next year to verify age of social media users' (10 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4b3OUov> accessed 15 December 2025. RTE, 'Uncontrolled' internet access like serving children "gin and tonic" – Minister' (10 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4b4UNSl> accessed 12 December 2025.

118 Minister for Culture, Communication and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 13 January 2026 [1084/26].

119 Minister for Culture, Communication and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 20 January 2026 [4133/26].

120 Minister for Culture, Communication and Sport, Patrick O'Donovan TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 13 January 2026 [1084/26].

existing age classification systems. This should be implemented sector by sector, establishing a comprehensive legally binding system categorising digital products and services determined by their age-appropriateness. Providers will then be required to implement effective, privacy-preserving, and non-discriminatory age verification mechanisms, as appropriate, to enforce these classifications.[121] A Government-issued document is also unlikely to be sufficient to give access to all children and it will therefore also be necessary for the Government to ensure that there are secure and effective alternatives to a Government-controlled mechanism for those who need them.

Furthermore, the Taskforce Report contains recommendations that would support the Government in taking a more targeted approach to addressing online child sexual abuse and exploitation. One recommendation proposes that Ireland should advocate at EU level that all providers of digital products and services be required by regulation to incorporate 'Child Rights by Design' principles into the design, features, and functioning of their services and algorithms.[122] If products are safe for children in the first place, many of the existing harms should be substantially reduced.

The Taskforce also recommended the strengthening sanctions and accountability measures to ensure that Board Members and executives of bodies providing digital products and services are held appropriately accountable for certain breaches of online safety regulations affecting children and young people's health, safety and welfare.[123] If individuals responsible for online platforms are held accountable, platforms may be less likely to pushback and may implement inadequate safety measures based on the large discretion they are afforded.

The implementation of these recommendations should be prioritised by Government as it engages in legislative and regulatory development.

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121 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 6.

122 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 6.

123 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 36.

Government should also ensure that all existing legislation, policies and strategies embed children's rights online, as recommended by the Online Health Taskforce. This includes ensuring that all actions and considerations by the Government afford children and young people their rights in the digital environment, equivalent to those in the physical world, including the right to health, privacy, safety, participation, freedom of expression, access to information and education, and protection from harm.[124]

This is especially relevant for the Government's new *National Digital and AI Strategy*[125] and for the analysis of the existing legislative frameworks to determine if they go far enough. Framing policies and strategies to ensure online safety and uphold children and young people's rights was one of the recommendations of the Online Health Taskforce,[126] which Government has committed to implementing.

124 Department of Health, '*Interim Report*' (March 2025).

125 As Report Card goes to print, the Government has published its National Digital and AI Strategy which does recognise children's online safety as a necessary element to development, see p 61-67 in particular; Government of Ireland, '*National Digital & AI Strategy (2030): Digital Ireland – Connecting our People, Securing our Future*' (18 Feb 2026) <https://bit.ly/4bkNgh4> accessed 18 February 2026.

126 Department of Health, '*Final Report: Online health and rights for Ireland's children and young people*' (2025) 6.

Commitment

Support and fund Coimisiún na Meán in enforcing the Online Safety Code.

Section Grade

A B C+ D E F

What has been achieved for children and young people so far?

The Online Safety Code became fully effective in July 2025

Over the lifetime of the last Government, Ireland was building a legislative and regulatory structure which, by the end of 2024, was largely in place. Coimisiún na Meán was established as the Irish Media Regulator and the State's Digital Services Act Coordinator in 2023.[127] It began a consultation process for the preparation of an Online Safety Code in that year. It also began exercising its powers under the Digital Services Act (2022) in February 2024 and under the finalised Online Safety Code (2024) in November 2024. In April 2025, Coimisiún na Meán published its first strategy with one of its six key strategic outcomes being 'a media landscape that upholds the rights, wellbeing and development of children and their safe engagement with content'.[128] Coimisiún na Meán continued to increase its resources in 2025.

Even before the commencement of Part B of the Online Safety Code in July 2025, which made the full Code effective,[129] Coimisiún na Meán had already issued a Statutory Information Notice to the platform X. Such notices require the recipient to provide information relating to its compliance with the Online Safety Code. The Regulator was concerned that information provided by X then to verify compliance with Part A of the Code, was not sufficient to assess whether the measures then in place by X were sufficient to protect children using the service.

When the full code went live in July 2025, X brought a High Court challenge to what it described as regulatory over-reach by Coimisiún na Meán in its implementation of the full Code. Those proceedings were dismissed by the High Court.[130] X has been given permission to appeal that decision, on the

127 Department of Culture, Communication and Sport, 'New media regulator, Coimisiún na Meán, formally established' (15 March 2023) <https://bit.ly/3Pc1r0v> accessed 6 January 2026.

128 Coimisiún Na Meán, 'Strategy Statement 2025-2027' (March 2025) <https://bit.ly/3P4ODsP> 16.

129 Full implementation of the Online Safety Code was in July 2025.

130 Twitter International Unlimited Company v Coimsiún na Meán H.JR.2024.1424.

basis that there are important points of law to be decided.[131] The appeal has not been heard to date.

In the latter half of 2025, Coimisiún na Meán instituted investigations in its own name against X, TikTok and LinkedIn,[132]and contributed to investigations commenced at EU Commission level on its investigations into pornography platforms Pornhub, Stripchat, XNXX, and XVideos, focusing on the risks for the protection of minors, including those linked to the absence of effective age verification measures.[133] In 2026, it will also be assisting the European Commission in its investigation into X and its Grok AI chatbot.[134]

Coimisiún na Meán has also contributed to the development of the DSA Article 28 Guidelines and to other EU initiatives and, in December 2025 it engaged with a number of external stakeholders, including the Data Protection Commissioner and the Australian e-Safety Commissioner, with whom it has signed Memoranda of Understanding, for more effective cooperation.[135] In the same vein, Coimisiún na Meán is a member of the Global Online Safety Regulators Network and currently, through the appointment of Ireland's Online Safety Commissioner, Niamh Hodnett, as its Chair, has a prominent role in building better cooperation towards more effective regulation of the online world.

Through the above, and building up staff and infrastructure, Coimisiún na Meán has become more established and more engaged. By the end of 2025, the Online Safety Framework was in place, and Coimisiún na Meán was engaging in the monitoring and supervision of the large video-sharing platforms under its jurisdiction. However, principles-based regulation, where the platforms are obliged to achieve certain ends, but have discretion in how to do so, is never speedy. Ultimately, it should lead to industry standards which

131 The Irish Times, 'X permitted to appeal High Court dismissal of challenge to regulator's online safety code' (21 January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4rsXYs1> accessed 9 February 2026.

132 Coimisiún na Meán, 'Coimisiún na Meán commences investigations into TikTok and LinkedIn' (12 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4cBMrTr> accessed 14 December 2025

133 European Commission, 'Commission opens investigations to safeguard minors from pornographic content under the Digital Services Act' (27 May 2025) <https://bit.ly/3PuFREy> accessed 12 December 2025.

134 European Commission, 'Commission investigates Grok and X's recommender systems under the Digital Services Act' (26 January 2026) <https://bit.ly/4sf07IX> accessed 6 February 2026.

135 Coimisiún na Meán, 'Coimisiún na Meán and Australia's eSafety Commissioner sign Memorandum of Understanding' (4 December 2025) <https://bit.ly/4unfhxj> accessed 10 December 2025.

are safe by design and default. That will not be accomplished quickly, and until it is, children's rights remain exposed to significant violations.

A gap remains in the provision of adequate remedies to children seeking redress for harm they complain they have suffered as a result of online harm and abuse. Coimisiún na Meán is enabled by its founding legislation to establish an individual complaints mechanism to the Online Safety Commission.[136] While the legislation permits the regulator time to assess the best way to do that, the reality for children at the end of 2025 was that no independent complaints mechanism existed, with platforms' having the final say in whether or not they would accept a complaint. The platforms actions may be subject to monitoring, supervision and even investigation in due course by the Regulator, but there is still no vindication of what an important right for children is, that of their right to redress for harm done to them by platforms that carried out such harm.

While it would not constitute an effective remedy, there is not yet even a recognition of the assistance that a 'Trusted Flagger' with expertise in child sexual abuse and exploitation could give in prioritising a complaint of harm to the platforms, which might at least affect a faster take-down of illegal content. It is for Coimisiún na Meán to appoint such flaggers, but there is no obligation on any company to apply for that status and there are no special incentives available for an organisation to take on that function.

What do children and young people need next?

Cross-Government Action

In a legislative framework, where the implementation of children's right to safety and freedom from abuse and exploitation online is shared between Government Departments and the Regulator, Government must ensure that it supports the Regulator as necessary to permit it to carry out its duty effectively. In this case, the relevant department is the Department of Culture, Communication and Sport. Coimisiún na Meán is still a growing organisation and there is no evidence that the hands of the Regulator are tied through inadequate resources or support.

136 Broadcasting Act 2009 (as amended) s.139V.

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The reality for children at the end of 2025 was that no independent complaints mechanism exists, with platforms having the final say in whether or not they will accept a complaint.

This is the first time that Ireland has actively attempted to regulate the global behemoth that is now the tech industry. It is an industry that has developed over the last three decades in a climate of inconsistent and light regulation, which varied according to jurisdiction, and where national boundaries and legislation proved ineffectual.

As this section shows, there has been substantial work undertaken in building up an infrastructure of regulation and regulators in this decade. This first year of the Government's *Programme for Government* and commitments has been mainly based on building and resourcing the infrastructure and, in particular, the Regulator, Coimisiún na Meán. A framework has been established and resourced which must now show that the Regulator is able to effectively regulate the digital platforms to ensure that the outputs and systems of those platforms are safe for children and that the rights of children and young people are vindicated over the remaining years of the *Programme for Government*.

Recommendations

- As a matter of urgency, the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration should complete the examination of Ireland's laws and policies to identify ways in which Irish law and processes need to be changed to ensure that children are protected from Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) online and that perpetrators are held to account.
- Use the occasion of the Irish EU Council Presidency to strengthen and promote the protection of children's rights in EU legislation, including prioritising the completion of the re-cast CSAM Directive, an effective Regulation on CSAM and a re-classification of AI chatbots, nudification apps and deepfakes as manipulative and requiring prohibition or strict control.
- Commit to implementing the findings of the Online Health Taskforce with a detailed time-bound implementation plan. Appoint an independent group of cross-sectoral experts to monitor and report on implementation over the lifetime of the Government.
- Urgently prioritise establishing an effective individual complaints system for all online harms so that children's right to redress and access to justice can be realised to the fullest extent possible.
- Adequately resource and support the nine agencies named to effectively protect and promote Irish people's fundamental human rights in the context of AI and further ensure the appointment and adequate resourcing of trusted flaggers with expertise in CSAM.

5

Mental Health

The *Programme for Government* commits to:	Progress:	Grade:
Develop a new care model for HSE Primary Care Psychology to expedite services for young people with less complex issues.	Limited	D
Legislate to regulate in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)	Good	C
Continue to expand the central referral mechanism to simplify referrals to community paediatric services, including CAMHS, to ensure that no child is placed on the wrong waiting list.	Slow	C-
Consider measures to attract and retain staff in CAMHS. We will also develop a new workforce plan to address immediate staffing shortages and longer-term needs.	Slow	C
Continue to resource CAMHS teams to reduce waiting lists.	Good	C
Enhance youth mental health services for those up to age 25, focusing on smoother transitions from CAMHS to adult mental health services.	Limited	D

The new *Programme for Government* provides a much-needed focus and commitment to address a number of systemic issues facing youth mental health services. The six commitments identified seek to address interrelated problems which if successfully tackled could ensure that all children and young people in Ireland can access mental health services in a timely and efficient manner by the end of the lifetime of this Government. While each of the six commitments are graded individually, it will be important to understand the collective impact that progress or the lack of progress can have on children and young people.

The Government receives a 'D' grade for its commitment to develop a new care model of HSE Primary Care Psychology. There has been limited progress on this commitment with just initial engagement on the development of a new model between the HSE and the Department of Health. The targeting of increased resources for this tier of mental health services has largely been through the expansion of the psychology traineeship, with no indication of whether trainees will be retained in the HSE post-qualification. Prioritisation of the development and resourcing of primary care psychology could have a positive knock-on effect on other aspects of youth mental health services and therefore it is disappointing that this has not been prioritised in the first year of the *Programme for Government.*

The Government receives a 'C' grade for the progress it has made on regulating CAMHS. The harm caused to vulnerable children and young people through the lack of clinical and governance oversight in CAMHS continues to be exposed. However, the regulation of CAMHS has made some progress with provision in the forthcoming Mental Health legislation and work underway to develop standards by the Mental Health Commission (MHC). The involvement of children and young people and the use of a Child

Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) during the development process by the MHC is particularly welcome.

The expansion of the central referral mechanism to simplify referrals to community paediatric services, including CAMHS, receives a 'C' grade. Some work has progressed to mainstream the Single Point of Access tool across the HSE as part of this commitment. The use of Single Point of Access as a triage system, as originally intended, could help to unlock its full potential by bringing together key services to identify the most appropriate and relevant pathways for children and young people to access services.

Measures to attract and retain staff in CAMHS and the development of a new workforce plan to address staffing shortages receives a 'C' grade. There have been a number of positive developments in the youth mental health workforce, including a slightly lower turnover and the development of a pipeline in recruitment for mental health nurses and for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. However, the recently published report on North Kerry CAMHS highlights the ongoing need for a specific workforce plan for CAMHS which is responsive to the needs of children and young people attending their services by identifying what specific skillset is needed.

Resourcing CAMHS teams to reduce the waiting lists receives a 'C-' grade. The significant increase in referrals to CAMHS over the last decade coupled with the maintenance of high waiting lists for appointments indicates that the system is overwhelmed and in need of increased resourcing. However, while additional resourcing of CAMHS is welcome it can only be effective if other parts of the system are adequately resourced and reformed.

The Government receives a 'D' grade for its commitment to enhance youth mental health services for those up to the age of 25. Work on the reconfiguration of services for young people up to the age of 25 has been progressed by the Sharing the Vision implementation structures. However, there is little evidence of an implementation plan on how this configuration can be achieved. Further evidence on the number of young people transitioning to adult services and their experience of this is needed in order to fully assess how effective the Government has been on delivering on this commitment.

Introduction

Mental health can be defined as 'a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community'.[1] The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes this as a basic human right with 'intrinsic and instrumental value'.[2] While mental health exists on a continuum and is experienced differently by each person, factors related to the individual, family, community or structural issues can safeguard or challenge mental health.[3] Increased risk of developing mental health conditions can occur when people are exposed to adverse experiences.[4] Conditions can include psychosocial disabilities and other states of 'significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. [5] Conditions can be treated effectively at a low cost, however, the WHO recognise that health systems across the world are often under-resourced resulting in gaps in treatment.[6]

Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy is the national overarching policy document guiding the development and implementation of mental health

1 World Health Organisation 'Mental Health' https://bit.ly/3NQTAVJ accessed 5 February 2026.
2 World Health Organisation 'Mental Health' https://bit.ly/3NQTAVJ accessed 5 February 2026.
3 World Health Organisation 'Mental Health' https://bit.ly/3NQTAVJ accessed 5 February 2026.
4 World Health Organisation 'Mental Health' https://bit.ly/3NQTAVJ accessed 5 February 2026.
5 World Health Organisation 'Mental Health' https://bit.ly/3NQTAVJ accessed 5 February 2026.
6 World Health Organisation 'Mental Health' https://bit.ly/3NQTAVJ accessed 5 February 2026.

policy and services in Ireland. *Sharing the Vision* promotes a lifecycle approach and acknowledges the importance of prevention and early intervention along with the opportunity to establish important foundations of mental wellbeing from before birth. This can be built upon throughout childhood, by building resilience and improving wellbeing, into adolescence and adulthood.

Health services in Ireland are delivered by the Health Service Executive (HSE) through six new health regions.[7] In general, mental health services are delivered across a number of different tiers of support, depending on the needs of the individual.[8]

A Mental Health Policy

The national overarching policy document guiding the development and implementation of mental health policy and services in Ireland.

Tier 1: Support provided through Tier 1 is not specialist mental health care but focused on initiatives delivered alongside other interventions. It may be delivered through funded websites, helplines or initiatives based in schools, youth services and family centres. It includes support groups, peer support, support for families, friends and carers, and mental health promotion advice.

Tier 2: Supports provided through Tier 2 are delivered through primary care initiatives and include the assessment/support for mild-to-moderate mental health problems/illness. It can include Primary Care psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists in Community Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), supports provided by Tusla, and Jigsaw – The National Centre for Youth Mental Health, which are some organisations delivering this level of service.

7 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

8 Adapted from Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 35 and Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 24.

Tier 3: Specialist Mental Health Services are a central focus of Tier 3 and delivered through Community Mental Health Teams. This level of services is accessed via a referral from a GP. These services are due to the occurrence of a moderate-to-severe mental illness. Services include CAMHS multidisciplinary teams in a community setting. They can sometimes be delivered in a general hospital setting by CAMHS Liaison Teams. This includes services for children with intellectual disability and moderate-to-severe mental illness.

Tier 4: Services delivered by CAMHS in Specialist Inpatient or Residential Units form part of Tier 4 supports. Provision covers both day and inpatient services. It includes some specialist outpatient services, including forensic services.

The National Office for Child and Youth Mental Health in the HSE was established in September 2023.[9] The aim of the office is to strengthen and integrate mental health supports for children and young people across Ireland. This will be achieved through coordination across services, with legislative and policy development across all aspects of support and prevention to specialist mental health services.[10] The Office is led by a National Clinical Lead for Youth Mental Health and an Assistant National Director for Child and Youth Mental Health and supported by a team of staff.[11]

In February 2025, the Office published a three-year plan, setting out how it will achieve its goal to '(re)design and deliver services which are safe, effective, easy-to-access and which offer appropriate support at all levels of need'.[12] The plan identifies 16 priority actions to achieve this goal, which focus on mental health and promotion and care which is evidence-based, safe, accessible and person-centred.[13] Actions include the development of a Single Point of

9 Department of Health 'Minister Butler launches new HSE National Youth Mental Health Office' Press Release, 11 September 2023.

10 Department of Health 'Minister Butler launches new HSE National Youth Mental Health Office' Press Release, 11 September 2023.

11 Department of Health 'Minister Butler launches new HSE National Youth Mental Health Office' Press Release, 11 September 2023.

12 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 4.

13 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 25.

Access (SPoA) for all referrals to child and youth mental health, in partnership with disabilities, primary care and organisations in the voluntary and statutory sectors; the development of a seamless pathway between child and youth and adult services; a holistic approach to the recruitment and retention of staff in child and youth mental health services.[14]

Experience of mental ill-health and poor emotional wellbeing can have a significant adverse impact on children, affecting their experiences and attainment at school, their friendships and family relationships, and their day-to-day lives.[15] While mental health problems are not selective, certain groups of children are at greater risk of poor mental health, particularly children who have experienced abuse or neglect;[16] including domestic abuse;[17] children living in poverty;[18] children who have experienced discrimination, including homophobia or transphobia;[19] autistic children and young people[20]; and children with chronic physical health conditions.[21] In 2023, the disproportionate levels of poorer mental health and suicide for Travellers, who have the highest rate of suicide of any group in Ireland,[22] was drawn into stark relief by the incredibly affecting documentary 'Patrick: A Young Traveller Lost' which highlighted the story of Patrick McDonagh, a 12-year-old Traveller

14 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 25, 50.

15 J.M. de Lijster, et al, *Social and academic functioning in adolescents with anxiety disorders: A systematic review*, (2018) Journal of Affective Disorders; Whear, Ukoumunne, Bethel, Thompson-Coon, Stein and Ford *School exclusion in children with psychiatric disorder or impairing psychopathology: a systematic review* (2014) *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*.

16 K. Sharratt, S.J. Mason, N. Wager, 'Childhood Abuse and Neglect, Exposure to Domestic Violence and Sibling Violence: Profiles and Associations with Sociodemographic Variables and Mental Health Indicators' (2023) Journal of Interpersonal Violence Vol 38, Iss 1-2, 1141-1162.

17 K. Sharratt, S.J. Mason, N. Wager, 'Childhood Abuse and Neglect, Exposure to Domestic Violence and Sibling Violence: Profiles and Associations with Sociodemographic Variables and Mental Health Indicators' (2023) Journal of Interpersonal Violence Vol 38, Iss 1-2, 1141-1162.

18 S. Wickham, M. Whitehead, D. Taylor-Robinson, B. Barr, *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: A longitudinal analysis of the UK millennium cohort study* (2017) The Lancet Public Health, 2(3).

19 T. Dürrbaum, F. A. Sattler, *Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: A meta-analysis* (2020) Journal of LGBT Youth 17:3; Liu and Mustanski, *Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* (2012) *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 42(3).

20 A. Accardo, N. Pontes and M. Pontes *Heightened Anxiety and Depression Among Autistic Adolescents with ADHD: Findings from the National Survey of Children's Health 2016-2019* (2022) *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* .

21 V. E. Cobham, et al., *Systematic Review: Anxiety in Children and Adolescents With Chronic Medical Conditions*, (2020) Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 59(5).

22 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 110.

boy from Finglas who sadly took his own life after he was bullied.[23] Research undertaken with young Travellers in Cork captured the everyday experience of discrimination and its pervasive impact on mental health particularly in relation to socialising and the role played by stereotypes.[24] Young Travellers 'remain largely invisible in mental health policy and service delivery' despite the 'robust evidence' of the disproportionate levels of mental health difficulties experienced.[25]

With no comprehensive survey outlining the prevalence of mental health conditions amongst children and young people in Ireland, these can be estimated using the 2021 International Burden of Disease Study (BDS).[26] The BDS is recognised internationally as a robust dataset, subject to peer review and updated periodically.[27] Prevalence rates calculated for Ireland are based on comparable data from similar sized high-income countries.[28] The BDS identifies, anxiety (42.2 per cent), ADHD (20.6 per cent), conduct disorder (12.7 per cent), depression (11.5 per cent) and Autism (7.6 per cent), as the most frequent mental health conditions amongst children and young people in Ireland.[29] The remaining 13 per cent of conditions include

Anxiety: 42.2%

ADHD: 20.6%

Conduct Disorder: 12.7%

Depression: 11.5%

Autism Spectrum Disorder: 7.6%

Most prevalent mental health conditions amongst children and young people in Ireland (Burden of Disease Study, 2021)

23 RTE Player, *Patrick: A Young Traveller Lost, 27 November 2023* < https://bit.ly/4cWP1U9 > accessed 19 March 2026.

24 Cork Traveller Visibility Group Ltd. *Measuring the impact of Discrimination on Traveller Youth Mental Health* (2022).

25 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 110.

26 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025).

27 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 11.

28 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 11.

29 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 11.

Eating Disorders (1.8 per cent), Dysthymia (1.6 per cent), Bipolar (1.2 per cent), Other (0.8 per cent) and Schizophrenia (0.1 per cent).[30] While these latter figures have low incidence rates they can require intensive supports, for instance, Eating Disorders account for just over one quarter of all admissions to CAMHS.[31] Overall, the prevalence rates calculated for Ireland using the BDS translates in to 181,000 cases with the estimated number of children and young people impacted lower than this due to co-existing conditions.[32]

To calculate the impact that these different mental health conditions can have, the BDS estimates the Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs).[33] Conditions with higher DALY values have greater disability burdens. Based on the prevalence rates calculated by the BDS for children and young people in Ireland, 43 per cent of the DALY burden is associated with anxiety, 21 per cent for all depressive disorders and 15 per cent with externalising disorders (including ADHD and conduct disorders) and 12 per cent with Autism.[34] Combining the DALY with the prevalence rates are important for resource allocation reasons. It allows decision-making to be informed about how to reach as many children and young people needing services as possible, along with balancing the needs of those small numbers of the population with high needs for less frequently presented conditions.[35] Based on this information, children and young people with externalising conditions and those with mild-to-moderate

30 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 11.

31 A. Dalym H. Lovett and E. Lynn *Annual Report on the Activities of Irish Psychiatric Units and Hospitals 2024* (Health Research Board 2025) 24.

32 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 11.

33 Disability Adjusted Life Years is a way of measuring the burden caused by a disease or condition. It combines the number of years lost due to disability with the years lived with some level of disability. Conditions with higher DALY values have a greater disability burden. See David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 13.

34 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 13.

35 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 17.

anxiety or depression comprise 70 per cent of the prevalence and 45 per cent of the DALYs. [36]

Suicide is also an indicator of the need for mental health services. There were 6 per cent of young people who reported having made a suicide attempt.[37] According to the WHO, suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15-29-year-olds globally.[38] While there has been some reduction in suicide rates since the start of the decade, 2022 data shows that just under eight in every 100,000 young person aged 15-19 died by suicide in Ireland.[39] Over the last two decades the National Self-Harm Registry Ireland has consistently observed the highest rates of self-harm have been amongst young people.[40] This has included the observation that the onset of self-harm is decreasing, with increased rates amongst ten to 14-year-olds. This is line with evidence internationally. [41] There is a gendered dimension to self-harm with the rate amongst 13-year-old girls six times that of 13-year-olds boys.[42]

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.[43] This right covers the full spectrum of health and wellbeing and fulfilling it requires 'a comprehensive multisectoral response [...] through integrated systems ... that involve parents, peers, the wider family and schools and the provision of support and assistance through trained staff.'[44] Ireland's progress under the UNCRC, is examined by a UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee issued Concluding Observations on children in 2023, expressing serious concerns relating to mental health policy for

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36 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 19.

37 B. Dooley, C. O'Connor, A. Fitzgerald, & A. O'Reilly *My World Survey 2 The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland* (Jigsaw and UCD School of Psychology) 26.

38 World Health Organisation, 'Suicide', (WHO, 2024) <https://bit.ly/4hprSIX> accessed 9 March 2026.

39 CSO, 'Suicide Statistics 2022', (CSO, 2024).

40 M. Joyce, S. Chakraborty J.C. McGuiggan et al *National Self-Harm Registry Ireland Annual Report 2024* (National Suicide Research Foundation 2025) 7.

41 M. Joyce, S. Chakraborty J.C. McGuiggan et al *National Self-Harm Registry Ireland Annual Report 2024* (National Suicide Research Foundation 2025) 7.

42 M. Joyce, S. Chakraborty J.C. McGuiggan et al *National Self-Harm Registry Ireland Annual Report 2024* (National Suicide Research Foundation 2025) 39.

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

44 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence*, 6 December 2016, CRC/C/GC/20, para 58.

children and young people and identified the issue of mental health as one of six areas where urgent measures should be taken.[45] The Committee raised concerns about insufficient and inadequate services; the long waiting lists; the placement of children in adult psychiatric wards; and the impact that racism and discrimination is having on the mental health of children from ethnic minorities, as well as the slow progress in developing a mental health action plan for Traveller and Roma children.[46]

In order to uphold the right to the best possible health provision for children, treatment facilities should be available to all and staffed by an appropriately trained workforce, with accountability and oversight to ensure that quality assurance standards are met.[47] For children with acute needs who require support in a psychiatric unit, the Committee is clear that adolescents should be separated from adults, where appropriate, and any decision on their care should be made in accordance with their best interests.[48]

The *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* includes specific commitments on services for children and young people. This includes areas such as developing the mental health workforce and infrastructure, community-based support, along with child and youth mental health. From these overarching areas the following commitments are tracked:

- Develop a new care model for HSE Primary Care Psychology to expedite services for young people with less complex issues.
- Continue to expand the central referral mechanism to simplify referrals to community paediatric services, including CAMHS, to ensure that no child is placed on the wrong waiting list.[49]
- Legislate to regulate CAMHS.
- Continue to resource CAMHS teams to reduce waiting lists.

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45 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 4.

46 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 31.

47 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *General comment No. 15 (2013) the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24)*, 1 February 2013 CRC/C/GC/15 para 27.

48 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 4 on Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child' (2003) UN Doc CRC/GC/2003/4 para 29.

49 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 95.

- Consider measures to attract and retain staff in CAMHS, while also developing a new workforce plan to address immediate staffing shortages and longer-term needs.
- Enhance youth mental health services for those up to age 25, focusing on smoother transitions from CAMHS to adult mental health services.

The following sections track progress in 2025 on delivering each of these commitments.

Commitment

Develop a new care model for HSE Primary Care Psychology to expedite services for young people with less complex issues.

Section Grade

A B C- D E F

Tier 2 on the stepped care approach to mental health services focuses on the provision of services through primary care settings.[50] This includes GPs and primary care teams.[51] Increasingly, primary care plays a role in the management of chronic and acute health conditions and treatment adherence, and in the general promotion of health and wellbeing in the community.[52] The type of interventions delivered in primary care settings include supports such as, talking therapies, digital health interventions and one-to-one sessional supports.[53] Talking therapies and related supports delivered by community and voluntary sector organisations are also categorised as primary care interventions.[54]

Primary care psychology provides a 'stepped service' with varying levels of intensity, and it plays a key role in signposting and escalating to secondary and tertiary services.[55] Nine out of ten mental health needs can be met within a primary care setting, with the remainder needing referral to secondary care services. Therefore, only ten per cent of cases are more clinically complex, requiring more specialist support services.[56]

1 in 10

Mental health cases require specialist support beyond primary care settings

The *Programme for Government* commits to developing a new model of primary care psychology to meet the needs of young people with less complex mental health issues.[57] This aligns with *Sharing the Vision* and *Slaintecare,* both of which envisage a stronger role for primary care, 'which, if appropriately resourced and with suitable governance, can provide a comprehensive range of interventions'.[58] Insufficient access to and availability of primary care services has led to an over-reliance on specialist secondary

50 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 35.

51 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 35.

52 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

53 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 38-39.

54 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 38-39.

55 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

56 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 40.

57 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 95.

58 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 40.

care systems and growing waiting lists as a result.[59] A focus on scaling up access to supports in primary care should help to reduce pressure on specialist mental healthcare. [60] This approach aligns with recent research commissioned by Mental Health Reform, which calls for an increased allocation of resources for early intervention services which could 'substantially reduce the significant distress and functional impacts of mental health morbidity' for children and young people.[61] The research argues that such heightened resources would have an added benefit for families along with reducing pressures on over-stretched specialist services (CAMHS).[62] Furthermore, the research found that for every €1 spent on these services there is an average return on investment of €0.84.[63]

Despite the strong evidence and argument for the scaling up of primary care supports, there is a disparity in the resourcing of this level of intervention across the six health regions. While overall there were 455 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) posts allocated across primary care psychology, the number per 100,000 of the population varies from a high of 14.57 in the Mid-West health region to a low of 3.8 in the South West health region. The second highest WTE per 100,000 population is in the Dublin and North East health region at 10.71 while the second lowest is in the West and North West health region at 7.25. The WTE per 100,000 in the remaining two Health regions is at 7.76 in the Dublin and Midlands and 9.86 in the Dublin and South East regions. It is important to note that the complement of staff in primary care psychology is for the entire population in a health region and not just for children and young people. According to the latest census data, children and young people aged under the age of 18 years comprise 25 per cent of the entire population.

59 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 40.

60 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 40.

61 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 6.

62 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 6.

63 David McDaid and A-La Park *Scaling-up early intervention and services for the 'missing middle' in the children and young people's mental health system in Ireland* (LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre and Mental Health Reform 2025) 42.

Allocation of Primary Care Psychology WTE across Health Regions and Under 18s Waiting lists

Health Region	WTE	WTE per 100,000	Waiting list (under 18s)	% of waiting list
Dublin and Midlands	84	7.76	5,033	17%
Dublin and North East	128	10.71	8,369	29%
Dublin and South East	97	9.86	3,431	12%
Mid West	62	14.57	1,334	5%
South West	28	3.8	7,423	26%
West and North West	56	7.25	3,428	12%
Total	**455**		**29,018**	

Source: HSE 'Written Answer on behalf of the Minister for Health [75283 & 75284 /25]' (HSE 2026); Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

The waiting lists for primary care psychology for under 18s stands at 29,018 nationally. The health region with the highest WTE per 100,000, the Mid West, has the lowest number of under 18s on its waiting list at 1,334, or just 5 per cent of the total. Conversely, the health region with the lowest WTE per 100,000, the South West, has the second highest number of under 18s on their waiting list at 7,423 or 26 per cent of the entire national waiting list. It is difficult to determine based solely on these numbers, what is happening at a local level. For instance, while the Dublin and North East region have the second highest WTE per 100,000 it has the highest number of under 18s on the waiting list at 8,369, or 29 per cent of the total.

Over half of children and young people on the waiting list for treatment from primary care psychology are there for over 52 weeks. There has been a significant increase in referrals to these services in recent years along with an increased complexity of cases.[64] The Primary Care Child Psychology Waiting List initiative targets removals of those under the age of 18 waiting longer than 52 weeks to access the service since 2021. To date, over 15,000 clients

64 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

have been removed from the waiting list nationally. In 2025, 3,466 clients were successfully removed via the Primary Care Child Psychology Waiting List initiative (18 per cent above the target 2,933 removals in the year).[65] This means focusing on those waiting the longest and seeking to move them off the waiting list by providing care to them first. This initiative includes the provision of interventions such as validation exercises, increased tele-screening and tele-consultations, and the increased provision of individual and group workshops as appropriate.[66] Continued base funding of €8.3 million for community-based waiting list initiatives was provided under Budget 2025, with this level of funding being maintained for 2026. In 2026, a target of 3,000 clients (under the age of 18 years waiting longer than 52 weeks) are to be removed from the Primary Care Psychology Waitling List by year-end.[67]

There have been some positive developments in terms of resourcing primary care psychology teams with an increase of 110 WTEs between June 2023 and October 2025. [68] Additional resourcing of services has been supported by the Psychology Training Initiative. This expanded the number of psychologists in professional training by 135 additional WTE trainees over a three-year period. This initiative has increased the HSE's number of Psychology Trainees, from 171 WTEs, to 306 WTEs (representing a 79 per cent increase).[69] The first cohort of additional trainees funded under this initiative will graduate in September 2026, meaning there will be an increase of 79 per cent of the available newly qualified psychologists available for recruitment to the HSE from this year onwards.[70]

An examination of the posts allocated to Primary Care psychology shows that 44 per cent of all posts – 201 WTEs – are trainee posts. There are 42 WTE Psychologist Assistant posts, a post formally established in 2022 which has been important in delivering low intensity supports.[71] The remainder of posts comprise of 103 WTE psychologist posts (23 per cent of the entire complement) and 127 WTE Senior Psychologist posts (28 per cent).

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65 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

66 Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly T.D., Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 October 2022 [48436/22].

67 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

68 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

69 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

70 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

71 P. Healy HSE National Director, National Services & Schemes 'Opening Statement' Joint Committee on Disability Matters and Joint Committee on Health 22 January 2026.

Breakdown of WTE Posts by Category

Grade	WTE
Trainee (Psychology Trainee, Counselling; Clinical; Educational)	201
Psychologist (Psychologist Counselling, Clinical; Educational and Psychologist Principal Clinical)	103
Senior Psychologist (Clinical; Educational; Counselling)	127
Psychologist Assistant	42
Total	455
West and North West	56
Total	**455**

Source: HSE 'Written Answer on behalf of the Minister for Health 75283 and 75284 /25' (HSE 2026).

The *Programme for Government* commitment to develop a new care model for HSE Primary Care Psychology to expedite services for young people with less complex issues is a welcome prioritisation. To date, there has been preliminary engagement between the Department of Health and the HSE to scope out the programme of work to underpin its development. Notably the HSE's National Service Plan 2026 identifies the development of 'a model of family support, counselling and psychology in primary care' as a priority action in 2026.[72] It is anticipated that a Stakeholder Group will be established to oversee this work by the end of Quarter 1 2026, with the agreement of Terms of Reference, a work programme (including a comprehensive stakeholder consultation exercise) and a timeline for the completion of the development of this new model and how it will be implemented.[73]

72 HSE *National Service Plan 2026* (HSE 2025) 20.

73 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

What do children and young people need next?

The development and further resourcing of primary care psychology services is an important aspect of the continuum of support provided by youth mental health services for children and young people. As it stands, primary care psychology provides supports across the lifecycle and the level or intensity of the support they provide just for children and young people is not evident in the data available. If a new model of support is to be successful in providing appropriate support to children and young people it is critical that the resourcing of the service adequately meets the need for services amongst children and young people.

There has been positive progress in expanding the psychology traineeship, the establishment of the psychologist assistant post and the reduction in the waiting lists. However, a breakdown of the WTE posts allocated to Primary Care Psychology shows that 44 per cent of the staff complement are trainees. While creating a supply of new therapists is important there needs to be a clear career pathway within the public health system for them once they qualify. Otherwise, there is a risk that once trainees are qualified they will leave the HSE for private practices.

It is welcome that initial engagement on the development of a new model of primary care has occurred between the HSE and the Department of Health. However, this will need to be a key priority area in the coming years in order to ensure that the children and young people receive appropriate care in a timely manner. With over 29,000 children on the waiting list, further investment in measures to support those on the waiting list, as well as improved coordination across all HSE services and interventions provided by the community and voluntary sector is needed. The scaling up of this tier of support should have a positive knock-on effect on CAMHS by ensuring only children needing specialist support are directed to these services. The positive developments in the workforce resourcing and work on the waiting lists for these services should be maintained through additional funding in Budget 2027.

Recommendations

- Identify clear milestones for the development of the new care model of primary care psychology. Progress on meeting these milestones should be captured and reported on an annual basis.
- While the new model of care is being developed, continue to resource primary care services in order to address the waiting lists.
- Develop a career pathway as part of the traineeship in order to ensure that trainees are retained in the HSE.

Commitment

Legislate to regulate CAMHS

Section Grade

A B C D E F

Over the last number of years, the operation of CAMHS has received considerable attention through a number of reports carried out on the clinical, governance and operations of teams across Ireland. In 2021, concerns around clinical care in CAMHS in South Kerry led to the initiation of an independent review of all open cases. The review resulted in the publication in January 2022 of the *Maskey Report*.[74] Amongst the findings, the review found that the care received by 240 young people did not meet the required standards, with serious clinical and governance failings, resulting in unreliable diagnoses; inappropriate and over-prescription of medication; the poor monitoring of treatment and potential adverse effects.[75] In February 2026, similar findings were identified in a report on a Look Back Review of CAMHS Area B (North Kerry CAMHS).[76]

In 2022 and 2023, as part of their annual statutory duty set out in the Mental Health Act 2001-2018, the Inspector of Mental Health Services at the Mental Health Commission (MHC) decided to carry out a review of CAMHS.[77] The scope of the review included the following objectives:

- To review the documentation on the care and treatment provided to young people.
- To map the services that are available to young people within the CAMHS teams.
- To identify the challenges confronting the CAMHS teams in providing mental healthcare and treatment to young people.
- To gain insight into the governance structure of each of the Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) and subsequently the processes for the management of the CAMHS teams.
- To reflect quality improvement and initiatives at all levels of CAMHS.[78]

74 S. Maskey, *Report on the Look-Back Review into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services County Kerry MHS* (HSE 2022).

75 S. Maskey, *Report on the Look-Back Review into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services County Kerry MHS* (HSE 2022) 49.

76 C. Halpin *CAMHS Area B Look Back Review Phase 1* (HSE 2026).

77 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 5.

78 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 21.

In January 2023, the *Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* was published. It demonstrated failings on the part of CAMHS, most notably a lack of governance and regulation leading to deficits in service provision;[79] 140 young people lost to follow-up;[80] many teams not having training to provide standard therapies;[81] a lack of emergency provision, particularly outside of Dublin, resulting in GPs referring young people to emergency departments;[82] and failings in the monitoring of anti-psychotic medication.[83]

The full *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* was published in July 2023.[84] It found continued failings on the part of CAMHS since the Interim Report, including that many teams were operating at less than 60 per cent of the recommended staffing levels under *A Vision for Change*;[85] the only benchmarking for CAMHS staffing nationally.[86]

While the MHC Review exposed many weaknesses in the delivery of appropriate mental health services for children and young people in Ireland, it also provided an important opportunity to move forward to improve these services. For instance, the Final Report recommended reinstating the post of National Director of Mental Health in the HSE to provide strategic direction over all mental health services in Ireland. The establishment of the National Child and Youth Mental Health Office in the HSE is a welcome step in terms of oversight

79 Mental Health Commission, *Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (January 2023) 3.

80 Mental Health Commission, *Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (January 2023) 6.

81 Mental Health Commission, *Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (January 2023) 5.

82 Mental Health Commission, *Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (January 2023) 5.

83 Mental Health Commission, *Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (January 2023) 5.

84 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (Mental Health Commission 2023).

85 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (Mental Health Commission 2023).See also: Department of Health, *A Vision for Change* (DOH 2006)

86 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (Mental Health Commission 2023).

of child and youth mental health services. Many of the recommendations from the MHC align with the *Programme for Government* commitments and *Sharing the Vision,* indicating an important synergy between political support and policy alignment.

The Independent Review of CAMHS included 49 recommendations for improvement.[87] Amongst them is the recommendation for the immediate and independent regulation of CAMHS by the MHC 'to ensure the State and the HSE act swiftly to implement the governance and clinical reforms to help guarantee that all children have access to evidence-based and safe services, regardless of geographical location or ability to pay'.[88] The *Programme for Government* commitment to legislate to regulate CAMHS aligns with this recommendation.[89]

The Mental Health Bill is currently at Committee Stage and makes provisions for the development of regulations.[90] In preparation for their development, the MHC has initiated a programme of work to develop standards for CAMHS.[91] In 2025, the MHC brought together a project team and their initial work included identifying and engaging with key stakeholders, establishing an Expert Advisory Group and commissioning Queen's University to undertake an evidence review of national and international best practice and policy in children's mental health services. This review was finalised in January 2026 but is not yet publicly available. [92]

The MHC has undertaken a public consultation and when it concluded in November 2025, 1,700 submissions were received. In order to involve children and young people in a meaningful way as part of this consultation, the MHC developed a partnership with a number of key organisations who facilitated focus groups and one-to-one interviews with children and young people who have either direct experience with CAMHS or a related interest in youth mental health. The public consultation was also promoted on channels used

87 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (Mental Health Commission 2023).

88 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023).

89 Government of Ireland *Programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland's Future* (Government of Ireland 2025) 95.

90 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

91 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

92 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

by young people (such as TikTok) and 33 submissions from children were received. Separately MHC connected with both Hub na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg.[93] A Child Rights Impact Assessment is being used during the development process.[94]

With the achievement of key milestones relating to the public consultation and evidence review, the focus for 2026 will be to complete focus groups and individual interviews with children and other relevant stakeholders during the first six months of the year. In the latter half of the year, a draft of the standards will be developed, along with a consultation on the final draft.

In addition to this the HSE CAMHS Operational Guidelines were updated and published in December.[95] The purpose of the document is to align practice with the intended outcomes of the new Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan, along with building on existing good practice and providing operational guidelines for CAMHS teams. The guidelines also ensure that legislative and regulatory requirements are met and that there is clarity on the roles and responsibilities of employees and management. The Operational Guidelines provide children, young people and their families, as well as other agencies and referrers information on the service being provided by CAMHS. The document ensures that there is a framework for audit and evaluation.[96]

What do children and young people need next?

The harm caused to vulnerable children and young people through the lack of clinical and governance oversight continues to be exposed in a number of high-profile reports on CAMHS. It is welcome that the forthcoming Mental Health legislation will provide for the development of regulations and that work is underway to develop standards for CAMHS by the Mental Health Commission as a forerunner to legislation.

93 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

94 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

95 HSE *CAMHS Operational Guideline 2025* (3rd Edition) (HSE 2025).

96 HSE *CAMHS Operational Guideline 2025* (3rd Edition) (HSE 2025).

The use of a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) and the involvement of children and young people as part of the development of CAMHS standards by the MHC is particularly welcome. It is important that it is published once completed.

Given the recently published findings of the North Kerry CAMHS lookback review and the findings of the Maskey Report and MHC independent review, the development of the standards represents an important first step towards regulating CAMHS. The learnings arising from these reviews should be a central part of the development of standards. It is critical that momentum is maintained and the standards are finalised in 2026. However, the real impact will only be realised once the regulations are set out in legislation similar to the approach of the regulation of approved centres by the MHC.

Commitment

Continue to expand the central referral mechanism to simplify referrals to community paediatric services, including CAMHS, to ensure that no child is placed on the wrong waiting list.

Section Grade

A B C- D E F

The *Programme for Government* commitment to develop a centralised referral mechanism is in line with the recommendations arising from both the MHC and the work of the *Sharing the Vision* National Implementation and Monitoring Committee (NIMC).[97] The independent review of CAMHS carried out by the MHC recommended that there be a 'single-point-of-contact triage system within each CHO' and that this 'should be developed for all referrals to CAMHS, with the ability to prioritise assessments with Children's disability network teams (CDNTs) and Primary Care should this be required.'[98] The Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist Group, established under the NIMC, made a similar recommendation as part of the work undertaken on developing a new integrated model of care for young people under the age of 25. The recommendation noted that:

> 'All referrals for children and young people with mental health difficulties, aged between 0-25 years, should come via one point of access and self-referral should be supported. This would provide a 'no wrong door' approach to accessing mental health services. The single point of access should be facilitated at a local community level where there is an awareness of adjunctive services in the locale as these vary across the country'.[99]

This recommendation has been incorporated into the *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* published in February 2025.[100] While the Single Point of Access (SPoA) is seen to be a long-term action, a number of intermediary milestones are outlined. They include undertaking an analysis of waiting list data to develop an understanding of what is causing waiting lists and ensuring that children and young people are on the appropriate list; the development of a SPoA clinical triage system including building on demonstration

97 Action 99 of *Sharing the Vision* calls for the establishment of a 'whole-of-government' implementation committee. The National Implementation and Monitoring Committee (NIMC) is made up of a number of different elements – NIMC Steering Committee, set up in December 2020, the NIMC Reference Group of Services Users, Family Members and Cares and the NIMC Specialist Groups. A HSE Implementation Group reports to the NIMC on HSE-led policy recommendations. Specialist Groups may be established by the NIMC Steering Committee to work on specific recommendations or other broader policy work related to *Sharing the Vision* that may require specialist input. Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 111.

98 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (Mental Health Commission 2023) 14.

99 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision, *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model* (Government of Ireland) 16 https://bit.ly/4sSgxqz accessed 19 March 2026.

100 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 4.

66

sites and developing governance and support structures for the SPoA.[101]

The independent review of CAMHS recommended that there be a 'single-point-of-contact' triage system with the ability to prioritise assessments with CDNTs and Primary Care should this be required.

101 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 42.

The development of a SPoA brings together HSE Disabilities, HSE Primary Care, and voluntary and community sector partners 'to create more streamlined and accessible mental health services'.[102] It brings all services together in one place to help to identify the most suitable interventions or treatment options for children and young people.[103] The SPoA promotes a concept of partnership and multi-agency working and 'enables the whole community to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people'.[104] It is intended to be a streamlined entry point for children and young people seeking mental health supports and is closely aligned with national policy objectives, prioritising equity, early intervention, safe access, and integrated care pathways. The model is built on a stepped care approach, meaning the intensity of support provided matches the level of need presented by each child or young person.[105]

Three 'demonstration' or 'pilot' sites were established in local areas in North Dublin, South Galway and Donegal with the aim of testing the approach in sites providing community health services to areas with a population of approximately 50,000. [106] The chosen sites represent a mix of populations including rural and urban communities.[107]

Of central importance is the involvement of the community and voluntary sector, to provide rapid access, early intervention and community-based approaches to supporting children and young people with mental health difficulties. They will also provide informal and formal parenting supports and education. Rapid escalation to statutory services, including CAMHS, Primary Care Psychology, Eating Disorders Teams or Inpatient Care if necessary will ensure timely and appropriate care. The goal of the SPoA is 'to improve navigation within the system, reduce duplication of services, and increase responsiveness to the needs of young people and their families'.[108]

102 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
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In June 2025, the CEO of the HSE, directed that the SPoA be implemented across all HSE Regions.[109] Regional management teams were instructed to develop implementation plans in each of their areas by October 2025 and a National SPoA Implementation Group was formed in mid-August to oversee implementation and was chaired by the National Director of Access and Integration. Each health region was recently asked to submit an implementation plan and referral process maps for a local SPoA.[110]

The next step is to develop a high-level national referral model, informed by these regional submissions and acceptable to all health regions and service types.[111] This national model will then be configured into the Community Care Record which will be deployed on a phased regional basis from Quarter 3 2026.[112] The vision for the Community Care Record is to ensure that every service user accessing Community Services has a single, up-to-date record that is available to all health care staff involved in their care. This is a significant programme of change, which will require standardisation of practice across all community services.[113]

The use of this approach should mean easier navigation for children, young people, their families, and referrers, ensuring access to the right care at the right place and time, along with supporting integrated care.[114] The SPoA will enhance visibility of waiting lists and enable active intervention to manage waiting lists more effectively.[115] This way of working leads to better outcomes for young people and their families and carers, while decreasing pressure on statutory services, corresponding to reductions in overall wait times.[116] Therefore, it is envisaged that the SPoA will help to reduce duplication on waiting lists, support joint clinical pathways, and improve service capacity. Overall it will contribute to a more efficient and effective healthcare system.[117]

109 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
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The creation of a digital SPoA is being supported through a significant IT change programme which will implement an electronic health record in CAMHS known as Community Care Record (CCR).[118] The CCR ensures that all service users have one up-to-date electronic record available to all healthcare staff involved in their care. The decision to expediate the referral models in CCR will help to support the creation of a digital SPoA to go live in all health regions in July 2026.[119] This will provide a unified digital front door across CAMHS, Primary Care, and Disability Services. Once operational, it will mean greater transparency and visibility of waiting lists. Ultimately this will mean a reduction in a duplication of referrals.[120]

What do children and young people need next?

It is welcome that work has progressed to mainstream the SPoA across the HSE. The analysis of the issues facing mental health services for children and young people indicates that there is a need to improve coordination at a local level between different tiers of services. The challenges experienced by children and young people in being referred to CAMHS is highlighted in research carried out by Families for Reform of CAMHS.[121] In particular, the research highlights the difficulties in getting support from CAMHS for specific groups, such as Autistic children, in trying to access services when they have an additional diagnosis.[122] The implementation of the SPoA needs to foster collaborative working at a local level to ensure that specific needs of children and young people are considered holistically and that they are directed on the right clinical pathway as early as possible. The use of SPoA as a triage system could help to unlock this by bringing together key services to identify the most appropriate and relevant pathways for children and young people to access services.

118 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
119 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
120 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
121 Families for Reform of CAMHS *Experiences of CAMHS: A Family Perspective* (2024).
122 Families for Reform of CAMHS *Experiences of CAMHS: A Family Perspective* (2024) 73.

Commitment

Consider measures to attract and retain staff in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). We will also develop a new workforce plan to address immediate staffing shortages and longer-term needs.

Section Grade

A B **C** D E F

The *Programme for Government* commitment to develop a workforce plan to address the staffing shortages in CAMHS is an essential part of respecting and fulfilling children's rights to healthcare. The UN Committee recommends that treatment facilities should be available to all and staffed by an appropriately trained workforce, with accountability and oversight to ensure that quality assurance standards are met.[123]

In line with international experience, retaining and attracting a highly skilled healthcare staff is a challenge for mental health services.[124] In 2023, there was a total of 835.62 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) staff employed in CAMHS across the country.[125] This included 711.57 clinical posts. These figures fell to 815.78 and 691.2 respectively in 2024. It is welcome that these figures have had increased to 861.25 and 730.68 respectively in 2025.[126] This increase in posts is partly attributed to an additional allocation of 126 new posts to CAMHS in 2024 and 2025, 77 of which have been filled.[127]

There has been positive progress in attracting new consultant CAMHS posts, a role essential to the viability and operation of the CAMHS team.[128] While increased numbers of nursing staff has also been a welcome development, the challenges with recruiting allied professional grades, who deliver critical 'talk-therapies', family supports and other therapeutic interventions, has meant there are still challenges of varying degrees across the Health Regions, including with external factors influencing recruitment and retention.[129] For instance, the lack of services near large urban centres has been influenced by the lack of affordable housing options.[130]

While there is no specific workforce plan for children and young people's mental health services, the *HSE People Strategy 2025 to 2027* provides an overarching framework for the entire HSE workforce.[131] The Child and Youth

123 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *General comment No. 15 (2013) the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24)*, 1 February 2013 CRC/C/GC/15 para 27.
124 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
125 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
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130 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
131 HSE *Our People Strategy 2025-2027 – Enabling Our People to Deliver* (HSE 2025).

Mental Health Office at the HSE continues to implement a comprehensive recruitment and retention approach to developing a skilled and valued workforce. This has included expanding the pipelines for recruitment of health care professionals, including by developing additional education pathways, attracting and engaging recruitment through the HSE Career Hub and supporting recruiters to expand applicant pools.

A report published in 2022 by the Department of Health noted that there was an urgent need to increase the supply of domestic nursing graduates in order to meet forecasted demand.[132] The report found that Ireland produced just 31 graduate nurses per 100,000, a comparatively lower rate than other countries.[133] Additional capacity in the system in recent years means that the number of nursing students has increased from 1,695 in 2018/2019 to over 2,300 in 2024/2025.[134]

Through its service level agreement with the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland, the HSE helps to support the delivery of the postgraduate specialist training programme in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.[135] The 38 trainees enrolled in the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry training programme will be eligible to work as consultants within the HSE's CAMHS.[136] Complimentary to this the HSE has undertaken a multi-pronged approach to attracting medical consultants across all specialities, including targeting potential recruits through high profile marketing overseas, direct engagement with participants with higher specialist training colleges, developing attractive relocation packages and bespoke initiatives for psychiatry posts which has resulted in successful recruitment in specific geographic areas.[137]

Recruitment processes within the HSE have been streamlined and accelerated through the introduction of a single decision point approved for delegation by the Regional Executive Officer to Integrated Healthcare Managers and Regional Directors of People. This reduces the process from a three-stage process which was temporarily initiated in 2024.

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132 Government of Ireland *Spending Review 2022 A System Dynamics Model of Nursing and Midwifery Workforce Supply* (Department of Health 2022).

133 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

134 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

135 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

136 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

137 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

What do children and young people need next?

There are a number of positive aspects to the development of the youth mental health workforce. This includes a slightly lower turnover rate of 6.7 per cent versus 7.4 per cent for overall national health service turnover[138] and the development of a pipeline in recruitment for mental health nurses and for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. However, there is much more to be achieved in this area to ensure that mental health services are delivered in a safe and appropriate manner. The recently published report on North Kerry CAMHS services highlighted the need for CAMHS teams to be adequately staffed to deliver appropriate and safe care. Furthermore, the *Programme for Government* commitment states that a specific workforce plan for CAMHS will be developed, however, to date this has not been achieved. The development of this plan should consider how CAMHS teams can be responsive to the needs of children and young people attending their services by identifying what specific skillset is needed.

Recommendations

- **Publish a specific workforce development plan for child and youth mental health services which includes a means of identifying what skillsets are needed to support individuals accessing their services. As part of the development of the plan consideration should be given to how staff wellbeing and a healthy working environment can be promoted.**

138 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

Commitment

Continue to resource CAMHS teams to reduce waiting lists.

Section Grade

A B C D E F

Referral to CAMHS services occurs when those aged under 18 years are deemed to have reached a threshold of moderate to severe mental health difficulties.[139] A review of the data indicates that there are a substantial number of children and young people waiting on these services. Therefore, it is welcome that the *Programme for Government* commits to resourcing CAMHS to address the demand for support. In 2025 there were 16,603 referrals accepted to CAMHS, representing an increase of 1,797 on 2024.[140] Of the total number of referrals accepted in 2025, 2,590 were classified as urgent referrals and 96.3 per cent of these were responded to in three days.[141] Just under 100 urgent referrals accepted by CAMHS were not seen within that timeframe.[142]

16,603

Number of referrals accepted to CAMHS in 2025

A total of 11,766 new cases were seen in 2025 and 69 per cent of these were offered an appointment within 12 weeks.[143] The proportion of new cases seen within 12 weeks increased in 2025, compared to 2024 (67 per cent). However, the proportion of new cases seen withing 12 weeks varied from a low of 53 per cent in HSE South West (Area D) to 83 per cent in HSE Dublin and South East (Area C) and HSE Midwest (Area E).[144]

	Referrals accepted - Nationally	New cases seen - Nationally	New cases offered appointment within 12 weeks - Nationally
Dec. 25	16,603	11,766	69%
Dec. 24	14,806	11,520	67%

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An examination of the trends over almost a decade shows a significant increase in referrals to CAMHS since 2016.[145] While there is a notable upward trend from 18,465 referrals in 2016 to 29,336 in 2025, the percentage of referrals accepted has decreased from 73 per cent to 57 per cent over this time. Therefore, while there was a 59 per cent increase in referrals between 2016 and 2025, there was only a 23 per cent increase in the accepted referrals. This still represents a significant increase in demand being placed on these services.

CAMHS	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Referrals received	18,465	18,489	18,650	18,831	17,436	22,212	21,762	23,874	25,721	29,336
Referrals accepted	13,499	12,988	13,255	13,190	12,531	14,439	13,086	13,764	14,806	16,603
Per centage referrals accepted	73%	70%	71%	70%	72%	65%	60%	58%	58%	57%

Source: Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

The increased need being placed on an already overstretched CAMHS, meant that there were 4,433 children on a waiting list for CAMHS services at the end of 2025.[146] Of these children, 13.6 per cent were waiting for a year or more to be seen.[147] In the previous two years, in 2023 and 2024, the waiting list for CAMHS services remained above 3,000, indicating a significant entrenchment of need.[148]

4,433

Children on CAMHS waiting list (December 2025)

While the HSE does not collect regular data on children on the waiting list for CAMHS, anaysis carried out in March 2024 found that 60 per cent of the referals on the entire waiting list related to Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)assessment. The remaining 40 per cent of referrals related to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)/Emotional

145 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
146 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
147 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.
148 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 13 January 2024.

Difficulties/Anxiety (16 per cent); Depression/low mood/self-harm (6 per cent); Eating Disorder (1.7 per cent); Psychosis (0.1 per cent); Diagnosis TBC/other (16.1 per cent).[149]

Research in the United Kingdom exploring young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services found that all participants expressed, in some form, an inability to function sufficiently and the emergence of negative beliefs, emotions, and thoughts occurred while waiting to access mental health services.[150] Ensuring that all children under 18-years have equitable and timely access to age-appropriate, quality mental health treatment and services is key to avoiding such negative outcomes. In its independent review of CAMHS in 2023, the MHC consulted with young people and their parents. There were multiple accounts reported of parents concerned that their child was deteriorating while on waiting lists.[151] The review highlighted the link between lengthy CAMHS waiting lists and the downstream negative consequences of more children and young people requiring care, including in-patient care, for acute mental health difficulties.[152] The Commission referred to the 'complete unacceptability' of children lingering on long waiting lists until they became seriously ill and/or developed suicidal behaviour, at which point many must resort to making a crisis presentation to the Emergency Department.[153]

Improving access to CAMHS and reducing the waiting lists to access these services has been a key priority of the Minister of State with Responsibility for Mental Health and the Government.[154] In 2025, an allocation of approximately €181 million to CAMHS has meant that funding has increased by 32 per cent

149 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

150 G. Punton, A.L. Dodd, A. McNeill, '"You're on the waiting list': An interpretive phenomenological analysis of young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services in the UK' PLoS ONE 17(3): e0265542 (2022) <https://bit.ly/40EOizi> accessed 19 February 2026.

151 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 63.

152 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 77.

153 ibid Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services* (July 2023) 77.

154 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

since 2022.[155] In Budget 2025, an additional €16 million in funding was provided for mental health services. This facilitated a number of initiatives, such as additional CAMHS services and new beds in the National Forensic Health Service. An additional €2.9 million for CAMHS service developments was also provided, including funding for eight additional staff to develop a new CAMHS emergency department liaison service and seven additional staff for an extra CAMHS hub.[156]

An additional €10 million allocated to CAMHS for Budget 2026 will mean total ring-fenced funding for CAMHS will be over €190 million this year.[157] This includes €6 million to develop a new CAMHS Emergency Liaison Service, an increase in out-of-hours on-call, the establishment of a new CAMHS eating disorder team and two new CAMHS Mental Health with Intellectual Disability teams. This also includes €4 million to recruit 47 staff to open seven new beds in the new National Children's Hospital and re-open 11 CAMHS beds in Linn Dara.[158]

€190 million

An additional €10m allocated to CAMHS for Budget 2026 will mean total ring-fenced funding for CAMHS will be over €190m in 2026.

As part of the CAMHS Waiting List Initiative, a pilot intervention was undertaken in 2025 to provide ADHD assessments and post-diagnostic psycho-educational support for children agreed from 6 to 18 years. The intervention was provided through a multidisciplinary, neuro-affirmative model.[159] In 2026, an additional 400 ADHD assessments nationally will be undertaken as a result of the mainstreaming of this intervention.[160]

155 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2025.
156 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2025.
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Ring-fenced funding of €3 million has been allocated as part of the HSE's Waiting List Action Plan.[161] This resulted in an additional 791 cases seen in 2022, 966 in 2023 and 1,475 in 2024. The annual target of an additional 1,250 cases had already been exceeded by the end of September 2025, meaning a cumulative 4,712 additional cases have been seen. However, the net effect of this additional activity has been offset by the overall increase in referrals over the same time period.[162]

What do children and young people need next?

Over the last decade referrals to CAMHS have increased significantly, with over 10,000 additional referrals in 2025 compared to 2016. Yet accepted referrals increased by just over 3,000 over the same period. Maintaining investment and resourcing of the CAMHS Waiting List Initiative is important in order to address the significant numbers waiting to access services. There is perhaps some indication that the lack of adequate resourcing of early intervention measures or other tiers of support is leading to a logjam of referrals to CAMHS. Therefore, while additional resourcing of CAMHS is welcome it can only be effective if other parts of the system are adequately resourced and reformed.

161 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

162 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 6 February 2026.

Commitment

Enhance youth mental health services for those up to age 25, focusing on smoother transitions from CAMHS to adult mental health services.

Section Grade

A B C **D** E F

The *Programme for Government* commitment to enhance mental health services for those up to 25 years of age and to create smoother transitions to adult services, aligns with the MHC's Independent Review which called for the integration of mental health services for children, noting that they 'should be fully integrated so that children can move seamlessly between services in a timely manner according to their needs'.[163] This is in line with Recommendation 36 in *Sharing the* Vision, which states that appropriate supports should be provided for on an interim basis to service users transitioning from CAMHS to General Adult Mental Health Services (GAMHS). The age of transition should be moved from 18 to 25, and future supports should reflect this.[164]

The expansion of services up to the age of 25 years responds to the life course stage of 'emerging adulthood'.[165] This stage of life begins with emerging adults at the age of 17-18 being dependent by living with their parents or carers and attending school.[166] By the end of the stage, in their mid to late 20s they live independently and have a career path forged ahead of them.[167] Therefore, this stage of life is characterised by increasing agency at a time of decreasing support from family. Apart from infancy, no other stage of life encompasses such 'dynamic and complex changes on the personal, social, emotional, neuroanatomical, and developmental levels.[168] Therefore improving transitions to adult services and extending youth mental health services up to the age of 25 is a welcome commitment, given the dynamics at play during a young person's life.

The Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist Group was established in September 2021 to progress recommendations and was comprised of representatives from service users. A voluntary community sector was then set up to monitor progress and to oversee implementation of the policy.

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163 Mental Health Commission, *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services,* (July 2023) 14.

164 Department of Health *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy* (Government of Ireland 2020) 101.

165 D. Wood, T. Crapnell, L. Lau et al. 'Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course' *Handbook of life course health development*, (2017) 123-143 https://bit.ly/4uanLro accessed 9 March 2026.

166 D. Wood, T. Crapnell, L. Lau et al. 'Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course' *Handbook of life course health development*, (2017) 123-143 https://bit.ly/4uanLro accessed 9 March 2026.

167 D. Wood, T. Crapnell, L. Lau et al. 'Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course' *Handbook of life course health development*, (2017) 123-143 https://bit.ly/4uanLro accessed 9 March 2026.

168 D. Wood, T. Crapnell, L. Lau et al. 'Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course' *Handbook of life course health development*, (2017) 123-143 https://bit.ly/4uanLro accessed 9 March 2026.

The work of the Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist Group undertook two interrelated workstreams. Workstream 1 focused on the development of an enhanced transitions plan (including implementation plan) to support individuals transitioning from CAMHS to GAMHS at 18 years.[169] Workstream 2 focused on the development of a reconfiguration plan, including prioritised and phased recommended actions, to plan for the provision of age-appropriate specialist mental health services up to age 25.[170]

The programme of work for Workstream 1 took place over a period of 24 months and included a consultation with young people, carried out by spunout as part of this. The consultation highlighted why there is a need to improve the transition experiences of young people moving from child to adult mental health services.[171] While 22 per cent of young people had either a 'positive' (18 per cent) or 'very positive' (4 per cent) experience moving out of CAMHS, 19 per cent had a 'negative' experience and 23 per cent had a 'very negative' experience.[172] The remaining 35 per cent indicated that their experience could have been better. Almost half of young people indicated that there was no positive part from transitioning from CAMHS to AMHS and almost two-thirds indicated that the most difficult part of transitioning between the two services was 'retelling my story'.[173]

The final output from the work was an implementation plan, with the following three overarching recommendations:

1. Moving from CAMHS to AMHS should be treated as a continuation of care, placing the young person at the centre, and transitional care plans should be co-produced with young people and, where appropriate, their support network.

169 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Enhanced Transition Plan Recommendations and implementation plan to support transition from HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to HSE Adult Mental Health Services* (Government of Ireland) 3.

170 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model* (Government of Ireland) 3.

171 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Enhanced Transition Plan Recommendations and implementation plan to support transition from HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to HSE Adult Mental Health Services* (Government of Ireland) 11.

172 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Enhanced Transition Plan Recommendations and implementation plan to support transition from HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to HSE Adult Mental Health Services* (Government of Ireland) 11.

173 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Enhanced Transition Plan Recommendations and implementation plan to support transition from HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to HSE Adult Mental Health Services* (Government of Ireland) 11.

2. It is the responsibility of all staff to effectively collaborate to ensure a smooth transition for all young people and to put in place relevant supports and enabling structures.

3. Area management teams should have responsibility for ensuring all young people experience a smooth transition between CAMHS and AMHS and this should be evidenced by standardised reporting of performance and person-centred outcomes. [174]

The *HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan* identifies the enhancement of transitions between services as one of its 16 action areas. This includes implementing the 'Enhanced Transition Plan' developed by the Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist Group. As part of the work the HSE indicates that it will continue to survey young people on their experience of transitioning from CAMHS to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS).[175]

The second workstream focused on the development of a new model of services for young people up to the age of 25.[176] In setting out the context for the development of services up to the age of 25, the Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group acknowledges that the epidemiological evidence indicates that half of all mental conditions develop before 15 years of age and three-quarters develop before the age of 25. Therefore, the transitioning of young people at the age of 18 to adult services can come at a time of great vulnerability. [177] The work of the Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist Group in developing recommendations for a new model, including commissioning research and undertaking consultations with stakeholders. The commissioned research focused on reviewing national and international evidence and best practice provision of youth mental health services up to 25 years, along with a mapping exercise on 'current patterns and projected future requirements of' mental health services for young people.[178]

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174 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Enhanced Transition Plan Recommendations and implementation plan to support transition from HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to HSE Adult Mental Health Services (*Government of Ireland) 14.

175 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 40.

176 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model (*Government of Ireland).

177 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model (*Government of Ireland) 6.

178 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model (*Government of Ireland) 11.

Stakeholder consultations focused on developing an understanding of both the perspective of those working in and navigating youth mental health services.[179]

Arising from the work of the group, it is envisaged that a future model of youth mental health services will have the following long-term goal:

> 'Young people should be able to rapidly and easily access youth-specific mental healthcare that provides recovery-focused needs-based and complexity-based care in a flexible and non-stigmatising manner. That care should be delivered in an integrated way with services provided in a single location'. [180]

The delivery of this vision is dependent on five interrelated recommendations, including those developed in the 'Enhanced Transition Plan', design and delivery of youth-focused interventions that intersect between CAMHS and adult services and investment in training the continued professional development of the workforce in order to facilitate the development of an integrated system.[181]

What do children and young people need next?

Given the substantial work undertaken to develop a plan to support young people to transition to adult services, it is important that there is a means of tracking implementation. This could mean capturing the number of young people transitioning to adult services on a monthly or quarterly basis. It is welcome that the HSE commits to continue to survey young people on their experience of transitioning to adult services, and these insights should continue to help in shaping the continued development of supports to ensure a smooth transition between services.

The latest Implementation Plan for *Sharing the Vision* assigns responsibility for the implementation of recommendations made by the Youth Mental Health

179 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model* (Government of Ireland) 4.

180 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model* (Government of Ireland) 16.

181 Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist group to support the implementation of Sharing the Vision *Transforming Youth Mental Health Services in Ireland: A New Model* (Government of Ireland) 20.

Transitions Specialist group at the HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office.[182] The publication of the Office's Action Plan acknowledges the important work undertaken by the group and where this is situated within the 16 actions it will focus on over the next three years.[183] While change processes can be complex and involve multiple stakeholders, it is critical that progress on the reconfiguration of services is captured and reported on an annual basis in order to provide a means or tracking progress. To date, no implementation plan has been published to allow for oversight and the monitoring of progress on the reconfiguration of services for all young people under the age of 25.

Recommendations

- Publish the number of individual young people who have had proposed transitions from CAMHS to adult services along with how many of these have been accepted by adult services on a quarterly basis.
- Publish updated information on young people's experiences of transitioning from CAMHS to adult services. This could be one aspect of a wider initiative to ensure that the voice and experience of young people accessing mental health services continues to feed into and reform aspects of the services.
- Develop a detailed implementation plan on the reconfiguration of services for young people up to the age of 25.
- Publish an annual report tracking progress on the implementation of the Action Plan of the recommendations arising from the work of the HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office. Specific details on the progress of implementing the recommendations of the *Youth Mental Health Transitions Specialist Group* should be included in the annual report.

182 Department of Health & HSE *Implementation Plan 2025-2027 Sharing the Vision* (Government of Ireland) 71.

183 HSE *Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027* (HSE 2025) 11.

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