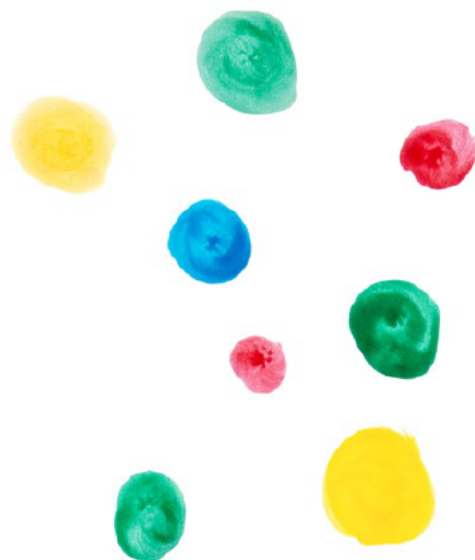




Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Second Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office



This Progress Report is supported by the following additional documents published by the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office.

[Action Learning Poster Booklet](#)

[Child Poverty Target Indicators](#)

Child Poverty and Well-Being in Transition: Learning and Adapting to Accelerate Change in Children's Lives

Second Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office

Department of the Taoiseach
Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office
gov.ie/childpoverty



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

June 2026



In 2025 approximately
208,000 children in Ireland
lived in households that were
at-risk-of-poverty.



Taoiseach's Foreword



Ending child poverty is the most significant challenge we face in our efforts to ensure that every child is happy, healthy, and hopeful—both now and into the future.

Is é deireadh a chur le bochtaineacht leanaí an dúshlán is suntasaí atá romhainn inár n-iarrachtaí chun a chinntiú go mbíonn gach leanbh sona, sláintiúil agus lán dóchais—anois agus sa todhchaí araon.

Cutting child poverty on this scale will be tough, especially as we face economic uncertainty and the risk of widening inequality. But we know what works and we know how to turn this ambition into reality.

The way forward is to prioritise those who need our help most and to keep making progress year by year. As we move towards 2030, we will be steadfast in our commitment to protect the dignity of children and the adults they will become.

That is why, I am pleased to publish the second progress report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, this report marks the end of the first Programme Plan, *From Poverty to Potential*, and we are now preparing the second plan.

These pages tell a story of consistent progress and determined focus. Each year we have made big moves and that is what we will keep doing. This report highlights significant developments, including increased child-related payments, expanded access to early learning and childcare, free schoolbooks for primary and post-primary students, and the launch of the new DEIS Programme and DEIS Plus Scheme.

These measures, alongside others set out in the report, are helping to lift more children and families out of poverty. But this report also highlights the challenges that remain and the new and emerging pressures that children and families face.

We have made real progress. We have built a more joined-up and strategic response to child poverty and child well-being. Now we must see it through.

Tá dul chun cinn fíor déanta againn. Tá freagairt níos comhtháite agus níos straitéisí curtha le chéile againn maidir le bochtaineacht leanaí agus leas leanaí. Anois ní mór dúinn é a chur i gcrích.

Micheál Martin T.D.

Taoiseach

“Government has set an ambitious goal: to reduce child poverty to below 3% by 2030. But targets only point the way—it’s action that gives them meaning.”

Child Friendly Summary

In 2023, the Government set up a team called the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office. Their job is to help different parts of government work together to make life better for children, young people, and families across Ireland. Every year the team tells everyone what has been done. This report show what was done between September 2024 and December 2025.

The Programme Office helps by bringing different government departments together so they can work together, share ideas, and make better plans for children. It listens to children, young people, and families to understand what matters to them. The team makes sure the changes made work well for children, and looks at how the money spent by the government can better support children and families.

In 2023, the Programme Office came up with a Plan for its first few years that wanted to work on a few things that were really important to children. Some of the most important things that have changed are:

- Families are getting more help with money, like higher payments and wages
- It is getting cheaper to send children to childcare
- Some schools are getting extra support to make it fair for all children
- There are more services in the community for families to be able to use. All children now get free schoolbooks, and many get meals in school
- More children can take part in sports, arts, and activities

Listening to children and young people is really important in our work, and children and young people have told us that while some things have gotten better there are still some big things they would like to see change including:

- Some families are struggling with housing and homelessness
- The cost of living is still high and it can be hard to afford things that children need
- There are not always enough workers in services like childcare and social support and sometimes there are really long waiting lists
- Services do not always work together as well as they should

We are going to keep working on this, and the team is making a new plan to make sure that children's lives keep getting better.

“The Programme Office helps by bringing different government departments together so they can work together, share ideas, and make better plans for children.”

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, established in the Department of the Taoiseach in 2023, was created to strengthen cross-government coordination and accelerate progress in tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and young people.

This Second Progress Report completes the reporting cycle of the first Programme Plan and sets out progress achieved between September 2024 and December 2025. This report provides an overview of progress while emphasising the multifaceted nature of the Government's response to child poverty. The learning gained over the lifetime of the Programme Plan, and encapsulated in this report, acts as both an update and a resource for all those working to improve outcomes in children's lives. The report is structured in two parts. Part One provides an update on the six priority areas, providing an overview of key developments, and concludes with a consideration of key cross-cutting challenges and lessons identified through delivering for children at risk of poverty. Part Two focuses on the specific contributions of the Programme Office, detailing its strategic initiatives and its ongoing work in enhancing the implementation of existing and emerging policy. This part ends with a summary of some of the key findings of a forthcoming Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review of the work of the Programme Office and considers what this learning could mean for the future.

Six priority areas identified in the Initial Programme Plan



1 Income supports and joblessness



2 Early learning and childcare



3 Reducing the cost of education



4 Family Homelessness



5 Consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental support, and well-being services



6 Enhancing participation in culture, arts, and sport for children and young people affected by poverty

Part 1: Cross-government update on six priority areas

Part 1 of the report is structured around the six priority areas identified in the Programme Plan. These priorities were selected for their potential to drive meaningful change for families and children experiencing poverty. Each section begins by describing the current context for each priority, and goes on to highlight significant developments since September 2024, drawn from feedback from 34 units across 12 government departments. Each section ends by offering a wider view of progress since the establishment of the Office in 2023.

Section 2.1 describes how recent budgets have placed a strong emphasis on targeted income supports to reduce child poverty. Weekly child support payments have increased significantly, alongside a €174 rise in Working Family Payment (WFP) thresholds and a 25.2% increase in the National Minimum Wage (NMW) since 2023. Efforts to address fuel poverty have become more focused, with enhanced weekly supports under the Fuel Allowance Payment (FAP) scheme and expanded eligibility, including to WFP recipients. Policy developments have also prioritised those furthest from the labour market, with new strategies such as SICAP 2024–2028, the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*, and the *Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2026–2030*. Improvements in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and expanded Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) supports for part-time students have supported lone parents' employment. Overall, the new 3% child poverty target provides a clear, ambitious direction for whole-of-government action.

Significant progress has been made in reducing education costs for families during the initial Programme Plan (section 2.2). Primary pupils now receive free hot meals and all primary and post-primary students benefit from free books. Support has also been extended beyond the school year through the Holiday Hunger Pilot introduced in summer 2025. Increased capitation funding has reduced pressure on schools to seek parental contributions. Alongside these measures, there has been a stronger focus on tackling educational disadvantage, reflected in the new DEIS Programme and the launch of DEIS Plus, which supports schools facing the highest levels of need.

During the Programme Plan, record investment in ELC has improved affordability, accessibility, and quality (section 2.3). Increased funding has reduced fees for parents and boosted enrolment, while capital investment and a new Supply Management Unit are helping to expand capacity. Workforce recruitment and retention remain a priority under *Nurturing Skills*. Changes to the National Childcare Scheme in Budget 2026 will support 27,000 additional children, with higher income thresholds and increased discounts benefiting lower-income families. Inclusion has also been strengthened through the expansion of AIM and Equal Start, with further progress to be guided by *Shaping Our Future: Early Years Action Plan*.

Family homelessness increased significantly during the Programme Plan, rising from 1,770 families with 3,699 children in May 2023 to 2,478 families with 5,188 children by the end of 2025 (section 2.4). In response, the Government has prioritised this issue through the *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025–2030* plan and more than doubled funding to €513 million in Budget 2026. Additional investment in homeless health services will support children in emergency accommodation. The Programme Office has worked closely with D/HLGH on the forthcoming *Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan* and will continue to support its implementation to address the needs of affected children and families.

Across 2023–2025, steady progress was made in strengthening coordination, expanding access, and embedding more integrated approaches (section 2.5). Local Area Child Poverty Action Plan pilots are demonstrating the value of coordinated, place-based delivery, alongside proven models such as the Area Based Childhood programme. Parenting and family supports have expanded significantly, including the National Home Visiting Programme, Parenting Support Advisors in all Tusla Network Areas, increased investment in Family Resource Centres, and the extension of Healthy Communities. These developments are supported by stronger data and evaluation, including service mapping, evidence-based programmes, and planned evaluations to inform national rollout.

Targeted measures have increased participation among children at risk of poverty in arts, culture, and sport, while reducing barriers to access (section 2.6). Initiatives such as Local Creative Youth Partnerships (LCYPs), the Creative Youth Nurture Fund, Your Place Your Space (UBU), and Community Sports and Physical Activity Hubs are increasingly focused on marginalised groups. DEIS schools also support participation through programmes like Cycle Right, BLAST, and the Active School Flag. There is growing emphasis on creating safe, family-oriented community spaces, with expanded UBU services, new sports hubs, and enhanced library access through My Open Library.

Additional investment in youth work and sport is supporting engagement and leadership opportunities for disadvantaged young people.

Alongside providing updates, departments were asked to identify the main challenges in achieving the goal of eliminating child poverty and supporting child wellbeing. Five consistent themes emerged over the Programme Plan period. These included the need to strengthen family support services, building on effective place-based approaches to ensure timely and accessible supports. The importance of targeted engagement with excluded groups was also highlighted, with a need for sustained investment to reach those with the greatest needs. Addressing complexity and improving coordination remains critical, with more integrated “no wrong door” approaches and better mapping of services required. Funding and resource constraints continue to limit long-term planning and service integration, with shared or pooled budgets identified as a potential solution. Finally, workforce shortages and retention challenges underline the need to invest in skills, development, and capacity to sustain high-quality services.

Part 2: Work of the Programme Office

The overall ambition of the Programme Office is to bring greater coherence and integration to government action aimed at addressing child poverty. The second part of the Progress Report summarises the work of the Programme Office from September 2024 to May 2026. This role is described over three sections which detail: the Office’s role as a system convenor, progress on strategic initiatives in the Programme Plan, and emerging insights from the forthcoming OECD review of the Office.

As a system convenor, the Programme Office has strengthened cross-government collaboration through several initiatives. The Cross-Government Network (CGN) supports stakeholders across the system, fostering innovation, shared purpose, and collective action, with eight meetings held since its establishment. This has been complemented by nine Action Learning Sets (ALS), which have helped evolve the CGN from a networking forum into a platform for collaborative problem-solving, with strengthened cross-sectoral engagement informing the next phase of work on complex poverty challenges. The Taoiseach hosted the second Child Poverty and Well-being Summit in September 2025, featuring a keynote address by Dr Michael Ryan and a strong focus on child participation. Supporting this, Youth Advisory Groups were established for the 2024 and 2025 Summits, enabling direct engagement with young people.

Five key strategic initiatives were progressed by the Programme Office over the lifetime of the Programme Plan to address barriers and drive more coordinated, targeted, and outcome-focused action to support children and families experiencing poverty. These initiatives strengthened the implementation of existing and emerging policies by enhancing service integration, cross-government collaboration, and the policy evidence base.

The Programme Office engaged extensively with Government departments ahead of the last three Budgets, publishing analyses of how allocations contribute to reducing child poverty, including a focus on enabling services and workforce investment. To contribute to the emergence of a culture and practice of service integration the Programme Office continued close engagement with D/CDE and the four Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans, and led the development of a self-assessment framework to support organisations in evaluating their progress towards more integrated service provision. Efforts to strengthen the policy evidence base included the development of a child poverty indicator dashboard to support the implementation of the new Child Poverty Target, testing practical tools through the CGN, and promoting Human Learning Systems approaches to support adaptability and learning. The Office also advanced cross-government engagement on children's services workforce planning. Finally, it worked closely with the Department of Housing to develop the forthcoming *Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan*, ensuring children's and families' voices remain central.

Impact of the Programme Office

As part of an OECD review of Centres of Government, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office was identified as an important and effective innovation in Ireland's approach to tackling child poverty. The OECD concluded that the Programme Office adds clear value by combining formal roles—such as monitoring progress and supporting policy development—with a strong informal function in brokering relationships, promoting coherence, and encouraging collaboration across government. Its role in enhancing the visibility and priority of child poverty, both within government and publicly, was particularly highlighted.

Three key achievements are emphasised in the forthcoming OECD report. First, the Office has strengthened the focus on child poverty within the national Budget process, leading to more coordinated investment and the publication of cross-government budget analyses. Second, it established the CGN and convened national Summits, significantly raising the profile of the issue and strengthening connections across sectors. Third, it has led important strategic initiatives, particularly in advancing service integration and shaping responses to family homelessness. Overall, the Programme Office has been effective as a coordination and facilitation hub, using its convening power and strategic positioning to align efforts and drive more coherent action across the system.

The OECD highlights that the Programme Office now needs to evolve from building visibility and momentum towards sharper prioritisation, stronger delivery focus, and more outcome-oriented coordination. Over time, its role could shift from central facilitation to embedding sustainable, system-wide capability, with a gradual reduction in its direct coordinating function.

Conclusions and next steps

This second progress update marks the conclusion of the Programme Office's first Programme Plan and reflects the Government's step change in ambition to both reduce child poverty and improve child well-being. Since its establishment in 2023, the Office has taken a focused, thematic approach, strengthening cross-government capacity to respond to a complex, systemic challenge. It has worked across existing policies and programmes to support what works, address gaps, and enable more coordinated action. Looking ahead, the next Programme Plan will build on these foundations, with a sharper focus on outcomes, prevention, and system capability—ensuring that the progress made translates into lasting improvements in children's lives.

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Acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
ALS	Action Learning Sets
AROPE	At Risk of Poverty or social Exclusion
ASF	Active School Flag
BLAST	Bringing Live Arts to Students & Teachers
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Teams
CFHAP	Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan
CGN	Cross-Government Network
CoG	Centres of Government
CPW	Child Poverty and Well-being
CPWPO	Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CSP	Community Service Programme
CSPA	Community Sports and Physical Activity Hubs
CYP	Creative Youth Plan
CYPSC	Children and Young People's Service Committee
D/CCS	Department of Culture, Communications and Sport
D/CDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
D/CEE	Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment
D/EY	Department of Education and Youth
D/ETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
D/FHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
D/Health	Department of Health
D/HLGH	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
D/JHAM	Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration
D/PER	Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation

D/RCDG	Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht
D/SP	Department of Social Protection
D/Transport	Department of Transport
D/Taoiseach	Department of the Taoiseach
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DRHE	Dublin Region Homeless Executive
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme
ECDW	Education Community Development Workers
ELC	Early Learning and Childcare
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
ETSS	Educational Therapy Support Service
EU	European Union
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
FAP	Fuel Allowance Payment
FET	Further Education and Training
FRC	Family Resource Centre
GP	General Practitioner
HE	Higher Education
HFSS	High Fat Salt and Sugar
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
IGEES	Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service
LCDC	Local Community Development Committee
LCYP	Local Creative Youth Partnerships
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Programme
MESL	Minimum Essential Standards of Living
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
NDP	National Development Plan
NGB	National Governing Body

NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHVP	National Home Visiting Programme
NMW	National Minimum Wage
NPO	National Participation Office
NTRIS II	National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy 2024 – 2028
NYCI	National Youth Council of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSO	Public Service Obligation
PQ	Parliamentary Question
RSI	Roadmap for Social Inclusion
RTR	Right to Read
SAC	School Age Childcare
SHC	Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme
SICAP	Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme
SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
SIT	Special Incentives for Travellers
SSNO	Scheme to Support National Organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector (SSNO)
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TRES	Traveller and Roma Education Strategy
TY	Transition Year
TYESI	Targeted Youth Employability Support Initiative
WFP	Working Family Payment
UBU	Your Space Your Place
YAG	Youth Advisory Group
YI	Young Ireland, the Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028
YTD	Year to date

1

Introduction



1 | Introduction

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office was established in the Department of the Taoiseach in 2023, to deepen the cross-government focus on, and accelerate the response to, child poverty and well-being.

The initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, *From Poverty to Potential* (July 2023-December 2025), identified six priorities which have the potential to bring about significant change for families and children living in poverty. These priority focus areas are:

- Income Support and Joblessness
- Early Learning and Childcare
- Reducing the Cost of Education
- Family Homelessness
- Consolidating and integrating family and parental support, health and well-being
- Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty.

The two main functions of the Programme Office are:

- 1 To monitor the delivery of policy commitments by departments and their agencies across the six key priority areas with a focus on some specific areas of action identified in the Programme Plan.
- 2 To undertake a small number of strategic initiatives which have the potential to increase the impact of current and emerging measures to fight child poverty and support child well-being.

As part of the Programme Plan, there is a commitment to producing regular progress reports that document progress made and highlight key priority areas for the coming period ahead. The first Progress Report of the Programme Office, published in February 2025, detailed progress made from May 2023 to August 2024. This second Progress Report completes the reporting cycle of the first Programme Plan and sets out progress achieved between September 2024 and December 2025. Where consistent with understanding emerging work and developments the report also captures updates from the first part of 2026.

The cross-government, multi-faceted response to child poverty and well-being is reflected throughout the report. As the first Programme Plan has now been completed, this second Progress Report serves as more than an update. The learning gained over the lifetime of the Programme Plan is encapsulated in the report, which also aims to be a resource for all those working to improve outcomes in children's lives.

This report begins by providing a context for and an update on cross-government developments in each of the six priority areas for the period from September 2024 to the end of 2025. At the end of each priority update, reflections are made on the overall progress achieved for the priority over the lifetime of the Programme Plan from 2023-2025. This update section concludes by drawing out some of the key challenges and lessons that colleagues across government have identified in delivering for children at risk of poverty over the full duration of the Programme Plan.

The report then goes on to consider the specific contribution of the Programme Office in Section Three. This section ends with a summary of the key findings of a forthcoming review of the work of the Programme Office by the OECD and considers what this learning could mean for the future. The report ends by drawing conclusions on how the Office has amplified the focus on child poverty and by identifying how its work needs to evolve and change for the next Programme Plan.

This report forms part of a wider objective to critically examine current approaches and to support the development of new and innovative responses to addressing child poverty and well-being. It aims to contribute to cross-government learning in a way that acknowledges the complexities and interdependencies inherent in tackling the cross-cutting nature of child poverty and well-being.

Methodological approach

Given the twin objectives of this report to capture updates as well as learning, the Programme Office developed a progress update template for all relevant government departments which was very specific about the areas of focus under the priorities but also encouraged a deeper level of feedback. The template was targeted at individual units rather than an overall department response in order to capture the heterogeneity of experiences of designing policy and services to respond to child poverty. For the initial progress report, the structure and questions for the template were developed following consultations and workshops with key stakeholders.

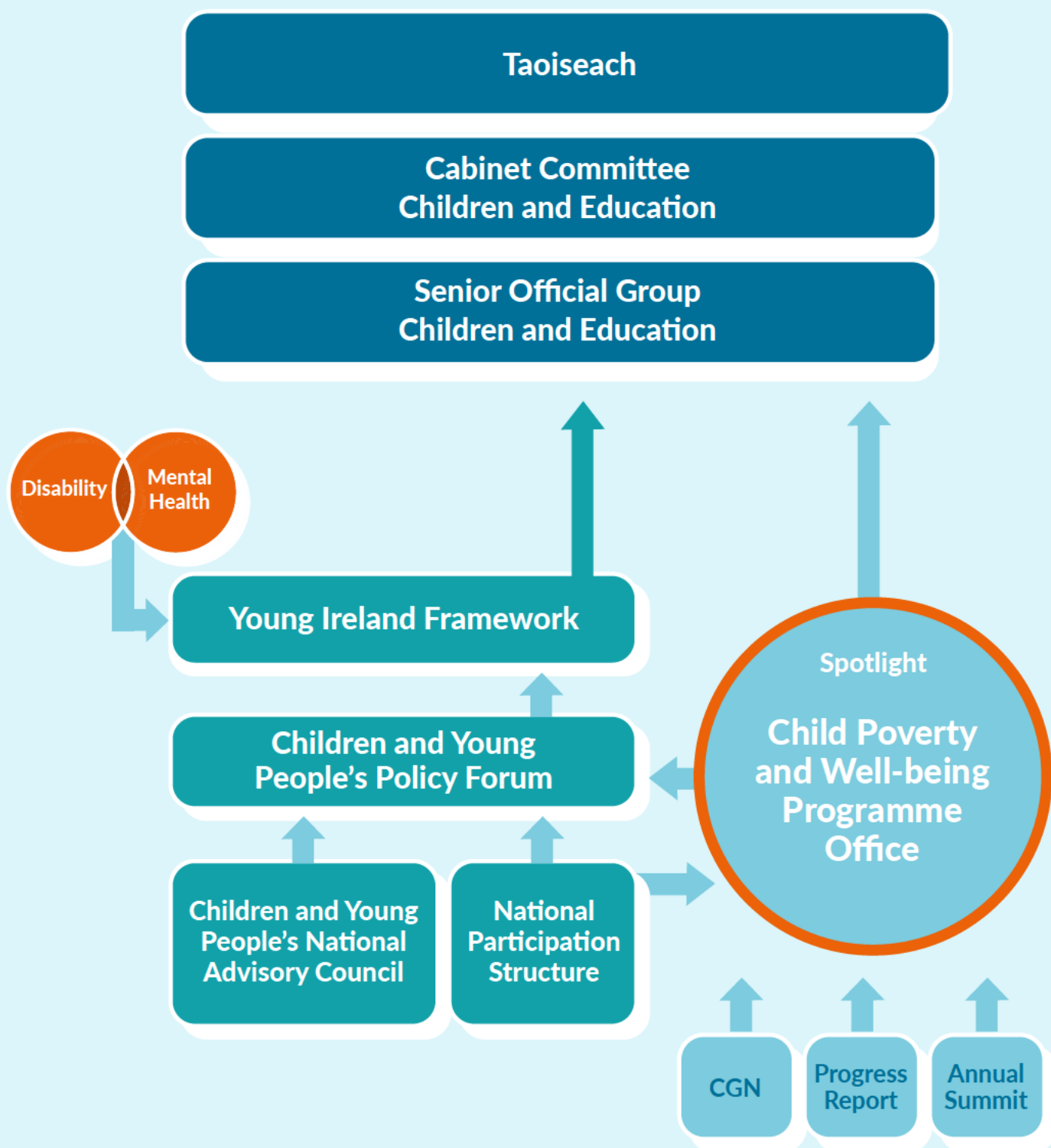
Learning from other cross-government reporting processes was encompassed and the template was designed to capture challenges, learning, and future orientations. For the second progress report it was updated to incorporate learning from the initial process. For this report, detailed feedback was received from 34 units across 12 government departments. The data for this report was collected at the beginning of 2026 and covers the period up to the end of the Programme Office's initial Programme Plan. Where necessary, to provide a coherent overall sense of progress, updates which have occurred since the end of 2025 are also incorporated.

1.1 Governance of the Programme Office

The Programme Office reports to Government through the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education, which is by a Senior Officials Group. The overall governance structure is illustrated in Figure 1. A core priority is ensuring accountability and responsiveness to children, which is supported through established participation structures under the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (D/CDE), and includes regularly engaging with young people and the development of child-friendly materials. The Office also engages closely with *Young Ireland: The Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028*, situating its work on child poverty within the wider national framework for improving outcomes for those aged 0–24.

This includes engagement with the Young Ireland governance structures including the Children and Young People's Advisory Council, which brings together community and voluntary representatives, academics, and experts to inform implementation. The Young Ireland framework placed particular emphasis on three initial "Spotlight" priorities—child poverty and wellbeing, child and youth mental health, and disability services—reflecting urgent, cross-government issues requiring targeted and coordinated action. The Programme Office works closely with the D/CDE to ensure integration and complementarity between the work of the Programme Office and the wider European ambitions in the EU Child Guarantee.

Figure 1: Overview of Programme Office and Young Ireland governance



Overview of the Work of the Programme Office May 2023 - December 2025

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND EVENTS



14

Government Departments engaged on how to address child poverty in the Budget

4

International Child and Well-being Office Engagements



5

Cross-Government Public Sector Delivery Group Meetings on Child and Family Homelessness



2

Cross Government Workshops on Child and Family Homelessness



3

Cross Sectoral Integrated Services Workshops

1

British Irish Council Meeting



7

Interdepartmental Groups



149

external events attended



90+

NGO Engagements



CROSS GOVERNMENT NETWORK (CGN)

6 Child Poverty and Well-being Network Meetings

360 Attendees at CGN meetings



56 Organisations Represented



9 Action Learning Sets Established



CHILD POVERTY AND WELL-BEING SUMMITS

2 Summits



262 Participants at Summit 2024 including online



88 Organisations represented at Summit 2024 including online



331 Participants at Summit 2025



97 Organisations represented at Summit 2025



ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

2

Meetings between the Youth Advisory Group (YAG) and the Taoiseach

3

Original Music Compositions by young people in collaboration with Music Generation for the two Summits



3

Children and Young People's Art Exhibitions



2

Child Poverty and Well-being YAGs



2

UNICEF Children Take Over Day

2



YAG Videos

10

Child friendly versions of key documents

Engagement and Consultation with Focus Ireland Children's Panels for Child and Family Homelessness

GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNICATIONS

10

Cabinet Committee Meetings

63

PQ Answers and Contributions



132

Representations Answered



10

Senior Officials Group Meetings

24

Briefings for the Taoiseach



34

Presentations given



21

Speeches drafted for the Taoiseach



REPORTING AND MONITORING

1



Work Plan developed

3



Budget Reports

2



Summit Reports

2



Participation Reports

1



Set of Child Poverty Target Indicators

2



Cross-government update on six priority areas

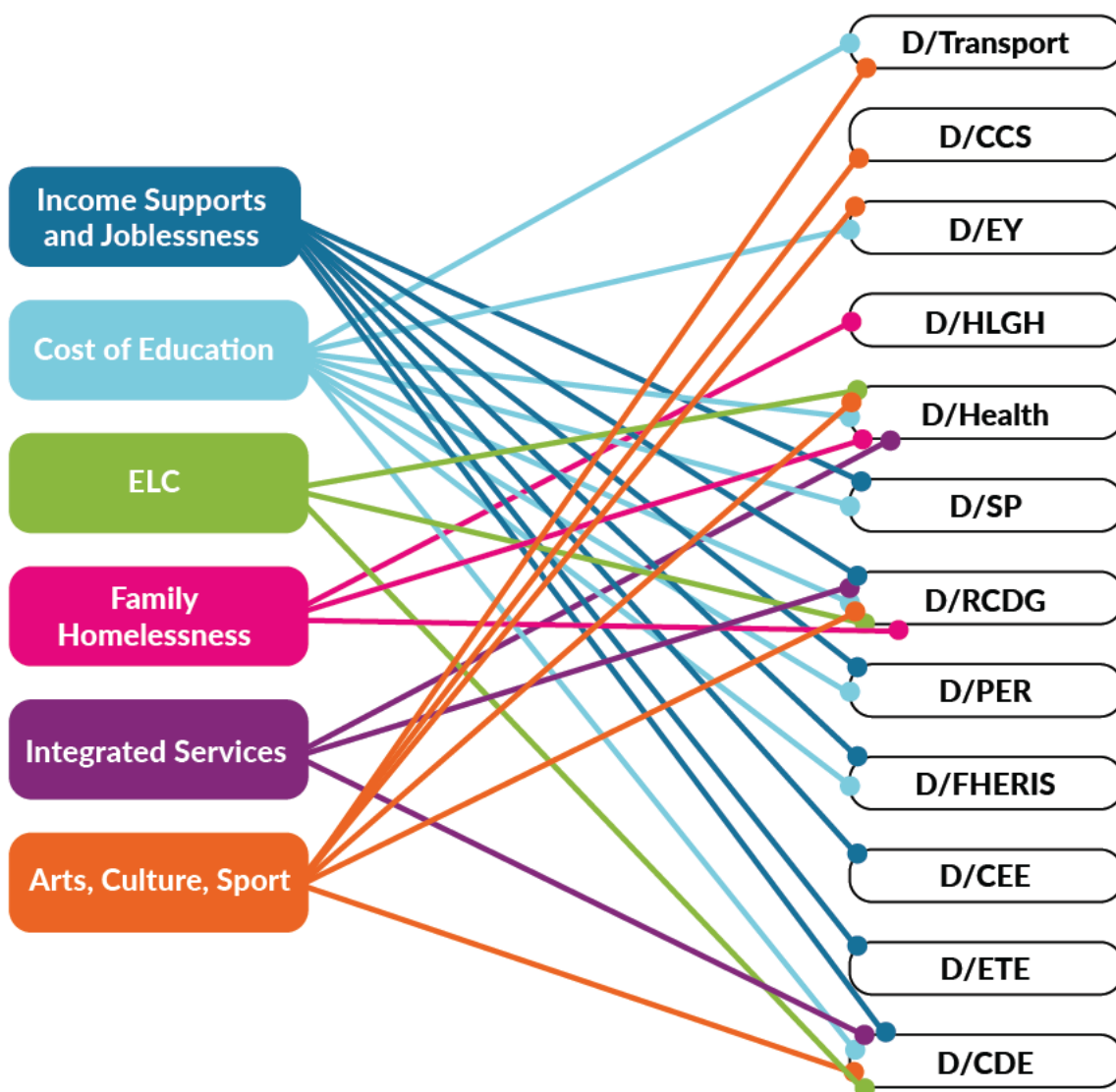


2 | Cross-government update on six priority areas

This part of the report is divided into the six priority areas identified in the Programme Plan. Each section commences with a short description of the current context for each priority which is followed by a review of key developments since the previous Progress Report (September 2024 to December 2025). As Figure 2 demonstrates, this update is informed by feedback from 34 distinct units across 12 government departments, with the majority of departments contributing to multiple priority areas.

Overall progress throughout the lifetime of the Programme Plan is presented at the end of each section. This part of the Progress Update concludes by highlighting key cross-cutting challenges and lessons identified by government colleagues, in delivering for children at risk of poverty.

Figure 2: Contribution of Government Departments to Progress Report



The purpose of this update is to capture and understand key developments and to take stock of progress in order to support learning and reflection in relation to possible future directions. As such, it is not intended to capture the full breadth of all relevant policy and services but rather seeks to reflect on what has changed and to be a resource in considering what needs to change, evolve and develop.

2.1 Income Support and Joblessness



Children are the age group most likely to experience poverty in Ireland, with an at-risk-of-poverty¹ rate of 16.9% in 2025, compared to 12.6% for the population as a whole. This means approximately 208,000 children live in households at-risk-of-poverty. There has been some volatility in child poverty figures in recent years, with an increase in consistent poverty from 2023 to 2024². However, the rate fell from 8.4% of children in 2024 to 7.5% in 2025. The child deprivation rate also fell between 2024 and 2025, from 21.2% to 19.6%. However, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children increased slightly (from 15.3% to 16.9%).³

Child poverty is not evenly distributed across the population and impacts some family types more strongly. For example, lone parent households continue to have higher consistent poverty than other households with children, at 13.4% in 2025, although their at-risk-of-poverty rate fell compared to 2024. Households who rent their home, households headed by a person with a disability or an unemployed person, and migrant and ethnic minority households also have higher rates of poverty, negatively impacting the children growing up in these households.

The Youth Advisory Group established for the Child Poverty and Well-being Summit in 2025 recognised how poverty affects some family types more than others. In particular, they called for 'more financial support for single income parents to support them with the cost of groceries and everyday expenses', and 'balancing out welfare between everyone e.g. asylum seekers, Ukrainians and Irish'.

2.1.1 Progress Update

The initial Programme Plan prioritised and monitored cross government actions to financially support low-income families, and support parents to access family-friendly employment, including through employment and training. Focus was placed on households at greatest risk of poverty and deprivation including lone parent families and Traveller families and families who need specific recognition to enable them to benefit from the full range of available supports.

Ten progress reports were received on this topic from a total of seven departments including, Department of Children, Disability and Equality, Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Department of Social Protection.

In 2025, the Minister for Social Protection and the Taoiseach launched an ambitious new Child Poverty Target set to 3% or less, reflecting a reduction of 5.5% from the current consistent child poverty rate, to be achieved by the end of 2030. Collated by the Programme Office, a Dashboard of Indicators which allows for a more holistic view of child poverty will be used alongside the new target.

The impact of Budget 2025's permanent income support measures for families with children was built on in Budget 2026, which focused on targeted measures and saw the largest ever increase in child targeted payments. The Working Family Payment threshold increased by €60 per week and recipients became eligible for the Fuel Allowance Payment (FAP). FAP was increased by €5 to €38 per week and will provide an additional €140 to over 460,000 recipients, including those in receipt of the Working Family Payment (WFP).

Other measures which benefit families with children living at-risk-of-poverty were the extension of the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to 2 and 3-year-olds and a 100% Christmas bonus for recipients of core social welfare schemes in December 2025.

1 A household or individual is defined as at risk of poverty if its income is less than 60% of the median disposable income.

2 Consistent poverty occurs where a household or individual has income less than 60% of median disposable income, and also enforced deprivation, meaning that they go without at least 2 out of 11 basic items because they could not afford them.

3. The figures in this section are drawn from the HYPERLINK "<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2025/poverty/>" Survey on Income and Living Conditions, 2025. See Table 5.1

The National Minimum Wage (NMW) increased above forecasted inflation and wage growth from €13.50 per hour in January 2025 to €14.15 in January 2026 resulting in a gross weekly increase of €26 for a minimum wage worker who works 40 hours a week.

More broadly, the key metric in protecting individuals from poverty is employment. Labour market participation for families who experience poverty and deprivation are aided by other programmes. The Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) supports target groups, including one parent families, long-term unemployed and educationally disadvantaged people, to improve their employability and labour market prospects. In 2025, SICAP supported almost 5,000 people from the target groups to progress into either employment or self-employment. In December 2025, D/RCDG announced increased Community Services Programme (CSP) which supports over 430 community-based organisations with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged in communities. In Budget 2026, the CSP allocation was increased by €4m, bringing the total allocation to €59.4m in 2026. Nine new additional organisations will join the CSP in 2026 and a two-year contract extension was granted to 11 currently-funded organisations that previously had a 31 December 2025 contract end date. Furthermore, an Open Call for Applications to join the CSP will be launched in 2026. These measures will result in both increased employment opportunities for those most distant from the labour market and provide services driven by local needs which often support marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities.

New measures under the *National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy 2024–2028 (NTRIS II)* include the expansion of the Civil Service Traveller and Roma Placement Programme, increasing places and introducing a structured pathway to permanent civil service roles. Employment supports are further strengthened through the expansion of the Special Initiative for Travellers (SIT) to fourteen locations, its extension to Roma participants, and the appointment of a national coordinator. In addition, continued Dormant Account funding for the Traveller Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme is supporting greater participation in apprenticeships through bursaries for Travellers and their employers.

Key to underpinning the success of all labour market measures is access to affordable, quality Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) facilitated by the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), which provides subsidies to meet the cost of early learning and childcare, and Equal Start, which aims to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in ELC. These measures are discussed in the Early Learning and Childcare section of this report.

While the main progress under this focus area is outlined above, there are other measures of significance. These include:

- Provision by D/FHERIS in 2025 of new courses and expanded capacity on courses for hard to reach/distant cohorts, focussed in particular on construction work and leading to higher employment outcomes.
- In 2025, D/FHERIS spent over €57 million on Further Education and Training (FET) training allowances to support the engagement and success of eligible learners who face financial barriers in FET. Learners who are in receipt of social welfare payments may transfer to a FET training allowance when participating in certain full-time FET programmes.
- Government made a number of important commitments in respect of addressing the high cost of energy. Measures included:
 - The Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Scheme IV ('Scheme IV') and the Submeter Support Scheme were introduced in November 2024 to provide €250 in on-bill support to nearly 2.3 million households at a cost of €488 million (ex. VAT).
 - Budget 2026 extended the 9% VAT rate applied to electricity and gas to the end of 2030.
 - Establishment of the National Energy Affordability Taskforce to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses.

Income Support and Joblessness: Overview of key developments 2023-2025

Recent budgets have prioritised targeted income support measures. Weekly Child Support Payment rates have increased by €16 for children under 12 and by €28 for those aged 12 and over. In addition, WFP income thresholds have risen by €174 per week, further strengthening support for low-income working families. The NMW increased by €2.85 per hour since 2023 or €114 per 40 hour week, representing a total increase of roughly 25.2%. Efforts to tackle fuel poverty have also become more targeted. With a shift away from once-off lump sum payments towards enhancing the existing FAP Scheme. This has included a €5 increase in the weekly payment, an extension of the eligibility season, and an expansion of the scheme to include recipients of the WFP.

Enhancing supports for those most distant from the labour market has been a priority focus and is reflected in the development of the new *SICAP (2024-2028)*, the *NTRIS II* and the new *Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2026-2030*. Lone parents' employability has benefitted from the ELC improvements and changes to the SUSI supports being made available to part-time students. The publication of the ambitious new 3% child poverty target provides a clear overarching aim and strategic focus for the whole-of-government approach to tackling child poverty.



Kids' Own Publishing Partnership

2.2 The Cost of Education

ESRI research has found that the relationship between childhood poverty and the risk of poverty later in life is strongly linked to lower educational attainment.⁴ Support with the cost of education can help children in low-income households to stay in school and so help to reduce the probability of poverty in later life. Between 2024 and 2025, the costs of participating in primary and secondary education fell, particularly for those at secondary level. The Vincentian Partnership MESL data shows that average educational costs for primary school children in urban areas decreased from €8.40 to €7.71 per week between 2024 and 2025, and for secondary school pupils from €18.83 to €8.22. In rural areas, these costs decreased from €8.33 to €7.71 for primary school children, and from €19.02 to €8.22 for secondary school pupils.⁵ These reductions can be linked to the introduction of free schoolbooks at secondary level, and other measures, as will be outlined below. Young people are very cognisant of the costs of participating in education, with those taking part in the Youth Advisory Group pointing to the cost of items such as school uniforms, study sessions and Transition Year.

2.2.1 Progress Update

Programme Plan actions and monitoring in this area concentrated on implementation of the range of government commitments aimed at reducing the cost of education and tackling educational disadvantage.

11 progress reports were received on this topic from eight departments including Department of Children, Disability and Equality, Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Department of Health, Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Department of Transport, and Department of Social Protection

Progress continues to be made in reducing the cost of education for families in this reporting period. Budget 2025 expanded the eligibility of the Hot School Meals to all 3,200 primary schools from September 2025. Budget 2026 allocated €286m for the School Meals Programme, supporting 682,000 children. Provision was also made for the introduction of a Summer Programme which focused on a Holiday Hunger Pilot in Summer 2025, which supported approximately 42,000 pupils at a cost of €1.3m.

Funding was provided to recruit a dietitian to the D/Health to conduct a review of the Nutrition Standards for the Hot School Meals Programme. The Nutrition Standards have been updated to remove foods that are high in Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) and were published in early 2026.

A working group has been established to review the D/EY circular providing guidance to schools on reducing financial pressures associated with the cost of education with the aim of putting greater emphasis on reducing costs for parents in ways such as using school uniform items which are generic and affordable.

The Free Schoolbooks Scheme was extended to Senior Cycle students in post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme for the 2025/2026 school year, helping to significantly reduce the cost of education for these families. From September 2025, all children and young people enrolled in primary, special and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme were provided with schoolbooks and core classroom resources. With a total funding package of over €170 million available in 2025, the Free Schoolbooks Scheme benefits almost one million children and young people and is particularly important for those families who struggle with the costs associated with education.

Work is continuing to maximise the availability of places in Transition Year programmes and in the current school year, the Transition Year grant paid to schools for each student was restored to €100.

The cost of education has been further reduced for families of young children commuting to school via Public Service Obligation (PSO) public transport. The Children's 5-8 TFI Leap Card was introduced in September 2025, allowing free travel for children under 9 years of age on PSO public transport.

Measures have also been introduced in the past year to increase access to Further and Higher Education. In Budget 2025, funding was allocated to increase income thresholds in the SUSI grant scheme and the student Part-Time Fee Scheme enabling higher rates of support. In Budget 2026, provision was made to increase non-adjacent maintenance rates, supporting those living further from their education institution, who may incur higher costs for transport and accommodation to access education.

Government is also committed to breaking down cost barriers to Further Education and Training (FET). Courses are either free or heavily subsidised and as already highlighted D/FHERIS spent over €57 million on FET training allowances to reduce financial barriers.

⁴ See the ESRI report on Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland

⁵ See the MESL Budget reports for 2024 and 2025.

The Targeted Youth Employability Support Initiative (TYESI), delivered by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), is a youth work programme that engages and supports harder to reach young people aged 15 to 24 years who are not currently in employment, education, or training. Between mid-2024 and December 2025, 18 TYESIs were established across the country.

In addition to reducing the cost of education for families, tackling educational disadvantage is also critical for children living in poverty. Budget 2026 provided significant investment to tackle educational disadvantage with the introduction of the DEIS Plus Scheme. Budget 2026 allocated an additional €16 million in 2026 (with full year costs of €48 million) to introduce the DEIS Plus Scheme and support the implementation of the new *DEIS Strategy to 2035*. This is the single biggest full year investment in tackling educational disadvantage since the DEIS Programme was established. The DEIS Plus Scheme supports schools with the highest level of educational disadvantage to improve educational outcomes. In addition, over 930 DEIS Gaeltacht scholarships were funded by D/RCDG in 2025 to create opportunities for DEIS second-level students to attend a recognised Gaeltacht summer course.

The Traveller and Roma Education Community Development Worker (ECDW) project 2024 evaluation showed improved outcomes, including participation and retention, with the employment of Travellers as ECDWs and involvement of Traveller organisations cited as critical success factors. However, the design, structure and delivery of the scheme did not lend itself to the participation of Roma children and young people and their families/guardians. Under the first two-year implementation plan of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-2030, two national TRES co-ordinators were appointed to support the implementation of actions within the strategy. There were also 15 community link worker positions established to support Traveller and Roma children and young people and those most at risk of educational disadvantage.

The Cost of Education: Overview of key developments 2023-2025

Significant progress has been made in reducing the cost of education for families and children over the course of the initial Programme Plan. The expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme and the introduction of Free Schoolbook Schemes mean that primary school children now have access to free hot meals, while, for the first time, all primary and post-primary students are provided with free schoolbooks. Support for children experiencing poverty is also extending beyond the school term, with the introduction of the Holiday Hunger Pilot in Summer 2025.

Over the last three Budgets, mainstream capitation rates have also increased by almost 50% in primary schools and almost 29% in post-primary schools. This helps reduce the need for schools to seek voluntary contributions from parents. Alongside cost-related measures a deeper recognition of the critical importance of tackling educational disadvantage has grown, reflected by the investment in DEIS Plus to support schools experiencing the highest levels of intergenerational disadvantage. The strategy sets out how more innovative approaches to tackling educational disadvantage and working towards a more flexible system of supports can ensure that schools receive the right support at the right time.

2.3 Early Learning and Childcare

Participation in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) is of particular benefit to children at risk of poverty, as it can help break cycles of intergenerational exclusion and deprivation. ELC allows parents to take part in training and employment while promoting children's overall well-being and providing opportunities for play and interaction with peers.⁶

In 2025, 3.6% of children aged 3-5 and at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion were in ELC between 1 and 25 hours per week, compared to 30.8% of their peers who do not face this risk. Unfortunately, the relative gap in participation has increased since 2021.⁷

However, the National Childcare Scheme has been successful in reducing the cost of childcare, both for average income and low-income households. For example, in 2018, prior to the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme in 2019, lone parents on low income (67% of the average wage) paid on average 23% of their net income for full time ELC, compared to the EU median of 6%. By 2025, ELC costs in Ireland had fallen to 13% for lone parents on low income, compared to the EU median of 4%.⁸

The Youth Advisory Group nonetheless pointed to high childcare costs in Ireland, as well as difficulties accessing available childcare.

2.3.1 Progress Update

The Programme Office monitored progress and actions in this area under the ambitious ELC programme, which seeks to ensure that families and children living in poverty have the opportunity to realise the full potential of ELC. This includes a focus on high-quality affordable ELC accessible to all children, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds.

Four progress reports were received on this topic from three Departments including Department of Children, Disability and Equality; Department of Health; and Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

Investment in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Aged Childcare (SAC) is at unprecedented levels. Budget 2026 allocated €1.5 billion, representing an additional investment of 38% compared with 2024, to improve affordability for parents, facilitate capacity growth, and ensure additional supports for children and families who are experiencing disadvantages.

From September 2025, the highest possible fees are no more than €295 per week (pre parental subsidies) for a typical full day place (40-50 hours). Fees as a proportion of family income have been brought closer to the EU average since 2018 for both average-income and low-income families, particularly for lone parents.

ELC capacity is increasing. Data from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile shows that the estimated number of enrolments increased by approximately 25% between 2022 and 2025. However, demand for ELC places still exceeds supply in some areas, particularly for younger children. As part of the *National Development Plan*, €197 million has been made available for capital investment in ELC for the period 2026-2030. This includes capital investment to build or purchase state-owned ELC facilities, investment in the expansion of existing ELC services via the Building Blocks Scheme, as well as a number of quality initiatives including supports to childminders. The primary focus of this investment is to deliver up to 1,800 additional places, focusing on the 1-3 year old, pre-ECCE, age range in community-led services.

The *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan*, published in December 2025, sets out a phased reform programme. Phase 1 actions in 2026 focus on rapid improvements in affordability, accessibility and quality for the sector. A public consultation in 2026 will inform Phase 2 actions for 2027-2029.

Equal Start, launched in September 2024, supports access and participation in ELC for children experiencing disadvantage. Achievements over the period include:

- Additional supports to 804 settings, benefitting 35,000 children, including 4,700 from priority cohorts.
- A 10% capitation increase for services receiving *Equal Start* Staffing Supports from October 2025.
- Introduction of 'Bia Blasta', a pre-school Nutrition Programme.
- Rollout of the Traveller Parenting Support Programme in 17 Tusla areas.
- Appointment of Traveller and Roma Advisory Specialists in Better Start to promote inclusive ELC and SAC.
- Roll-out of Early Talk Boost to address language delay.
- Guidance and supports to ELC services to participate in inter-agency cooperation.

6 See for example https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BP202403_0.pdf and <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/JA202246.pdf>

7 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_caindform25_custom_21525458/default/table

8 Material provided to the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality

Planned actions for 2026 include reviewing the Inclusion Co-ordinator role and updating the Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years (LINC) programme; reviewing and updating the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines and associated training; and developing a new Family and Community Partnership Coordinator role, along with its training. The D/CDE is assessing options to extend the Access and Inclusion Model to children under three. The independent review of the ECCE Programme (published October 2024) will inform plans to place the ECCE Programme on a statutory footing, guaranteeing a right of access to all eligible children.

A dietitian has been recruited to support implementation of Nutrition Standards for ELC. Implementation is funding dependent and is managed by D/CDE.

Through SICAP, 19 social enterprises working in early learning and childcare were supported in 2025 (4% of all supported social enterprises). The CSP supported 23 ELC services in 2024, with 22 continuing into 2026. Funding to these 22 services amounts to €3.4 million in 2026 and they will remain in contract until the end of 2027. Local partnerships continue to play a key role in supporting disadvantaged children and families through community childcare services, schools, and interagency collaboration.

Early Learning and Childcare: Overview of key developments 2023-2025

During the lifetime of the Programme Plan, the Government's commitment to ensuring affordability, accessibility and quality in the ELC sector has been demonstrated through record levels of investment. An almost €0.5 billion increase in funding has led to significantly reduced fees for parents and higher enrolment levels. Substantial capital investment under the *National Development Plan* (NDP), alongside the establishment of a Supply Management Unit within D/CDE, is placing a focus on expanding capacity. At the same time, the recruitment and retention of a high-quality workforce remain a key capacity-building priority under *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (SAC). Changes to the income-assessed National Childcare Scheme (NCS) subsidies, introduced in Budget 2026, will support an additional 27,000 children to take part in the NCS in 2026.

These changes include increases to the lower income threshold from €26,000 to €34,000 and the upper threshold from €60,000 to €68,000. The multiple child discount is also to be increased for families with two or more children under the age of 15. These measures will reduce the costs of childcare for lower income families. Promoting inclusion and participation has been a key priority. The expansion of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), together with the launch and scaling of Equal Start, is supporting greater access to ELC for children experiencing disadvantage and those with disabilities. Looking ahead, *Shaping Our Future: Early Years Action Plan* is building on this progress and driving further improvement, with the forthcoming consultation on Phase Two set to guide the next stage of development.

2.4 Family Homelessness



Housing difficulties in Ireland have a negative impact on children, and the number of children in emergency homelessness accommodation in Ireland increased again in 2025, from 4,603 in January 2025, to 5,571 in March 2026.⁹

In addition, those who rent their home are at higher risk of poverty, with 12.2% of such households at-risk-of-poverty in 2025, compared to 1.4% of households living in owner occupied accommodation.¹⁰ Focusing particularly on children, 31 per cent of children in rented households in Ireland experienced material deprivation in 2024, compared to 3.7% of children in owner-occupied households.¹¹ These figures indicate the impact of increasing housing costs on families with children, particularly those in rented accommodation.

The Youth Advisory Group pointed to a range of difficulties related to housing. These included high costs and a shortage of housing both for rent and purchase, as well as instability in the private rental market. They were also concerned about poor quality rental properties, and difficulties accessing social housing.

2.4.1 Progress Update

The Programme Office monitored cross government progress and aimed to enhance actions to prevent and reduce the impact of the experience of homelessness on children and families.

Four progress reports were received on this topic from three departments including Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Department of Health, and Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

The Government is prioritising increased housing supply to address homelessness, with record investment levels. Nearly €6.8 billion was allocated to housing in 2025, including an extra €50 million for acquisitions to help larger families and Housing First clients exit long-term emergency accommodation. Funding will increase further in 2026, with over €9 billion in capital investment.

A new integrated housing and homelessness action plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*, published in November 2025, focuses on delivering 300,000 new homes and supporting people to secure their own homes. It recognises homelessness is the single most pressing social issue that we face and introduces targeted actions to address it.

Key measures include the development of a *National Homelessness Prevention Framework* by 2026, and a *Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan* aimed at preventing family homelessness, improving supports for affected children, and reducing time spent in emergency accommodation. Additionally, €150 million in ring-fenced capital funding for 2026 will support local authorities to acquire homes for families experiencing long-term homelessness and for Housing First for individuals with complex needs.

There continues to be progress in preventing people from entering homelessness. In 2025 a total of 1584 families were prevented from entering emergency accommodation and 1129 were supported to exit emergency accommodation.

For children and families experiencing homelessness, family support is critical. Family support is provided by a range of statutory services including D/HLGH, D/CDE, Tusla, the HSE, and D/EY, as well as non-statutory providers. Supports include

- Families First which supports children and families living in homeless services by addressing relational, mental health, addiction, and trauma-related needs through family-focused interventions. Delivered by the HSE, DRHE and NGO partners, it provides wraparound, family-centred support to promote stability and long-term housing outcomes. The service is currently expanding.
- Four families have been housed through the Housing-Led Family Support Scheme pilot which provides wraparound supports. This D/HLGH initiative commenced in Galway in 2024 and will be evaluated in 2026.
- The HSE are developing Infant Feeding Guidelines and Nutrition Standards for Homeless Centres and International Protection Accommodation Services to support families with healthy eating.

⁹ See <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/collections/homelessness-data/#homelessness-data> - reports for January 2025 and March 2026

¹⁰ See SILC 2025, Table 5.1

¹¹ See SILC Module on Child Deprivation 2024, Figure 4.3

SICAP provides funding for local services for people experiencing homelessness. In 2025, 6,660 individuals—20% of the total caseload—reported experiencing homelessness or housing exclusion.

In 2025, thirty community organisations with a focus on homelessness were supported and seven community events focused on homelessness were held and attended by 706 people.

Family Homelessness: Overview of key developments 2023 - 2025

Over the course of the Programme Plan, family homelessness increased significantly, rising from 1,770 families and 3,699 dependent children in May 2023 to 2,478 families and 5,188 dependent children by the end of 2025. The Government's recognition of the urgency and scale of this issue is reflected in the publication of the integrated housing and homelessness action plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025–2030*. Funding in this area has more than doubled over the last three budgets from €242 million to €513 million in Budget 2026.

Budget 2026 also allocated an additional €1.53 million to homeless health services, and these services will support children as well as others who are in emergency homeless accommodation. Given the serious implications for child wellbeing, and as part of the development of the *National Homelessness Prevention Framework*, the Programme Office worked closely with the D/HLGH engaging across government to develop the forthcoming *Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan*. The Programme Office will continue to support D/HLGH in overseeing the implementation of this Action Plan, with the aim of realising the Government's ambition to end family homelessness and ensuring that the needs of children experiencing homelessness are effectively addressed.



Jackie Austin, Director of Public Health Nursing, HSE speaking at the 3rd CGN meeting

2.5 Consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services



Research has shown that well integrated services for children can help increase their quality of life, provide better experience of services for their families, and reduce wider service use, for example health services where a child has a chronic disease.¹² This is particularly the case for children who are vulnerable, and/or in low-income families. Service integration and accessibility can be improved through better referral pathways, co-location, outreach to disadvantaged groups, collaborative delivery of key supports, and/or enhanced interagency cooperation in funding, data, administration, and governance.

It is difficult to measure the experience of service integration for families, but waiting times and waiting lists for services may be useful proxies. For example, 23% of open Tusla cases were awaiting the allocation of a social worker in December 2025, a small improvement on 2024.¹³ In the same month, 86.6% of babies in the year to date (YTD) had had their Public Health Nurse child assessment¹⁴ by the age of 12 months, down slightly from 88% in December 2024. In terms of mental health, by December 2025, 69% of accepted referrals /re-referrals to CAMHS in the YTD had been offered their first appointment, and seen, within 12 weeks.¹⁵ This is an increase from 62% for the same figure in 2024.¹⁶

The Youth Advisory Group raised concerns about access to special education services, as well as to mental health supports and disability services. They also sought greater use of digital and other tools to speed up assessments and so shorten waiting times to access services.

2.5.1 Progress Update

Enhancing service integration is a key priority area for monitoring, as well as one of the Programme Office's strategic initiatives. Seven progress reports were received on this area from three departments including Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Department of Health, and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.

D/CDE and D/RCDG are jointly conducting the Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans pilot programme in cooperation with the Department of the Taoiseach.

The objective of these pilot plans is to test better service integration approaches and improve access to available services for disadvantaged children, young people and their families. An update on this work is outlined at the end of the section.

Supporting the development of a dedicated child health workforce remains vital for delivering services to children and families experiencing poverty, as recognised in the *First 5: Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019–2028)*. A Dedicated Child Health Workforce Steering Group was established within the D/Health with a Project Officer appointed in 2025. The Steering Group has reviewed existing practices in Ireland and developed recommendations for progression which have been submitted to the M/Health and the M/CDE. Public Health Nursing roles dedicated to the 0–5 age group are currently being examined through an independent research evaluation of existing models of public health nursing in Ireland, as part of the development of a *Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix in Community Care Settings*. An Expert Oversight Group is guiding this work.

Home visiting forms an important component of both the dedicated child health workforce and the wider child workforce. The *Tusla National Home Visiting Programme* is responsible for the development and expansion of evidence based early childhood Home Visiting Programmes in areas of disadvantage through the administration of €10 million from the Children's Fund from 2024 to 2028. During the 2024–2025 period, 13 home visiting services were established or expanded, significantly improving access to home visiting supports.

Family Support Workers and Home School Community Liaison teachers also utilise home-visiting as a mechanism to offer individualised parenting support. Measures under *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* continue to increase accessibility to, and awareness of parenting and family support services.

¹² See Satherley, R.M., Lingam, R., Green, J. et al. (2021) 'Integrated health services for children: A qualitative study of family perspectives', BMC Health Services Research, 21 (167). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-021-06141-9>

¹³ See Tusla Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report, December 2025, slide 3, and Tusla's Annual Review on the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services Available 2023.

¹⁴ The indicator in full is the percentage of children reaching 12 months within the reporting period who have had their 9-11 month PHN child health and development assessment on time or before reaching 12 months of age.

¹⁵ See HSE NPR Management Data Report, December 2025, p.63

¹⁶ HSE National Performance Report – December 2024 Reporting Period

Ongoing implementation for 2025/26 includes:

- Roll out the 2025/26 Parent Peer Support Fund to assist local organisations setting up or expanding peer support activities for parents.
- Roll-out of pilot Community Based Parenting Hubs and dedicated Parenting Support Advisors in all 30 Tusla Network areas.
- Finalising the best practice guidelines for consulting with parents.
- Mapping of parenting support services by Tusla and D/CDE to enable better access for parents and practitioners to services available in their areas.

Expanding provision of statutory and non-statutory family support services plays a critical role in supporting children and their families who are experiencing poverty. Additional funding was secured in Budget 2026 for expansion of the Family Resource Centre (FRC) Programme, increasing membership by ten to 136. FRCs play a critical role in prevention and early intervention. Counselling, pre-school and after-school activities and community-based initiatives across the whole life cycle are provided at low or no-cost to service users. Budget 2026 increased core funding from €160,000 to €180,000. Approximately 100 services will benefit. In 2025, an additional €1.5 million was secured for the mainstreaming of counselling, psychotherapy and therapeutic services to children and young people to reduce waiting lists for community-based counselling services. This was previously funded as a pilot under Dormant Accounts and is in addition to the yearly Family Support Services Counselling funding, also administered by Tusla.

A number of important initiatives have emerged to support Inclusion Health strategies. The Lynn Clinic delivers inclusive, consultant led healthcare to children who are homeless, refugees, international protection applicants, or ethnic minorities facing barriers to care. Based in Summerhill in Dublin's North East Inner City, it operates an enhanced community care model that integrates paediatric services with primary care supports and Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs). In Budget 2025, the *Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme* (SHC) was extended to include an extra four disadvantaged areas. D/Health reported a notable increase in 2025 in both the number of programmes delivered and number of participants engaging in the parenting programmes run through the 23 SHC areas. This was aided by the five new evidence-based programmes which were added to the SHC parenting suite in late 2024.

The *Scheme to Support National Organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector (SSNO)* received funding of just over €24 million towards the operational costs of national community and voluntary organisations. SSNO funded organisations provide support to those most disadvantaged and deliver services and supports that focus on addressing poverty and social exclusion and promoting equality.

Other important progress includes:

- A national policy on the rights of children living in informal kinship care will be developed. Results from consultations in 2025 and 2026 with children and young people and with parents with experience of informal kinship care arrangements will form the basis for a public consultation for this policy.
- The five-year, cross government mental health promotion strategy, *Pathways to Wellbeing*, launched in December 2024 and includes actions to strengthen mental health and wellbeing during critical developmental stages from pregnancy and infancy through to childhood and adolescence. Particular emphasis is placed on equity, ensuring targeted support for children and families facing adversity or experiencing poorer mental health outcomes. In 2025 a Policy Lead for Mental Health Promotion was appointed within D/Health. *Pathways to Wellbeing: Phase 1 Implementation Plan (2026-2027)* is scheduled for publication in Q2 2026.
- Funding for period poverty mitigation measures was increased to €914,000 in Budgets 2024 and 2025. The HSE programme focusses on period dignity supports for Travellers and Roma in particular.

Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans

1 Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown and Wicklow Children and Young People's Service Committees and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown and Wicklow Local Community and Development Committee €100,000.

AIM: to improve service coordination and family support focused on early childhood (pregnancy to age 4) through addressing systemic and intergenerational factors contributing to child poverty.

2 Kildare Children and Young People's Service Committees and Kildare Local Community and Development Committee €100,000.

AIM: to improve access to services for disadvantaged families with neurodivergent children by piloting community-based occupational therapy in Family Resource Centres and the Plural Practice Model, alongside flexible referral criteria and support and skills building for professionals, parents, and children.

3 Monaghan Children and Young People's Service Committees and Monaghan Local Community and Development Committee €93,000.

AIM: to address issues such as intergenerational patterns, difficult household conditions, migrant status, and the "working poor" through a dedicated "Family Champion" role. The Family Champion will coordinate support, provide tailored assistance and advocate the needs of the family, while aiming to improve engagement with existing services and address the root causes of poverty.

4 Tipperary Children and Young People's Service Committees and Tipperary Local Community and Development Committee €85,000.

AIM: to enhance living conditions and reduce child poverty by improving energy efficiency and service integration. The pilot focuses on energy auditing and profiling to improve household energy efficiency and security and assessing how these interventions impact poverty indicators.

Service integration and consolidation are being advanced through the utilisation of existing local structures demonstrating the value of a collective response to shared priorities at national and local levels. CYPSC and LCDC are working together across multiple agencies and local partners. Over the first year the pilots tested innovative approaches (e.g. relational models, new service roles, energy-focused interventions, and flexible service access) to address the different dimensions of child poverty. Early outputs included data insights and practical supports for families alongside learning from challenges such as data access and recruitment. D/CDE have engaged the Centre for Implementation Research at University of Limerick to undertake a comparative study between the four pilots in late 2026, with a view to possible mainstreaming of all or part of the pilots for national expansion.

2023-2025: Overview of key developments

Across the 2023–2025 Programme Plan period, steady progress has been made in strengthening system coordination, expanding access to services, and embedding more integrated approaches. Local Area Child Poverty Action Plan pilots are demonstrating the value of coordinated, place-based delivery, alongside proven models such as the Area Based Childhood programme.

Parenting and family supports have been significantly expanded, with the *National Home Visiting Programme* now established, Parenting Support Advisors in all Tusla Network Areas, the rollout of Parenting Hubs, increased investment in Family Resource Centres, and the extension of the *Healthy Communities programme*. These developments are increasingly underpinned by stronger data and evaluation, including service mapping, expansion of evidence-based parenting programmes, and the planned evaluation of local pilots to inform national scale-up.

2.6 Participation in Arts, Culture and Sport

Children benefit from better physical and mental health, well-being and cognitive development when they take part in arts, sport and culture activities. Children from lower income backgrounds miss out on this compared to their better off peers, however.¹⁷

SILC data for 2024 shows that 27.8% of children under 16 who are at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPe) in Ireland were unable to participate in regular leisure activities due to financial reasons. This is an increase from 19.4% in 2021 and can be linked to the increase in the cost of living in that time period. For children not at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the figures were 1.4% in 2021, and 0.9% 2024¹⁸, showing a large gap in the art, culture and sport opportunities available to children from low-income households.

The members of the Youth Advisory Group pointed to the costs of taking part in sport, such as transport to sports facilities, and the need for more inclusive sport, as well as more funding for women's sports.

2.6.1 Progress Update

The Programme Office monitoring in this area concentrates on the implementation of existing Government commitments and work towards increasing the exposure of children who are at risk of poverty to arts, culture, and sport through the promotion of specific measures that remove barriers such as cost, availability, and transport.

Ten progress reports were received on this topic from six departments including the Department of Culture, Communications, Sport, Department of Community Development and the Gaeltacht, Department of Children, Disability and Equality, Department of Health, Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, and Department of Transport.

A key driver in the creation of opportunities for children who have not previously had exposure to arts and cultural participation is the cross-government Creative Ireland Programme, including the Creative Youth Plan (CYP) 2023–2027. Ongoing emphasis is placed on ensuring that CYP initiatives reach disadvantaged children through targeted programmes and strategic partnerships. Examples include:

- Funded by D/EY, D/CCS and D/CDE, Local Creative Youth Partnerships (LCYP) engage children and young people at risk of disadvantage and marginalisation in local creative activities by working collaboratively with local stakeholders, including ETBs, local authorities, the non-formal education sector, family support services, and youth services. In 2025, funding was provided for the establishment of an eighth LCYP in Tipperary and the continued provision of a full-time Creative Youth Participation Officer through Hub na nÓg to ensure that the voice of the child is embedded across all CYP programmes and initiatives.
- A new Creative Youth Nurture Fund was launched by D/CCS in 2025 as a successor to the 2023 pilot programme. Up to €800,000 has been made available over the next two years to support approximately eight projects engaging specific cohorts who may face barriers to creativity. Target groups include Traveller and Roma communities, children and young people in or transitioning from the care system, and those engaged with the youth justice system. In addition, €1.5 million has been allocated under the fund for creative projects to be delivered on a Shared Island basis from 2026 to 2028.
- D/EY led CYP initiatives, Creative Clusters and Bringing Live Arts to Students & Teachers (BLAST), encouraged applications in 2024/25 and 2025/26 from schools that had never previously participated in CYP initiatives. These programmes also received a Traveller and Roma focus under the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy*. In total, 26 schools participated in Creative Clusters and seven schools engaged in nine BLAST Residencies in the school years 2024/25 and 2025/26.

¹⁷ Broh, B.A. (2002) 'Linking extracurricular programming to academic achievement: Who benefits and why?', *Sociology of Education*, 75, pp. 69–96. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3090254>; Covay, E. and Carbonaro, W. (2010) 'After the bell: Participation in extracurricular activities, classroom behaviour, and academic achievement', *Sociology of Education*, 83(1), pp. 20–45. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0038040709356565>, and Sport Ireland (2023) *The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2022*. Physical Activity for Health Research Centre, Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Limerick, Sport Ireland, Healthy Ireland, and Sport Northern Ireland. Available at: <https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2023-10/2022%20CSPPA%20Full%20Report.pdf>.

¹⁸ See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_chmd06/default/table?lang=en&category=livcon.ilc.ilc_md.ilc_chmd, analysis of Eurostat data variable ilc_chmd06

- *Creative Schools*, run by the Arts Council in partnership with D/EY, successfully prioritises participation by DEIS Schools, small rural schools, special schools, and Youthreach centres.
- In 2025, a new Creative Youth School Data Mapping Tool was designed, displaying school participation across specific CYP programmes. This tool will help identify with limited participation to date, particularly those with greater need based on socio-demographic data.
- In 2026, the Creative Ireland Programme published the evaluation of the pilot Creative Youth Nurture Fund (2023–2025). In addition, in 2025, D/CCS, D/EY, and D/CDE commenced a joint research programme with the ESRI to enhance knowledge of the nature, inclusiveness and impact of participation on children and young people in creative and cultural activities.

In-school Creative Youth Projects

Creative Clusters (DEIS): Selskar

College, Wexford created a sensory garden. Students researched and selected plants based on their sensory properties to create a calm environment that promotes wellbeing. In Dublin City Centre, Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire, pupils' voices directly informed the creation of a quiet, peaceful, and comfortable shared space within the school yard that supported wellbeing, inclusion, and a sense of belonging.

Teacher Artist Partnership + (DEIS): St. Patrick's

Corlough's Creative Spaces: Sticks and Stones horticulture and landscape design project transformed an outdoor area into a garden and play space to support wellbeing and creativity. The wider school community worked alongside the children to create a lasting, inclusive resource for learning and play.

D/RCDG reported that the cross-government focus on child poverty has accelerated, informed, and broadened actions within the public library service to enhance participation in arts and culture for children and young people affected by poverty. Several initiatives aligned with the *National Public Library Strategy 2023–2027* have been advanced, including:

- The My Open Library service, now operational in 59 branches nationwide, with additional branches scheduled to come on stream. The extension of library opening hours outside standard staffed times facilitates more flexible access and reduces barriers such as limited transport options and a lack of quiet study space at home.
- Expansion of the Right to Read Programme, which supports the delivery of targeted initiatives for children and families to foster a love of reading, improve literacy, and widen cultural engagement.
- Expansion of the Skills for Life Initiative and the Healthy Ireland at Your Library Programme, which provide access to expert health information, events, and resources supporting the development of essential life skills critical to educational attainment and wellbeing for children and families.
- Creation of family-oriented library facilities in socio-economically disadvantaged areas through the Libraries Capital Programme 2023–2027, providing safe, welcoming, and accessible environments for learning and cultural participation.
- Acceleration of the development of public libraries as community hubs to ensure participation is not limited by economic barriers. Libraries serve as vital points of connection, delivering accessible, free, and inclusive supports to disadvantaged children and families through partnership with education, health, and community organisations.
- Enhanced sensory services in public libraries through the introduction of sensory rooms, pods, toys, and assistive technologies across the library network.

Youth work plays a critical role in encouraging young people in deprived communities to engage in arts, culture, and sport, while supporting the development of talents, skills, and abilities and unlocking potential that might otherwise not be achieved. Key initiatives include:

- In 2025, over €50 million was allocated to the UBU, *Your Place, Your Space* scheme, with an additional €1.2 million secured for the establishment of ten new UBU services, bringing the total number of UBU-funded services to 259 nationwide across the 16 Education and Training Board (ETB) areas. UBU targets young people aged 10–24 who are identified as marginalised, vulnerable, or at risk of not flourishing.
- In 2025, the *National Youth Arts Programme* which is a strategic partnership of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) on behalf of the Arts Council and D/CDE supported 1,296 young people to participate in the programme in youth work settings across Ireland. In addition, 72 artists and youth workers were employed to support the programme delivery and participate in continuing professional development opportunities.
- In 2025, €5 million was awarded to National Governing Bodies (NGB) of sport from the Dormant Accounts Fund to strengthen capacity to reach those who are economically, socially, or educationally disadvantaged, as well as people with disabilities. Funding supports projects which empower volunteers through youth leadership training and targeted training for those working in disadvantaged areas.
- During 2024–2025, under the Healthy Ireland Framework, the Active School Flag (ASF) was awarded to 228 schools, including 70 DEIS schools, which demonstrated a commitment to creating a physically educated and active school community and providing opportunities for students to develop leadership skills.

Other work that removes barriers include:

Sport plays an important role in enhancing participation. Recent progress includes:

- *Sport Ireland's* establishment of a Young Voices in Sport Focus Group, comprising 19 young people from across the island of Ireland. The group met twice in 2025 and will continue to meet in 2026. The first topic identified for discussion by the group is 'youth participation in sport'.
- Allocation of €1.32 million in 2025 to 29 existing and four new Community Sports and Physical Activity Hubs to promote local engagement in sport and physical activity, particularly in disadvantaged areas.
- D/CDE secured Dormant Accounts funding in 2025, for the recruitment of two senior Inclusivity Officers to identify and implement pathways for seldom-heard children and young people to engage effectively with participation structures, including youth councils, and to build strong relationships with supporting organisations.
- D/CDE allocation of €500,000 in 2025 to local authorities through the annual Capital Grant Scheme for Play and Recreation to support the upgrading and maintenance of playground facilities for children and young people. Work is under way in D/CDE to develop a new Play and Recreation Strategy.



Taoiseach and Jen Hesnan (LCYP) - Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board at Summit 2025

2.7 Overview of Challenges: Programme Plan 2023-2025

When providing updates on key developments, departments were also asked for their views on the challenges they face in realising the goal of eliminating child poverty and supporting child wellbeing. There was significant consistency across responses, as reflected in the feedback for both Progress Reports and over the full period of the Programme Plan. Five overarching challenges were identified.

2.7.1 Need to further enhance Family Support Services

Over the Programme Plan period, stakeholders highlighted the complex and often intergenerational needs of families at risk of poverty, underscoring the importance of investment in high-quality family support services. Service provision currently spans a diverse mix of state, state-funded, and community and voluntary models, with multidisciplinary, relationship-based approaches such as Meitheal and CYPSC proving effective. *The Local Area Poverty Action Plan* pilots further demonstrate the value of collaborative, place-based service delivery within existing structures, pointing to the importance of building on current investments and scaling successful approaches to ensure timely and accessible supports for families experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

2.7.2 Very targeted engagement with the most excluded groups

Respondents widely acknowledged the importance of targeted responses to facilitate access for hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups to the services they need. Over the duration of the Programme Plan, strategies such as *SICAP (2024–2028)*, *NTRIS II*, and *Creative Youth* have supported the development of engagement and outreach programmes across a range of public services. These include the Traveller and Roma Education Community Development Worker (ECDW) project (2024) and the *LCYPs*. While significant progress is being made, sustained and enhanced investment is vital to strengthen the capacity to provide a ‘very targeted’ response to those families and children with the greatest needs.

2.7.3 Complexity and Coordination

Respondents emphasised that the complex, multi-dimensional nature of childhood and family poverty remains a significant challenge, with overlapping financial, social, and economic pressures continuing to limit access to supports—particularly in terms of cost, transport, and service availability.

For example, while childcare costs have reduced, availability still constrains labour market participation, especially for lone parents and low-income families. The interlinked nature of income, social exclusion, and housing further complicates responses and underscores the need for coordinated cross-sectoral approaches. For example, sometimes for *SICAP* programmes progression-to-employment metrics do not capture the substantial qualitative work undertaken with individuals to move them closer to employment opportunities and develop life skills. While important progress has been made in coordinating cross-government policy, respondents stressed the need to deepen and strengthen these efforts, particularly by advancing more integrated “no wrong door” approaches and improving coordination across services and agencies. Additional capacity to map local resources and services would also enable greater coordination and coherence. An emphasis on relational practices at agency and departmental level is also beginning to gain traction as an approach to managing complexity and to developing multi-faceted, cross-departmental responses.

2.7.4 Funding and Resourcing

Several respondents raised issues relating to resource constraints and funding sustainability. The provision of long-term, sustainable funding is essential to enable capacity building, long-term strategic planning, workforce stability, and service integration. Although some important schemes have been mainstreamed during the lifetime of the first Programme Plan—such as the Creative Youth Nurture Fund and the expansion of counselling, psychotherapy, and therapeutic services for children and young people to reduce waiting lists for community-based counselling—more substantial investment is crucial. Increasingly, the potential of shared or pooled budgets is being raised by respondents as a mechanism of interest.

2.7.5 Workforce

Ireland’s growing economy, labour market pressures, and rising housing costs have created significant workforce challenges throughout the duration of the Programme Plan. Respondents across departments identified the supply of qualified professionals (the pipeline), as well as staff retention and development, as critical issues across the full range of child services. Training, developing, and retaining a skilled workforce remains essential to building capacity and ensuring the delivery of high-quality public services. However, progress across priority areas continues to be constrained by workforce shortages, particularly in childcare, child health services, education, youth services, and family support services.

3



Work of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office



3 | Work of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office

The overall ambition of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office is to bring greater coherence and integration to government action aimed at addressing child poverty and promoting child well-being. This section summaries the work of the Programme Office from September 2024 to December 2025 and includes further updates to May 2026. In addition to monitoring progress across the six priority areas described in Section 2, the Programme Office has continued to strengthen the cross-government focus on addressing child poverty by building opportunities for reflection and engagement, and by undertaking a number of strategic initiatives which were identified as important in enhancing the implementation of existing and emerging policy.

This part of the report outlines the Programme Office's activities across three key sections. The first section highlights the Office's role as a system convenor, fostering connections within government and broader society to engage stakeholders in the mission to end child poverty and promote child well-being. The second section reviews progress on the strategic initiatives outlined in the initial Programme Plan. Finally, the report reflects on emerging lessons from an OECD Review of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in 2025/2026 and identifies several priority areas for future development.

As part of its wider role, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office provides secretariat support for the Cabinet Committee on Children and Education and the associated Senior Officials Group and supports the broader work of the Taoiseach and the Government in delivering Programme for Government commitments in relation to children and young people.

3.1 Building connections

A key role of the Programme Office is convening and strengthening cross-government collaboration to address child poverty and improve child well-being. This section describes key mechanisms established to support this work, including the Cross-Government Network, Action Learning initiatives, the annual Child Poverty and Well-being Summit, and structured engagement with children and young people. Together, these approaches demonstrate a growing emphasis on coordination, shared learning, and inclusive participation—ensuring that policy development and service delivery are informed by evidence, collaboration across sectors, and the lived experiences of children and families.



Elizabeth Canavan, Dr Aoibhín Walsh and Dr Tony Bates panel discussion at CGN meeting May 2025

3.1.1 Cross Government Network (CGN)

To support its work as a system convenor, the Programme Office established a Cross-Government Network on Child Poverty and Well-being. The purpose of the Cross-Government Network is to bring together the wide range of actors across government departments, their agencies and local authorities who are responsible for implementing actions and policies which impact on the objective to end child poverty and enhance child well-being. The Network creates a platform to support this diverse work and helps to foster creativity and innovation as well as a shared purpose and mission.

From September 2024 to May 2026, the Cross Government Network on Child Poverty and Well-being met five times bringing the total number of CGN meetings to eight, since its establishment in 2023. Topics discussed at the Network meetings included the child services workforce (October 2024), breaking down barriers to participation in arts, sports and culture (December 2024), and a practical exploration of how a more responsive public sector could better support children and families experiencing poverty (May 2025). Following this meeting a series of CGN Action Learning Sets (ALS) were established. Insights and learnings from this process were discussed at the CGN meeting in Feb 2026 (see below for more details). The most recent meeting in April 2026 explored the 'Poverty Stoplight' as a tool for helping individuals, communities and societies overcome disadvantage and poverty. Reflections and learnings from the Cross-Government Network meetings inform the ongoing work of the Programme Office. More information on Network meetings, including meeting agendas and presentations, can be found on the Programme Office website <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/campaigns/child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office/>.

3.1.2 Action Learning

The CGN needed to evolve from a relationship and network building forum to a collaborative action forum. Action learning was chosen as a method to progress this evolution within the CGN by facilitating members to work collectively and creatively on shared problems. Action Learning is a structured approach to building cross sectoral collaboration on shared problems in a small group setting through cycles of action and learning.

Following the CGN meeting in May 2025, a call out was sent by the Programme Office inviting Network members to set up and lead ALSs. The Programme Office provided support and facilitated support by external action learning experts from Atlantic Technological University. Initially nine ALS's were convened, some of which met frequently in 2025 and have now concluded, while others continue to be a work in progress.

At Summit 2025 a CGN ALS panel shared their insights and learning. In March 2026, the CGN came together to further reflect and build on the insights gained and the strengthened cross sector collaboration that has emerged from the Action Learning Sets. The learning and experiences from the ALS's are informing the next stage of cross government efforts to tackle the complex, multidimensional challenges of poverty and its effects on children, young people, and their families.



Sinead Burke and Ministerial Panel at Summit 2025

3.1.3 Child Poverty and Well-being Summit

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office facilitates wider engagement across sectors during the annual Child Poverty and Well-being Summit. The Taoiseach hosted the second annual summit in the Aviva Stadium in September 2025. The Summit brings together leaders, policymakers, practitioners, and change-makers to explore how to drive systemic change that deliver results for children.

It highlights collaborative approaches, examines what is working, and surfaces bold ideas that are needed to address the structural barriers that keep children and families in poverty. Children's participation is an integral part of the day. Summit 2025 included an art exhibition, a specially written musical performance from a young Music Generation artist, and engagement with our Youth Advisory Group on Child Poverty and Well-being. (detailed below).

The discussions and outcomes from Summit 2025 will feed directly into the development of the Office's second Programme Plan. A report on the Second Annual Child Poverty and Well-being Summit was published in December 2025.

3.1.4 Children and Young Peoples Participation

Facilitating children and young people's participation in policy development is central to the work of the Programme Office. In advance of both the first and second Child Poverty and Well-being Summits, the Taoiseach wanted to listen directly to children and young people about what is important to them, and what they think the Government should focus on in child poverty and well-being policy. Together with D/CDE, the Programme Office established Youth Advisory Groups (YAG) prior to Summits 2024 and 2025.

The development and facilitation of the YAG process was supported by the National Participation Office (NPO) and Hub na nÓg. For Summit 2025 the YAG comprised of 17 young people aged 16 to 18 years old and was formed following a call to organisations funded by D/CDE and specifically targeted organisations that engage young people from disadvantaged communities. The video the YAG created, which captured their views on the challenges they face and their suggested solutions, was screened at the Summit. Members of the YAG participated in a panel discussion with four Government Ministers as part of the plenary session. Following the Summit, the YAG met with the Taoiseach to discuss the impact of their participation. A report detailing the YAG participation process in advance of Summit 2025 is being prepared and will be published in Summer 2026.

More broadly, the Programme Office seeks to enhance child participation through a range of strategies. The Taoiseach co-sponsored the National Youth Assembly on Play and Recreation in April 2026. The Office also produces child-friendly versions of all key documents. In developing the new Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan (CFHAP), the Office worked to ensure that the voices of both children and parents were included and had a meaningful impact on the process. The Office regularly receives correspondence from children and values the opportunity to engage directly on their views on how to improve the lives of children in Ireland.

3.2 Strategic Initiatives

This section outlines the key strategic initiatives progressed by the Programme Office during the reporting period, building on the priorities set out in the Programme Plan. These initiatives are designed to strengthen the implementation of existing and emerging policies on child poverty and well-being, with a particular focus on embedding a cross-government approach, enhancing service integration, and improving the evidence base for policy. Together, they reflect a continued effort to drive more coordinated, targeted, and outcome-focused action across the system to better support children and families experiencing poverty.

3.2.1 Focus on child poverty in the annual Budget

For the past three annual Budgets, the Programme Office has engaged with all relevant Departments to examine their spending plans in relation to child poverty and well-being, publishing a report after each Budget analysing how allocations contribute to reducing child poverty. The third budget report, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being*, published in December 2025. The measures introduced in Budget 2026 mark the first year of a multi-annual programme to deliver on the national target of reducing consistent child poverty to 3% or below by 2030. They include over €320 million in targeted income supports for children in families at risk of poverty, including the largest ever increase in the Child Support Payment, alongside further investment in enabling services such as Equal Start, a new DEIS Strategy and DEIS Plus, and additional Family Resource Centres.

The report also highlights the importance of sustaining the children's services workforce in the context of rising demand and ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, with additional funding allocated accordingly. It further draws attention to an innovative outcomes-based approach to child poverty spending by the D/Health and the HSE, which the Programme Office will continue to monitor for its impact on improving health outcomes and reducing inequalities among children and families.

3.2.2 Service integration for children and families

As described in section three, despite significant progress coherence and coordination in service provision remains a challenging issue for service providers, policymakers, children, families and communities.

The Office has sought to contribute to the emergence of a culture and practice of service integration to promote better outcomes for children in need.

The Programme Office has continued to advance its work on service integration, building on progress made in its first year. This has included close engagement with the D/CDE and the four Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans, which are linked to the EU Child Guarantee. These pilots, operating across Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown and Wicklow, Kildare, Monaghan, and Tipperary, are testing different approaches to improving coordination between services and enhancing access for disadvantaged children, young people, and their families.

In parallel, the Programme Office has led the development of a self-assessment framework to support organisations in evaluating their progress towards more integrated service provision. The framework was developed by an informal cross-sectoral working group, bringing together senior leaders from across Government, the non-statutory sector, and independent researchers. It addresses key issues such as leadership and accountability, maintaining a strong child and family focus, enabling service users to "tell their story once", improving referral pathways, and strengthening inter-agency relationships. Testing of the framework is currently underway.

The Office has also worked with the D/CDE, and D/EY to oversee research on school-linked models of service integration. This research examines practices in three schools that are integrating health supports with education provision in different ways, with a report on the findings due to be published later in 2026.

3.2.3 Cross-government tools to enhance policy and implementation focus on child poverty

In Ireland and internationally, a range of policy implementation tools are used to strengthen responses to child poverty and well-being, including impact assessments, national targets, child and equality budgeting, and broader legislative and policy instruments. The Programme Office aims to promote the use of these tools across the policymaking system, to deepen their effectiveness, and to explore opportunities for further development.

The Programme Office has engaged extensively with departments to advance this work. This has included collaboration with the D/SP on the new national child poverty target and the development of a supporting dashboard of indicators, which brings together data across areas such as education, health, housing, income, and participation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of child poverty.

In parallel, the Office has worked with the D/SP and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) on the development of a proposed Virtual Data Room to better identify the key drivers of child poverty and inform targeted policy responses.

Engagement has also taken place with the D/PER on equality budgeting and the Public Service Performance Report, as well as with the D/CDE and the D/HLGH to pilot the use of a children's rights impact assessments in the development of the forthcoming *Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan*.

The Programme Office has also deepened its application of Human Learning Systems¹⁹ to embed learning and adaptability in its work. The Office has contributed to the development of a government-wide initiative on building a more relational public service, including by supporting the organisation of a showcase event on key relational practices in November 2025. Finally, the Cross-Government Network has provided a platform to explore practical tools such as the Poverty Stoplight, highlighting its potential to support more relational, person-centred approaches to addressing disadvantage and poverty.

3.2.4 Initiative on child services workforce development

The Government's ambition to strengthen the response to child poverty depends on a sustainable pipeline of skilled staff across key sectors, including health, education, disability, social work, culture, and sport. These professionals play a critical role in delivering interventions that support positive outcomes for children, yet many services continue to face significant recruitment and retention challenges.

In 2025, the Programme Office continued its cross-government engagement on the children's services workforce, focusing on areas where a whole-of-government approach can support more strategic workforce planning. This has included an Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) research project examining the future supply and demand for children's services over the next 10–15 years, alongside a review of international best practice in centrally coordinated workforce planning. The Office has also contributed to the Department of Health working group established under *First 5* to advance the development of a dedicated child health workforce.

3.2.5 Family Homelessness

The Government's housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities*, published in November 2025, recognises the harmful impacts of emergency accommodation on children and families and commits to the development of a CFHAP guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Action Plan is centred on preventing families from becoming homeless, strengthening supports for those in emergency accommodation, and enabling timely access to secure, permanent housing.

In 2025, the Programme Office worked closely with the D/HLGH to progress the development of the Action Plan. This included establishing a cross-government Public Sector Delivery Group to ensure coordinated input and shared ownership, alongside a programme of stakeholder engagement, including public consultation and in-person events that captured the perspectives of families and children with experience of homelessness. The work was further informed by a Child Rights and Youth Impact Assessment and a Rapid Evidence Review of national and international research. The Action Plan is expected to be approved and published in summer 2026, with the Programme Office continuing to support its implementation, including ensuring that the voices of children and families remain central.

3.3 Evaluation and Impact Assessment: OECD Review of the Programme Office

As part of a wider project examining the evolving role of Centres of Government (CoG) in 2025/2026, the OECD undertook a review of Ireland, using the Child Poverty and Well being Programme Office as a case study. The review (forthcoming) recognised that child poverty in Ireland had long been addressed through a mix of departmental policies, with no single actor holding the mandate or capacity to drive a sustained whole of government response. The decision to locate the Programme Office in the D/Taoiseach was therefore found to reflect both political priority and institutional necessity.

The report concludes that the Programme Office provides clear added value, noting that:

"Stakeholders consistently emphasised the value of this Office; which combines formal monitoring and policy support with a more informal role in brokering, quality assurance, and promoting consistency and cooperation across departments."

¹⁹ Methods and Tools | Human Learning Systems

3.3.1 Role and contribution of the Programme Office

The OECD found that the Programme Office plays several important roles. It is designed to bring greater coherence, visibility and follow through to the child poverty agenda, supports alignment across six strategic focus areas, and provides a focal point for policy analysis, cross departmental coordination and public engagement. It has introduced a more consolidated approach to monitoring progress, including through the national budget process. Its symbolic role in elevating the visibility of child poverty and child well being within and beyond government was highlighted as particularly important. The Office also plays a behind the scenes role in reviewing draft materials, connecting actors across policy areas, and encouraging consistent framing of children's well being across government, while helping to strengthen capabilities for cross government working.

3.3.2 Key achievements to date

Three achievements are particularly emphasised. First, the Office has brought greater focus on child poverty into the annual Budget process, resulting in more coordinated child poverty related spending for the first time and the publication of cross government Budget reports. Second, it established the Cross Government Network (CGN) on Child Poverty and Well being and convened two national Summits (2024 and 2025), enhancing the profile of child poverty across government and strengthening both formal and informal connections. Third, the Office has progressed a number of strategic initiatives, including leadership on service integration and on the issue of family homelessness.

The OECD also underlines that the Programme Office does not control budgets or programmes, but instead *“works through relationships, convening power and the ability to frame a shared narrative.”* As such, it has functioned as a facilitation and coordination hub rather than a delivery unit.

3.3.3 Emerging learning and directions for the future

Looking ahead, the report identifies several priority areas for future development:

1. Clearer prioritisation and thematic focus would help sharpen the Office's impact without narrowing its overall ambition.
2. The Cross Government Network should evolve beyond trust building towards more tangible joint problem solving.
3. A stronger measurement framework—combining targets with milestones and learning oriented monitoring—would better support decision making and accountability.
4. Budget coordination could be further strengthened, recognising the constraints of Ireland's centralised budget process, with deeper engagement helping to embed child poverty as a shared fiscal concern.
5. Sustaining political momentum will require stronger institutional foundations and clarity on the Programme's future trajectory.

The report stresses that the Programme Office was never intended to be permanent. Its core purpose is to shape direction, align departments and embed long term goals that can increasingly be internalised by the wider system. The emerging challenge is therefore one of evolution rather than justification: moving from mobilisation to focus, from visibility to delivery discipline, and from central coordination towards sustained system wide capability, while planning for a gradual reduction in the Office's role over time.

4 | Conclusions and next steps

This second progress update marks the end of the Programme Office's first programme plan for Child Poverty and Child Well-being. Established in 2023, the Office represented a step change in government ambition — not only to reduce child poverty, but to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their circumstances.

From the outset, the Programme Office adopted a focused, thematic approach, concentrating its mandate on a small number of priority areas. Its role has been not only to sharpen attention on key aspects of children's lives, but also to strengthen the wider system — building the capacity of cross-government responses to address what is a complex, systemic challenge.

Over the past three years, the Office has tested, learned and evolved its approach to driving whole-of-government action. It has worked across an existing landscape of programmes, investments, data and expertise — supporting what works, identifying gaps, removing barriers, and enabling new and more coordinated action.

Progress over this period reflects the Government's ambition. There has been record investment in income supports for children and families, alongside the adoption of an ambitious national child poverty target. Across early years, schools and further and higher education, universal supports have been strengthened, providing a platform for more targeted interventions through initiatives such as *DEIS*, *DEIS Plus*, and *Equal Start*. On some of the most acute challenges, including child and family homelessness, the Office has supported the development of more coordinated, evidence-informed responses, shaped by engagement with stakeholders and — crucially — with children and young people themselves.

A consistent focus has been on improving the experience of service integration for children and families. The Office has recognised that it is the commitment and expertise of those working directly with children and families that drives real change — and it is they who carry the responsibility and risk that comes with it. The Office has sought to strengthen the levers that support these professionals and their organisations to deliver responsive, integrated and relationship-based services.

This work lives in the practice of talented, expert and dedicated people whether they are: teachers, home visitors, GPs, nurses, social workers, social care workers, guards, early learning and care practitioners, administrators or receptionists, youth workers, and the many others who meet children and families every day. The job of the centre of government is to nurture the structures and systems which allow all of these people to do the best possible work they can and to build and nurture the relationships which will enable and empower children and families to realise their full potential.

The Programme Office has sought to experiment and learn over the last three years and this learning points the way forward. The OECD has challenged us to sharpen our focus, deepen our strategic approach, further strengthen connectivity across government, and continue to develop robust frameworks for measurement and accountability. Crucially, the success of the Programme Office must be judged not by its processes or activity, but by the difference it makes in the lives of children.

The next programme plan will build on these foundations, with a renewed emphasis on outcomes. It will support sustained progress towards child poverty targets, while recognising that child well-being extends beyond income alone. It will deepen the focus on prevention and early intervention, strengthen understanding of the social determinants of children's experiences and outcomes, and continue to enhance the responsiveness and capability of the system as a whole. It will also maintain a targeted focus on specific challenges including homelessness and the needs of the most vulnerable children.

When it comes to child poverty, partial success is ever enough—there is always more to be done. Yet the process and experience captured in this report show that real progress is being made. At the first Child Poverty Summit in 2024, one young person spoke about looking around a room filled with committed leaders and practitioners and feeling a genuine sense of hope for what is possible.

The task now is to ensure that this hope is not only sustained, but realised.



Rialtas na hÉireann
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