

CHILDREN'S  
RIGHTS  
ALLIANCE

# Child Poverty Monitor 2023





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- Extern
- Early Learning Initiative (ELI)
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- Good Shepherd Cork
- Katharine Howard Foundation
- One Family
- Pavee Point
- Society of St Vincent de Paul
- Teachers Union of Ireland
- Youth Work Ireland

## INTRODUCTION

This is the second Children’s Rights Alliance’s **Child Poverty Monitor**. The Monitor tracks government progress on reducing the number of children experiencing poverty, showcases best practice solutions and spotlights key areas of concern including on: food poverty, income inadequacy, family support and educational disadvantage.

Child poverty is defined by the deprivation of essential resources for a minimum standard of living. This means that a child in poverty has limited or no access to the basic essentials which we would consider the minimum any citizen should have such as healthcare, housing, education, food. Long-term exposure to poverty and deprivation impacts on children’s outcomes across a number of domains including their physical and mental health, educational attainment and socio-emotional well-being, and can result in them having low self-esteem, which can lead to mental health difficulties in later life<sup>1</sup>. The longer a child stays in a cycle of consistent poverty, the greater the negative impact on their sense of self, aspirations, ability to avail of opportunities and ability to realise their full potential. These outcomes are not inevitable and turning the tide on child poverty is possible with the right policy decisions.

The most recent Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) revealed that child poverty increased across the board. For example, the number of children experiencing enforced deprivation rose to 236,910. A sharp increase was also noted in the number of children living in consistent poverty, rising from 5.2 per cent to 7.5 per cent, or almost 90,000 children. While the number of children living in emergency accommodation stagnated at the start of 2023, in the last two months, an additional 221 children became homeless. There are now 3,594 children trapped in emergency accommodation.

Lone parenthood, ethnicity, disability and family size have been identified as being associated with persistent poverty.<sup>2</sup> A multi-dimensional measure of poverty, known as ‘economic vulnerability’, was established by researchers to capture those families exposed to three indicators of poverty – low household income (bottom 20 per cent), difficulty making ends meet and material deprivation.

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1 Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth *The Dynamics of Child Poverty Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3iiUtEG>> accessed 4 June 2021.

2 Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth *The Dynamics of Child Poverty Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3iiUtEG>> accessed 29 June 2022.

Household transitions, such as the breakdown of a relationship or job loss for a parent<sup>3</sup> and the inability of the mother to work due to disability or illness have been found to make families particularly vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>

The European Commission's recommendation *Investing in Children*, provides a roadmap of how to address child poverty through a range of lenses. It recommends tackling child poverty and social exclusion through integrated strategies encompassing not only children's material security but also the promotion of equal opportunities.<sup>5</sup> The *Recommendation* sets out a three-pillar approach which focuses on adequate resources and affordable quality services and the right to participate.

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3 Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth *The Dynamics of Child Poverty Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3iiUtEG>> accessed 29 June 2022.

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*



## **Pillar 1: Access to adequate resources**

Member States should prioritise parental participation in the labour market. This acknowledges the link between parental employment and 'children's living conditions'.<sup>6</sup> Member States should also ensure the optimisation of income benefits so that they can provide an adequate standard of living.



## **Pillar 2: Access to affordable quality services**

A reduction in inequality at a young age can be ensured through investment in early childhood education and care. The improvement of education systems should ensure impact on equal opportunities. The responsiveness of health services should be improved to meet the needs of children experiencing disadvantage. Member States should prioritise a 'safe, adequate housing and living environment' to support children's 'development and learning needs'.<sup>7</sup> Family Support and alternative care settings should be enhanced and of good quality.



## **Pillar 3: Children's participation**

Member States should support children to participate in play and recreation including sport and cultural activities. Mechanisms that support children's participation in decision-making should be supported particularly in areas that impact their lives.

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.* 8.

Traditionally the Irish Government has addressed child poverty through the use of income supports. This was on foot of calls from the Combat Poverty Agency which has since been merged into the Department of Social Protection. In recent years, the Government's main vehicle for addressing child poverty, in particular, was the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People: Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (BOBF) (2014-2020). It included a target to lift 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020. The Government responded to this commitment by introducing a *Whole of Government Approach to Addressing Child Poverty*. This work focused on targeting increased income supports for those in receipt of social welfare, including measures that recognised the increased costs for older children. Complimentary to this, investment was provided for programmes often readily available in other countries such as free school books and hot school meals. This work was followed by further research examining the impact of poverty on children. For instance, the Government commissioned a dedicated Child-specific Poverty Research Programme initiated by the Department of Children.<sup>8</sup> However, what was clear from international experience that in order to drive real change, the Government needed a greater investment of capacity and resources.<sup>9</sup>

The Government's National Action Plan on the EU Child Guarantee (2022) builds on earlier work in BOBF and outlines the services, programmes and supports in place across relevant government departments within the scope of the Guarantee.<sup>10</sup> However, it also takes the planning and coordination of services to address child poverty one step further by proposing to leverage the relationship between Local Community Development Committees and Children and Young People's Services Committees to develop Local Area Child Poverty Plans.<sup>11</sup> A pilot programme of four sites will seek to 'maximise learning and assess the feasibility of local area child poverty action plans being embedded in local co-ordinating structures' planning frameworks'.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, a major development in the year has been the transition of power of a new Taoiseach and the selection of child poverty as one of three commitments for the second part of the Programme for Government. A key issue to date has been the challenge of capacity at government level to implement cross-government action to end child poverty. Following other successful models in the UK, Scotland and New Zealand, the Government has established a new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit in the Department of Taoiseach. The Unit has the potential to be a driver for

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8 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Income, poverty and deprivation among children: A statistical baseline analysis* (DCYA 2020); Bertrand Maitre, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth *The Dynamics of Child Poverty Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Survey* (ESRI 2021).

9 National Advisory Council on Children and Young People, *Paper on Addressing Child Poverty* (DCEDIY 2021).

10 Government of Ireland, *EU Child Guarantee Ireland's National Action Plan* (DCEDIY 2022).

11 Ibid, 27.

12 Ibid.



an ambitious, cross-governmental change at a time when it is sorely needed. The resourcing of the unit with a team of six officials mirrors the approach in New Zealand. The development of a robust and ambitious work plan is currently under way and with the right priorities and resources, it can harness the work being carried out across Government and drive concentrated cross-departmental work to address the systemic issues that are causing child poverty and deprivation rates to rise.

The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit can provide the much-needed leadership to tackle child poverty. Alongside the work of the Unit, there is a need to build a coherent cross-government plan to tackle child poverty. It is welcome that the Government is planning a spotlight on child poverty in the next National Children's and Young People's Policy Framework. This work is also being informed by a research initiative with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development which is seeking to implement the European Guarantee and the BOBF successor Framework.

Turning the tide on child poverty requires a long-term, sustained effort on the part of successive Governments. It is important that the new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit is given time and scope to complete its work. It will take more than one Programme for Government to deliver long-term results. Drawing further on international best practices, a commitment in legislation through a Child Poverty Reduction Act would provide a sharp policy focus and political accountability. As part of the accountability mechanisms enshrined in legislation in New Zealand, the government is required to report on progress to address child poverty on budget day. Similar action could be undertaken as part of the series of papers published on Budget Day by the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform.

Budget 2024 is set against a backdrop of a housing crisis with rising rent, an accommodation shortage and an increase in the numbers of children and families experiencing homelessness. At the same time families are weathering the cost-of-living storm. For many families, rent is the single biggest pressure point and without urgent action to address the current housing crisis, it will be extremely difficult for other measures to effectively improve outcomes for children and young people.

Across all three poverty measures there has been an increase in the number of children living in poverty in 2022 compared to 2021. This highlights the challenges that those on a low-income face in meeting the costs of a minimum standard of living. The targeting of resources towards those families experiencing the most disadvantaged (such as those with older children and those in receipt of the Back-to-School Clothing and Footwear Allowance) was a welcome approach to addressing income poverty.

The issue of food poverty remains a growing concern for families right across the country particularly given the rises in inflation for basic items. In Budget 2019, a commitment to pilot the provision of hot school meals was announced as a means of ensuring that children have access to a substantial meal during the school day. Momentum around hot meals in schools continues to grow with a significant

commitment to ensure universal provision by 2030. It is critical that expansion should focus not only on quantity but also quality food. A collaborative approach across government and in local communities is now needed to ensure provision during holiday time. This means utilising existing community infrastructure as well as identifying innovative approaches to food provision during this time.

There is a renewed focus on tackling educational disadvantage with an increase in the number of DEIS schools for the academic year 2022/23; 280 primary and 38 post-primary schools respectively. Our Spotlight Solution in Education takes a closer look at the Home School Liaison Programme which, for the first time, is being extended to support Traveller and Roma Children who are in non-DEIS schools. We need to see a plan put in place for this initial pilot to be expanded to other non-DEIS schools that have a high level of educational disadvantage in the coming years.

The growing number of children and their families living in emergency accommodation is perhaps one of the most significant challenges the Government now faces. In the Child Poverty Monitor, we profile Focus Ireland's Family Centre which provides wraparound support for children in such circumstances. Dedicated Child Support Workers provide an essential connection to specialist interventions. Investing in initiatives such as this can help children navigate the difficulties of homelessness and should be a critical part of the response to the housing and homelessness crisis.

Intervening early with tailored supports for children and their families is an important means to address poverty and adversity in childhood. Tusla has established a strong community infrastructure of family support. However, to ensure that all parents can receive the support they need, closest to them, further investment is needed as well as the development of a standardised home visiting programme. The Child Poverty Monitor spotlights the work the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) are doing locally and across Ireland to support young children and their families.

There was a significant milestone reached in Budget 2023 regarding early childhood education and care with a commitment to spend €1 billion in this area, five years ahead of schedule of the commitment contained in *First 5*. Increases to the hourly rates of the National Childcare Scheme continue to address the issue of affordability and the development of a new Equal Participation Model will provide much needed focus to addressing child poverty within early years settings. The work of Let's Grow Together is highlighted in our spotlight solution. This service works with everyone important in children's lives, empowering families, and enabling children to grow through the relationships in their community.

In healthcare, we saw a welcome increase in the number of babies receiving their developmental screening checks from 53.6 per cent in 2021 to 83.3 per cent in 2022, demonstrating a slow return to pre-pandemic levels of public health nurse visits to families in the first year of a child's life. Our Spotlight Solution shows the positive impact that home visiting can have on children and families and its potential as a

key intervention in breaking the cycle of disadvantage early. The cost of healthcare remains challenging for families living on low incomes. The current Medical Card income threshold for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week, while the poverty line for this household in 2022 was €692.16. We need to see Budget 2024 revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum, these should be set above the poverty thresholds.

All children should have access to a safe space to play with their friends. For many children their accommodation circumstances prevent them from taking part in such activities. Budget 2024 can put a strong emphasis on play by appointing an expert on play at national policy level that will help to drive action in all local authorities in Ireland. Ensuring access to green spaces not only benefits children but also the wellbeing of their families.

Child poverty is not inevitable, it is the result of political choices. There is now ample evidence of the systemic issues and the factors pulling families into poverty as well as the solutions and initiatives that can be delivered to break the cycle of poverty. What we need now is the political will to do so. With 236,910 children and young people experiencing enforced deprivation, we are calling on Government to make the right choice now by making Budget 2024 a Children's Budget.

## Spotlight Solution:

### THE NEW CHILD POVERTY AND WELLBEING UNIT

#### Introduction

Child poverty is a multi-faceted problem that is now trapping over 180,000 children and young people, denying them opportunities to reach their full potential.

In December 2022, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the establishment of a Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit, that would be located in the Department of the Taoiseach. It follows the successful track record of other child poverty offices in Scotland and New Zealand that have delivered positive outcomes for children and young people. The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit has the potential to be a gamechanger for Ireland's child poverty rates. It can drive cross-government work and foster cross-departmental engagement to ensure a multi-layered response to the multi-faceted nature of child poverty.

Alongside the work of the Unit, there is a need to build a coherent cross-government plan to tackle child poverty. Drawing on international best practices, a commitment in legislation through a Child Poverty Reduction Act would provide a sharp policy focus and political accountability. It is welcome the Government is planning a spotlight on child poverty in the next National Children's Strategy, and we need to see the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit retained by the next Government to deliver the sustained, long-term effort required to turn the tide of child poverty.

#### The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit

The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit is a prime vehicle to drive cross-governmental working to end child poverty. In April 2023, a senior civil servant was appointed as Head of the Unit to oversee the development and implementation of its work plan. The Unit will be resourced with a team of six officials to carry out this work.

The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit will develop its programme of work based on the following priority areas:

- Income support and joblessness
- Early learning and childcare
- Reducing the cost of education
- Family homelessness
- Consolidating and integration public health, family & parental support, and wellbeing services
- Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty

**“Our focus must be on reducing child poverty and improving well-being. Our vision is to make Ireland the best country in which to be a child. We must give everyone the best start in life, empowering them to make the most of that start through education, equal opportunities and good jobs to work towards a better future.”**

—Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, Dail Debates 17 December 2022

# Income Adequacy



## 2022 v 2023 – Overview statistics and policy developments

### STATISTICS:

**Table 1: SILC 2021 Child Poverty Statistics**

	At risk of Poverty	Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
State	11.6	13.8	4.0
0-17 age group	13.6	17.0	5.2
1 adult, with children under 18 years	22.8	44.9	13.1
2 adults, with 1-3 children under 18 years	9.1	10.7	3.0

Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2021

**Table 2: SILC 2022 Child Poverty Statistics**

	At risk of Poverty	Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
State	13.1	17.7	5.3
0-17 age group	15.2	19.9	7.5
1 adult, with children under 18 years	23.8	43.5	14.1
2 adults, with 1-3 children under 18 years	13.1	17.7	5.3

Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2022

According to the CSO, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7.7 per cent in the 12 months between March 2022 and 2023.

Following Budget 2023 social welfare supports were forecasted to meet just 62 per cent of the minimum essential standard of living costs for older children. After Budget 2022 the rate was slightly higher at 64 per cent.

## INCOME ADEQUACY

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear that implementation of children’s socio-economic rights is not a charitable process but a basic obligation of Government.<sup>1</sup> Ireland was last examined by the Committee in January 2023.<sup>2</sup> In its Concluding Observations, the Committee urged the Irish Government to raise social welfare rates to reflect the cost of living as a key means by which to ensure children have access to an adequate standard of living.<sup>3</sup> The Committee also called for children seeking asylum to have ‘prompt’ access to social protection.<sup>4</sup>

Ensuring that children and their families have access to adequate resources is a central pillar of *Investing in Children*. The commitments under this Pillar are concerned with supporting parents’ participation in the labour market and providing for adequate living standards through a combination of cash income and in-kind benefits.<sup>5</sup>

While parents and guardians have the primary responsibility to provide for the child’s material needs, the State also has the responsibility to assist parents and guardians to alleviate poverty where needed.<sup>6</sup> The EU Recommendation *Investing in Children* is clear - of primary importance are adequate benefits including specific income supports for families and children and access to schemes providing minimum income.<sup>7</sup> Eligibility for support should be sensitive to the adequate redistribution of resources across income groups.<sup>8</sup> The facilitation of access to benefits should be a user-friendly process and outreach services should be provided.<sup>9</sup> Member States need to ensure that disincentives to work are not created for single parents as well as ensuring targeted supports avoid stigmatisation and poverty traps.<sup>10</sup>

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- 1 UNCRC ‘General Comment No. 5 General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Arts. 4, 42 and 44) (2003) CRC/GC/2003/5 para 6.
  - 2 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6.
  - 3 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 34.
  - 4 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 40.
  - 5 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 3-4.
  - 6 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 27.
  - 7 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 3-4) 778.
  - 8 *ibid.*
  - 9 *ibid.*
  - 10 *ibid.*



## Access to an adequate income

The annual poverty statistics captured by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) provide important data on the proportion of the population without an adequate income.

The 'at risk of poverty' rate describes the proportion of the population who have an income below 60 per cent of the national median income.<sup>11</sup> When examined by age cohort, children have the second highest risk of poverty rate at 15.2 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 13.1 per cent.<sup>12</sup> Households with children headed by one adult have a higher rate of 23.8 per cent versus those in two adult households (13.1 per cent).<sup>13</sup>

SILC measures a household's experience of deprivation, i.e. the proportion of households unable to afford a set of 11 goods and services which are considered the norm for society. While 17.7 per cent of the population experience deprivation the rate was higher amongst children (19.9 per cent) and in one parent families (43.5 per cent).<sup>14</sup>

A third measure, consistent poverty, combines the proportion of the population who are identified as being at risk of poverty and experiencing deprivation. Children are most vulnerable to consistent poverty, with a rate of 7.5 per cent versus an overall rate of 5.3 per cent.<sup>15</sup> Children living in households headed by a lone parent are significantly more vulnerable to consistent poverty at a rate of 14.1 per cent compared to 5.3 per cent of two parent families.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1: SILC 2022 Child Poverty Statistics**

	At risk of Poverty	Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
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0-17 age group	15.2	19.9	7.5
1 adult, with children under 18 years	23.8	43.5	14.1
2 adults, with 1-3 children under 18 years	13.1	17.7	5.3

Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2022

11 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

12 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

13 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

14 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

15 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

16 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

Further insight about the inadequacy of a household's income to meet all expenditure costs is provided in *SILC: Enforced Deprivation 2022* report. In 2022, 50.8 per cent of all households reported some level of difficulty (from great to little) in making ends meet with 5.9 per cent reporting great difficulty.<sup>17</sup> Two adult households with children experienced a higher rate of difficult making ends meet than the general population (57.1 per cent and 5.8 per cent respectively).<sup>18</sup> However, one parent families reported much higher rates across all levels of difficulty. Three-quarters of all one parent households (75.9 per cent) reported some level of difficulty making ends meet, with 9.8 per cent reporting great difficulty.<sup>19</sup> Research from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency found that in 2018 38 per cent of Traveller and Roma families experienced difficulties in making ends meet.<sup>20</sup>

The inability of a mother to work due to disability or illness has been identified as a strong predictor of economic vulnerability.<sup>21</sup> The latest SILC figures show an at risk of poverty rate of 35.2 per cent for those unable to work due to illness.<sup>22</sup> The Growing Up in Ireland research has found higher incidences of chronic illness and disability among children from lower socio-economic backgrounds with greater numbers of children being described as 'severely hampered in daily activities'.<sup>23</sup> The primary carer of a child with a disability is less likely to participate in the labour market especially if the child's disability is more limiting.<sup>24</sup> Higher rates of poverty are reported in 2022 for individuals with self-reported chronic illness over the age of 16 years of age.<sup>25</sup>

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17 *ibid.*

18 *ibid.*

19 *ibid.*

20 European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 'Roma and Travellers in six countries' (European Agency for Fundamental Rights) < <https://bit.ly/3zDz4yx> > accessed 15 June 2022, 73.

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

22 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

23 ESRI, *Growing up in Ireland: Key findings No 4 the health of 9 year olds*, (ESRI 2009).

24 John Cullinan, 'The Economic Costs of Disability for Families' (Frontline Magazine 201) 5).

25 CSO, *Poverty Indicators by Health Status – Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022*, (CSO 2023).

## Cost of Living Increases

The poverty rates, across all three measures, for children have all increased in 2022 when compared with 2021. In reporting on the latest SILC figures, the CSO notes that while income increased from the previous year, i.e. from 2020 to 2021 as the income reference period is for the preceding year, this increase is eroded when inflation is taken into consideration.<sup>26</sup>

According to the CSO, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7.7 per cent in the 12 months between March 2022 and 2023.<sup>27</sup>

The impact of inflation has a varying impact on different groups in society depending on their individual consumption patterns.<sup>28</sup> The household budget of lower income households tends to largely comprise of necessities.<sup>29</sup> A more in-depth analysis of the items included in CPI highlights the growth in prices for essential costs such as food, clothing and energy. These particular price increases will have a profound impact on low-income families and presumably many of those who self-reported difficulty in making ends meet in the deprivation figures recorded by SILC 2022.

In some instances, the annual percentage change in prices for essential items is in excess of the overall growth in CPI. For instance, food has risen by 13.3 per cent overall, staple items as bread (15.4 per cent), milk, eggs and cheese (19.7 per cent) and pasta (17 per cent) all exceed the overall increase for this category of CPI.<sup>30</sup>

The costs of clothing have increased by 6.8 per cent, however, footwear is up 6.6 per cent. Given the propensity for the growth in children's feet this is an unavoidable item to purchase for families with children.<sup>31</sup>

The rise in energy costs has been borne out in an increase in calls for help from low-income households with the Society of St Vincent de Paul seeing a 20 per cent increase in calls for assistance with energy costs in 2022 compared to 2021.<sup>32</sup> Overall energy has increased by 32.6 per cent. There are significant annual increases across a number of sub-indices with a 32.3 per cent increase in the cost of solid fuels, 62.7 per

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26 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

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

28 TASC, *The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022* (TASC May 2022) 28.

29 Ibid.

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

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

32 Society of St. Vincent De Paul, *Warm, Safe, Connected? Priorities to protect households in energy poverty – Policy, Practice, and Regulation* (SVP 2023).

cent increase for electricity, 85.9 per cent increase for Gas.<sup>33</sup> While these increases are staggering the Government has warned that there are further challenges ahead with regard to energy prices.<sup>34</sup>

The Irish social welfare system has been found to play a key role in reducing inequality in Ireland.<sup>35</sup> It is critical that social welfare payments are adequate to meet the costs of living and responsive to situations where these costs rise. A Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)<sup>36</sup> is one which establishes the minimum needed to live and participate in Irish society and is a standard of living which no one should be expected to live below.<sup>37</sup>

Budget 2023 introduced a range of measures to tackle the impact that increases in the cost of living were having on all households. However, these measures are assessed as being inadequate due to the costs of an MESL increasing in the latter part of 2022. Adjustments to the weekly rates of Social Welfare failed to reach the minimum needed and advocated collectively by non-governmental organisations. For example, in the post-Budget 2023 analysis carried out by the Vincentian MESL Research Centre, both one and two parent families with a two children (one attending primary and another attending secondary school) were projected to have weekly shortfall of €93 in 2023. In households with younger children (one attending pre-school and another attending primary), the inadequacy of levels were lower at €14 for both.

Commitment no. 25 in the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* will “(c)onsider and prepare a report for Government on the potential application of the benchmarking approach to other welfare payments”.<sup>38</sup> This task was due to be completed by the third quarter of 2020. The delay in actioning the commitment is related to a linked commitment on benchmarking pensions. The Government is still due to respond to the latter which is part of the recommendations of the Pensions Commission.<sup>39</sup>

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

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

35 TASC, *The state we are in: inequality in Ireland 2022* (TASC May 2022) 28.

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

37 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, ‘What is minimum essential budget standards research?’ <[www.budgeting.ie](http://www.budgeting.ie)> accessed 23 June 2022.

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

39 Department of Social Protection, *Social Inclusion Division* (Department of Social Protection 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3b9ITel>> accessed 24 June 2022.

The *Roadmap* proposes that the benchmarking of pensions should consider price inflation and earnings, however it does not take into consideration the real costs facing households.

Typically, the update to the MESL data uses a blended approach of direct pricing and inflation adjustments of the items in each component of the budget. In 2020, however, a more extensive research project was undertaken and the MESL was reviewed and rebased. This involved re-engaging in deliberative focus group discussions to determine whether the contents of the budget should be amended. Research comparing the costs of both approaches showed a divergence in costs, with the CPI rate tending to under-estimate changes in the cost of the MESL.<sup>40</sup> For example, in households with children the rebased food basket 'is an average of 16 per cent higher than the adjusted cost in the parental budgets, and 18 per cent higher for school age children'.<sup>41</sup> In the clothing budget children's rebased costs were one-third higher.<sup>42</sup>

Benchmarking weekly social welfare rates to MESL can ensure that such income is responsive to the actual costs incurred by families and less likely to be masked by inflation.

## Adequacy of Income Supports for Families with Children

Adequate social welfare rates that address the changing needs of a child are vital to ensuring their basic needs are met. The VPSJ's research has consistently identified older children as having additional and distinct needs in comparison to younger children.<sup>43</sup> In 2019, the minimum needs of children aged 12 and over, cost over €120 per week, which is 63 per cent more expensive than the minimum needs of younger children.<sup>44</sup> Additional costs relating to food, clothing, personal care, social inclusion and second level education account for much of the difference.

To address this issue, non-governmental organisations, utilising the data from the MESL research, have long called for additional resources to be targeted towards households with older children who are in receipt of the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC). In Budget 2019, and over the course of three subsequent Budgets

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40 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *Submission to the Low Pay Commission* (VPSJ 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3cjM0vY>> accessed 27 June 2022.

41 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *MESL Working Paper Examining the accuracy of inflation adjustment and quantifying the impact of basket changes*. (VPSJ 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3NYczZE>> accessed 27 June 2022, 6.

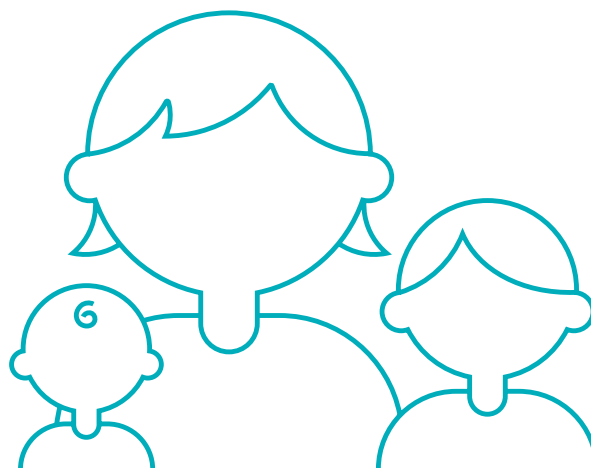
42 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *MESL Working Paper Examining the accuracy of inflation adjustment and quantifying the impact of basket changes*. (VPSJ 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3NYczZE>> accessed 27 June 2022, 7.

43 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *MESL 2018: Update Report* (VPSJ 2018) 11.

44 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2019 update report* (VPSJ 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2QzOtJv>> accessed 10 July 2020, 23.

targeted increases were provided meaning that the rate for over 12s is now €8 higher than that for under 12s.<sup>45</sup>

The targeting of increased resources towards older children based on evidence informed policy making is welcome. However, despite collective calls to continue targeting a higher increase for over 12s, Budget 2023 delivered a flat rate increase of €2 for all children covered under the Qualified



Child Increase. The current rates are

now €42 for under 12s and €50 for over 12s. The VPSJ's assessment post-Budget 2023 forecasted that social welfare supports would meet just 62 per cent of MESL costs for older children<sup>46</sup>, in the Budget 2022 analysis the rate was slightly higher at 64 per cent.<sup>47</sup> This analysis, coupled with the continued increases in CPI (see previous section) means that substantial increases to the IQC payment is needed in Budget 2024 for both rates of the payment.

Further research<sup>48</sup> by the VPSJ has considered the costs associated with caring for a child with a disability.<sup>49</sup> This research found that households with an adolescent child with a profound intellectual disability have additional weekly costs of €243.95.<sup>50</sup> Social welfare rates for such households should be reflective of the additional costs of disability.

## Access to an Adequate Income for Families in Direct Provision

It is critical that all families with children are treated equally regarding access to social welfare income. In April 2023, approximately one in every five applicants for international protection was a child, with 4,331 children being accommodated

45 Citizens Information, 'Claiming for a child dependant' <<https://bit.ly/3xtOfHT>> accessed 15 June 2022.

46 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Budget 2023 MESL Impact Briefing* (SVP 2022).

47 VPSJ, *Budget 2022 MESL Impact Briefing* (VPSJ 2021).

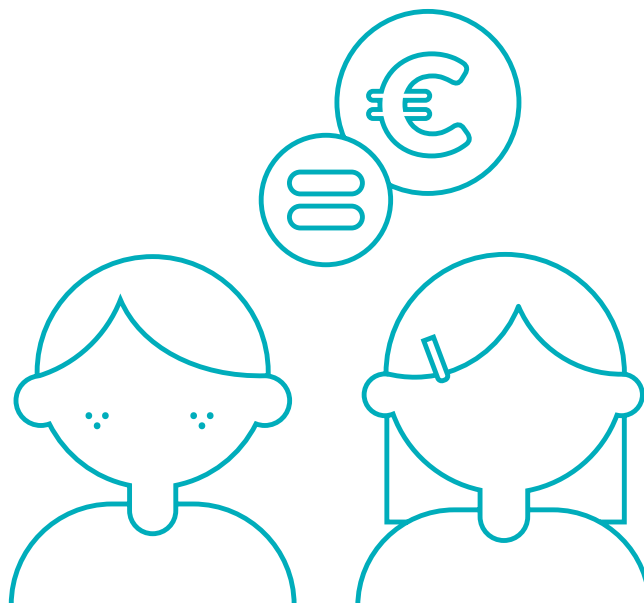
48 VPSJ, *Care at Home: Costs of Care Arising from Disability* (Family Carers Ireland and VPSJ 2022).

49 An important aspect of the MESL research is the fact that it makes a number of assumptions about the household types under study. For instance, it is assumed that neither the adults or children in the households have a disability or long-term illness.

50 VPSJ, *Care at Home: Costs of Care Arising from Disability* (Family Carers Ireland and VPSJ 2022).

by the International Protection Accommodation Service.<sup>51</sup> Children living in Direct Provision centres are at a high risk of consistent poverty although they are not counted in the official poverty statistics.

Children and young people in Direct Provision have spoken about how a lack of income means they have few opportunities to take part in activities with their friends and peers after school. The financial cost of school trips or the need to take public transport after sport activities is a major barrier in terms of integrating into the community.<sup>52</sup>



Children in Direct Provision receive a weekly payment of €29.80 currently.<sup>53</sup> Historically the rate of the Daily Expense Allowance (DEA) has been significantly lower than other social welfare payments for children. For example, in 2013 the rate was €9.60 compared to €29.80 for the IQC paid to social welfare recipients.<sup>54</sup> The DEA rate has remained unchanged since 2019 despite increases being applied the IQC and a separate rate being established for under and over 12s.<sup>55</sup>

The current payment for children and young people in Direct Provision falls short of what is needed to meet the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) for children and young people as set out in the Vincentian MESL Research Centre data. A new paper from the Research Centre adapts the MESL budgets for families living in Direct Provision.<sup>56</sup> This was achieved by reviewing documentation related to what is provided for families in Direct Provision along with consultation with an Expert

51 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – April 2023* (DCEDIY April 2023) <<https://bit.ly/41RYqUa>> accessed 25 April 2023.

52 Ombudsman for Children, *Direct Division Children's views and experiences of living in Direct Provision* (OCO 2020) 28.

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

54 Citizen's Information, *Budget 2023* <<https://bit.ly/3VP9Oyj>> accessed 9 May 2023.

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

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

Group.<sup>57</sup> This informed adjustments to individual aspects of the MESL budget.<sup>58</sup> A comparison between the current income supports and the expenditure needed for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living shows a weekly shortfall of €17.92 for a primary school child and €50.32 for a secondary school child.<sup>59</sup> For a one parent family with two children (one in secondary and one in primary school) is €117.50 and this rises to €140.37 for a two parent family.<sup>60</sup>

### MESL Expenditure Compared to Current Income

Household type	Shortfall
Secondary School Child	€50.32
Primary School Child	€17.92
One Parent & two Children	€117.50
Two Parent & two Children	€140.37

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

The *White Paper* committed to the introduction of a monthly International Protection Child Payment which would be provided at the same rate as Child Benefit,<sup>61</sup> as they move into phase two accommodation.<sup>62</sup> At phase two, parents would also be eligible to apply for a means-tested International Protection Payment, which would be aligned with the rate of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance.<sup>63</sup> This has yet to happen. Not only was provision not made for those in the international protection system to receive a child benefit payment at a time when a double child welfare payment was introduced, they also do not qualify for the IQC available to children whose parents are in receipt of social welfare payments.<sup>64</sup> This was the only group of children in Budget 2023 that did not receive any additional help to tackle the increased cost of living.

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

58 *ibid.*

59 *ibid.*

60 *ibid.*

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

62 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 18 January 2022.

63 Government of Ireland, *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Government Publications 2021) 30, 64-65.

64 Children's Rights Alliance, *Budget 2023 – What does it mean for Children and Young People?* (30 September 2022).



Analysis from the MESL Research Centre indicates that if an additional payment for children was introduced at the Child Benefit rate, the income would cover 77 per cent of the MESL expenditure needed for a family comprising of one parent and two children and 74 per cent for a two parent and two children family.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, while the introduction of such a payment would make a welcome contribution to the expenditure needs of families living in Direct Provision this would still leave them at risk of poverty.

## Complementarity of income supports and in-kind benefits

In this section the complementarity of responses to the cost-of-living increases is discussed. Analysis of in-kind benefits related to nutrition, childcare, education, health, housing, transport and access to sports or socio-cultural activities are described in the relevant sections later in the report under access to affordable quality services.

The Government has responded to the cost-of-living increases in an ad-hoc manner outside of the normal Budget cycle. This has included the introduction of measures to help households and families to meet the costs of energy, health and transport in February<sup>66</sup> and May 2022<sup>67</sup>. Further measures were also announced in Budget 2023 including, amongst others<sup>68</sup>:

- **Energy:** Three instalments of an energy credit of €200 (November 2022 and January and March 2023). A lump sum once off payment of €400 for Fuel Allowance recipients.
- **Health:** Continued reduction in the drug payment threshold to €80 per month.
- **Transport:** A 20 per cent reduction in public transport fees until the end of 2023 and the expansion of the 50 per cent travel fare for young people to those aged 16,17 and 18 years (this was previously introduced for those aged 19 to 23).
- **Social Welfare:** A double payment to all social welfare recipients in both October and December (Christmas Bonus) as well as a double payment of Child Benefit. A lump sum payment of €500 to all recipients of the Working Family Payment.

65 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Estimating the MESL costs for families in Direct Provision* (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023), 15.

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

67 Department of the Taoiseach, 'Government announces further measures to help households with rising cost of energy' (Department of the Taoiseach 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Oghd4R>> accessed 14 June 2022.

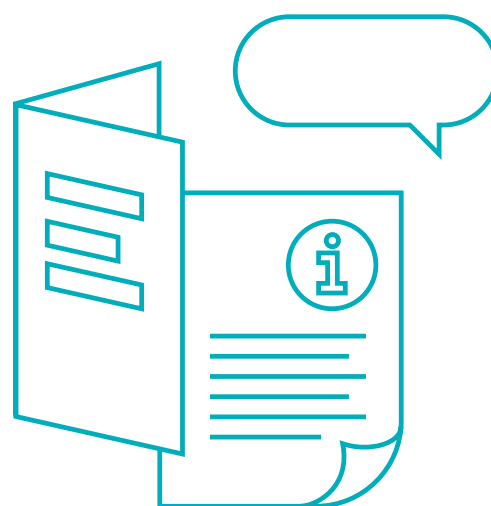
68 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2023: Expenditure Report*, (DPER 2022), p. 26.

While these actions provide some supports for low-income families they do not go far enough. Public transport cost reductions are only beneficial to those who have access to such services, while the drug payment scheme adjustment is unlikely to benefit low-income families who will have access to the Medical Card.

More targeted and effective solutions would be the extension of the Fuel Allowance to recipients of the Working Family Payment in order to protect working families on low incomes<sup>69</sup> by providing them with support for increased energy costs. Targeting supports as opposed to universal interventions is a more effective means of tackling energy and fuel poverty.<sup>70</sup> The continued inaction on benchmarking of social welfare rates to date means that those dependent on such payments will continue to struggle to make ends meet.<sup>71</sup>

### Effective and Fair Administration of Income Supports

The Irish Social Welfare system provides an important role in preventing poverty and supporting people to access employment.<sup>72</sup> According to SILC, income from social transfers play an important role in preventing poverty. The exclusion of social transfers from income sees the at risk of poverty rate rise from 13.1 per cent to 36.7 per cent.<sup>73</sup> For individuals who do not have sufficient social insurance contributions for contributory payments, a range of social assistance payments are available providing for 'the main contingencies putting people at risk of poverty'.<sup>74</sup>



The social welfare and tax systems should be responsive to different family structures and parenting arrangements. Currently there is a lack of data on the issue of shared parenting in Ireland. According to the last Census almost one in five families in

69 Society of St Vincent de Paul, *Budget 2023: What Does it Mean for the People in Poverty?* (SVP 2022) <<https://bit.ly/426Dwkh>> accessed 28 April 2023.

70 Barrett, M., Farrell, N. and Roantree, *Energy Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland* (ESRI 2022).

71 Social Justice Ireland, *Government cost of living package fails to reach many of the most vulnerable* <<https://bit.ly/3NTi7UZ>> accessed 14 June 2022

72 National Economic and Social Council, *Toward a More Integrated Income Support System* (NESC March 2021) 5.

73 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

74 National Economic and Social Council, *Toward a More Integrated Income Support System* (NESC March 2021) 5.

Ireland were one parent families.<sup>75</sup> It is likely that some level of shared parenting is present amongst this cohort of the population.<sup>76</sup> A survey on shared parenting published in 2017 highlighted the financial impact experienced by those in shared parenting arrangements and a need for the social welfare system to be responsive to this.<sup>77</sup>

Reform of existing social welfare and tax supports is needed to ensure shared parenting is promoted and supported. For example, both the One Parent Family and Job Seekers Transition payments apply rules relating to co-habitation. Families who have shared parent arrangements are often assessed as co-habiting and this acts a financial disincentive. A child-centred approach would ensure that rules are amended to ensure that the social welfare system would meet the best interest of the child.<sup>78</sup>

The Department of Social Protection has published a strategy on customer service which sets out its vision for customer service and the actions required to realise this. The Department as a member of the International Social Security Association (ISSA) has received recognition for the quality of its service delivery.<sup>79</sup> As part of its model of customer service the Department adopts a customer focus approach and captures the 'voice of the participant' through a range of fora.<sup>80</sup> Other components include staff training and various means of capturing and measuring feedback.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the Department's customer focus approach, anecdotal evidence indicates that customer service at the Department of Social Protection is problematic for some social welfare recipients. In particular, groups working with one parent families have indicated that the provision of information on entitlements needs improvement and there is a lack of consistency of service delivery by staff across the organisation.<sup>82</sup> To further exacerbate the experience of poor customer service, in some instances there is a requirement for lone parents to provide the same information to different bodies

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75 Central Statistics Office, *Census of Population 2016 - Profile 4 Households and Families (CSO)* <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp4hf/cp4hf/fmls/>> accessed 14 June 2022.

76 One Family, *Submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare Reform - Your Vision, Our Future* (One Family 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Hqd641>> accessed 15 June 2022.

77 One Family, *Ireland's First National Shared Parenting Survey* (One Family) 12.

78 One Family, *Submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare Reform - Your Vision, Our Future* (One Family 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Hqd641>> accessed 15 June 2022.

79 Department of Social Protection, *Customer Service Strategy 2020 - 2022* (Department of Social Protection 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3Ht9nHY>> accessed 15 June 2022, 15.

80 *ibid* 18.

81 *ibid*.

82 One Family, *Submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare Reform - Your Vision, Our Future* (One Family 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Hqd641>> accessed 15 June 2022.

charged with administering supports. Reform of existing systems and processes would ensure a more efficient use of resources and a reduced burden on those accessing the system.<sup>83</sup>

Members of the Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality have supported a call for improved social protection services. In particular the Citizens Assembly supported 'greater efficiency and accountability for public funding and reprioritisation between current spending and revenue raising'.<sup>84</sup>

## Ensuring that one parent families have sufficient access to income supports

*Investing in Children* calls for Member States to ensure that means tested and targeted benefits avoid creating work disincentives for lone parents and second earners. Over the last recession (2008-2013), research has highlighted that discretionary policy changes particularly affected the incomes of lone parents. It is vital that measures are taken to increase income for lone parents to address the discrepancies of the WFP that have a negative impact on lone parents.

Since 2016, nine reports on one parent families and poverty have been published, including the 2017 Joint Committee on Social Protection Report on the Position of Lone Parents in Ireland.<sup>85</sup> Each of these reports paints a similar picture of children growing up in the grip of poverty. Budget 2023, when stripped from once-off emergency payments, will entrench lone parent households and their children in deeper poverty. Analysis from the ESRI analysis confirms that lone parents will be slightly worse off in 2023 compared to price adjusted policies.<sup>86</sup> Analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre shows that even with the extra cost of living payments and social welfare increases, the shortfall in the income of a one parent family with two children rose from €82.73 at the end 2022 to €93.32 in 2023.<sup>87</sup>

The Working Family Payment (WFP) is a weekly tax-free payment available to employees with children. It gives extra financial support to people on low pay. You must be an employee to qualify for WFP and you cannot qualify if you are only self-employed. Currently one-parent families need to work the same number of hours per week as two-parent families to benefit from the Working Family Payment.

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83 One Family, *Submission to the Commission on Taxation and Welfare Reform - Your Vision, Our Future* (One Family 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Hqd641>> accessed 15 June 2022.

84 The Citizens Assembly, *Report of the Citizens Assembly on gender equality* (The Citizens Assembly 2021) 138.

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

86 ESRI, *Post-Budget Briefing Budget 2023: Distributional impact analysis* (ESRI 2022)

87 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *Budget 2023 MESL Impact Briefing*, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2022).

A reduction in the weekly threshold to 15 hours per week for one-parent families would reduce the disproportionate pressure they are under and help them increase their earning capacity.

Recent budgets have introduced changes to social welfare payments to address the high levels of poverty in one parent families. However, barriers still remain. For example, once a parent's youngest child turns 14, the parent must change to a normal Jobseeker Payment or Working Family Payment, depending on their circumstances. This can lead to a significant drop in income, at a time when the cost of raising a child becomes more expensive. Analysis provided by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice's MESL Research Centre in their 2022 pre-budget submission notes that a lone parent working full time on the National Minimum Wage loses €53 per week when transferring from JST to WFP.<sup>88</sup>

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88 VPSJ, *MESL Pre-Budget 2022*, (VPSJ 2021), 8.



# Recommendations

## Budget 2024

- Raise the Qualified Child Increase by a minimum of €8.50 for children under 12 and a minimum of €12.50 for children over 12.<sup>89</sup>
- Expand the Fuel Allowance to families in receipt of the Working Family Payment.
- Benchmark the Daily Expenses Allowance for children to the Increase for a Qualified Child and ensure a differential rate for over and under 12s is also applied.
- Introduce the International Protection Child Payment. In Budget 2024, to take account of the higher costs for older children, the rate should be set at €32 for children over 12 and €20 for children under 12. Commit to incrementally increasing the rates of the payment over the next three budgets so that it aligns to Child Benefit.

## Medium-term

- Benchmark the Daily Expenses Rate to the rate of the the Qualified Child Increase.
- Extend Jobseekers Transition Payment to parents in work, education or training until their youngest child reaches the end of second level education.
- Further develop IT and administration systems to ensure families can efficiently maximise their incomes. Once documentation or verification of circumstances is provided by a customer once it should be uploaded to the system. Entitlements should be automatically added to a customer's account.

89 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Social Welfare Benefits 25 April 2023 [19289/23].



# Recommendations

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## Long-term

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

# Food Poverty





## 2022 v 2023 – Overview statistics and policy developments

### STATISTICS:

In 2022, the proportion of the population unable to afford a set of 11 goods and services considered the norm for society was 17.1 per cent, an increase from the 2021 rate of 13.8 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

This rose to 20.1 per cent amongst under 18s.<sup>2</sup>

In relation to the food-related deprivation items, 3.7 per cent of the population were unable to afford a roast once a week, increasing to 11.3 per cent in families headed by a lone parent.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the number of individuals experiencing one of three food deprivation indicators captured in SILC, the rate of food poverty was 8.9 per cent in 2021, down from 13.1 per cent in 2014.<sup>4</sup> Households with children are more at risk of food poverty and this risk increases by family size.<sup>5</sup> In 2018, 19 per cent of 10 to 17 year-old children went to school or bed hungry compared to 22 per cent in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2022' (CSO 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3Oto5NC>> accessed 23 November 2022.

2 *ibid.*

3 *ibid.*

4 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <https://bit.ly/3TUOiqh> accessed 1 November 2022.

5 Carney and Maitre, *Social Inclusion Technical Paper No. 3, Dublin and Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection* (DEASP 2012).

6 Költő and Gavin et al *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018*. (Department of Health & Galway: Health Promotion Research Centre NUIG 2020).

The latest research on the gap in costs between rural and urban shows that in 2020, the weekly cost of a healthy food basket for a two-parent family with two children (one attending primary school and one attending secondary school) living in a rural area was €169 compared to €147 in an urban area.<sup>7</sup>

### POLICY DEVELOPMENTS:

- ❓ An evaluation of the entire School Meals Programme (which includes both cold food provision and hot school meals) was published in March 2023.<sup>8</sup> Amongst the key overall findings is that the programme is viewed as a positive initiative with many important impacts.<sup>9</sup>
- ❓ The evaluation makes a number of important recommendations including that all children should receive a hot school meal and this should be achieved by taking a progressive universalist approach to expanding the programme.<sup>10</sup> In response to this, the Minister for Social Protection stated that from 2024 hot meals will begin to be rolled out on a phased basis to primary schools not currently delivering this option with universal provision achieved by 2030.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2020?* (2021)

8 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*

11 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces plans for roll-out of Hot School Meals to all Primary Schools', <https://bit.ly/44Mfs8n> accessed 9 May 2023.

## FOOD POVERTY

**“All the small increases add up. I have five growing children and they are constantly hungry, no filling them. So, it’s made things harder.”**

**“Weeks there I had to decide - do I pay for food or put money on electricity. Robbing Peter to pay Paul.”<sup>12</sup>**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides that every child has the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical health and governments have an obligation to combat disease and malnutrition through the provision of adequate nutritious food.<sup>13</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that in implementing this right, providing food in school is ‘desirable to ensure all pupils have access to a full meal every day’ and recommends that this is combined with education on nutrition and health.<sup>14</sup> Ireland was last examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee called for policies which ensure all children have an adequate standard of living to be strengthened and that the school meals and programmes that provide access to nutrition are expanded.<sup>15</sup>

The *EU Recommendation on Investing in Children* calls on Member States to take action to tackle food poverty by introducing complementary in-kind benefits related to nutrition and to tackle ‘the social gradient in unhealthy lifestyles’ by providing

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12 Barnardos, *Food Insecurity in Ireland Impact on children and their parents*, (Barnardos 2023), p. 8.

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

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

15 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

children with ‘access to balanced diets’.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore the recommendation calls for investment ‘in prevention, particularly during early childhood years, by putting in place comprehensive policies that combine nutrition, health, education and social measures’.<sup>17</sup>

Food poverty is one of the driving forces behind higher rates of obesity and ill-health in disadvantaged communities.<sup>18</sup> The high cost of good quality, nutritious food often prices low-income families out of maintaining healthy diets by limiting their choices to more processed and refined food-based diets as a cost-effective way of meeting daily calorific requirements.<sup>19</sup> In Ireland, by age three, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have consumed energy-dense food like hamburgers and crisps, but less likely to have eaten fresh fruit or vegetables.<sup>20</sup> Poor nutrition in children is linked to reduced development, cognitive function, delayed school enrolment, impaired concentration, increased illness, absenteeism and early school leaving.<sup>21</sup> Being able to buy nutritious food locally or having access to transport to a local supermarket helps to prevent food poverty, and more economically advantaged households do not have to travel as far for food shopping.<sup>22</sup> Evidence also shows that families living on low and fixed incomes tended to cut back on food expenditure as it was easier to control than the cost of rent, utilities, or education.<sup>23</sup> Parents - and mothers in particular - within low-income households sometimes reduce their food intake in order to provide more for their children.<sup>24</sup>

Parents describe feeling anxious and guilty about the type of food they provide as feeding their child is their priority rather than the quality or content of the food.<sup>25</sup> They may choose unhealthy processed convenience foods so that their children will want to eat it and will not experience hunger.<sup>26</sup>

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- 16 European Commission ‘Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ (20 February 2013) C(2013), 8.
- 17 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
- 18 Richard Layte and Cathal McCrory, *Growing up in Ireland Overweight and obesity among 9 year olds*. (DCYA 2011).
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 James Williams, Aisling Murray, Cathal McCrory, Sinéad McNally, *Growing Up in Ireland - Development From Birth To Three Years* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2013) 37.
- 21 Alessandro Rhyll Demaio, Francesco Branca, Decade of action on nutrition: our window to act on the double burden of malnutrition, *BMJ Glob Health* 2017; 3
- 22 Richard Layte and Cathal McCrory, *Growing up in Ireland Overweight and obesity among 9 year olds*. (DCYA 2011) 33
- 23 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Stories of Struggle: Experiences of living below the minimum essential standard of living* (SVP 2018).
- 24 Society of St Vincent de Paul, *“It’s the hardest job in the world”: An exploratory research study with one-parent families being assisted by the Society of St Vincent de Paul* (SVP 2014).
- 25 Safefood, *Food on a low income Four households tell their story* (Safefood 2011) 5, 48, 51.
- 26 *ibid.*, 22.

Energy-dense foods composed of refined grains, added sugars, or fats are cheaper per calorie than healthier nutrient-dense foods. In Ireland, by age three, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have consumed energy-dense food like hamburgers and crisps, but less likely to have eaten fresh fruit or vegetables.<sup>27</sup>

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

Food poverty is defined as the inability to have an adequate or nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility.<sup>28</sup> The latest deprivation statistics, from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022, show an increase in the number of people unable to afford basic goods and services which are considered the norm for society.<sup>29</sup>

An analysis of deprivation amongst those living below the poverty line is provided in SILC 2021.<sup>30</sup> This shows that in 2021 the consistent poverty rate for the entire population was 4 per cent. Of those living in consistent poverty 27.2 per cent were unable to afford a roast once a week while 17.9 per cent were unable to afford meat, chicken or fish every other day.<sup>31</sup> This was substantially higher than the rates for those not in consistent poverty who reported not being able to afford such items at a rate of 2.7 and 1.0 per cent respectively.<sup>32</sup>

**Table 1: SILC 2021 Statistics**

	Percentage of individuals in consistent poverty	Percentage of individuals not in consistent poverty
Unable to afford a roast once a week	27.2	2.7
Unable to afford meat, chicken or fish every other day	17.9	1.0

The 2022 Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) does not provide the same level of analysis regarding deprivation as that captured for the previous year.<sup>33</sup> In relation to the food-related deprivation items, 3.7 per cent of the population were

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

28 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2018?* (Safe Food 2019).

29 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO 2023).

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 *ibid.*

33 The results of SILC 2022 were published in two separate reports - *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2022* (published in November 2022) and *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (published in February 2023).

unable to afford a roast once a week, with this increasing to 11.3 per cent in families headed by a lone parent.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, overall, 1.4 per cent were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day and this rose to 6.3 per cent of one parent households.<sup>35</sup>

Based on the number of individuals experiencing one of three food deprivation indicators captured in SILC, the rate of food poverty was 8.9 per cent in 2021, down from 13.1 per cent in 2014.<sup>36</sup> Households with children are more at risk of food poverty and this risk increases by family size.<sup>37</sup> In 2018, 19 per cent of 10 to 17 year-old children went to school or bed hungry compared to 22 per cent in 2014.<sup>38</sup>

A healthy diet is out-of-reach for families with inadequate disposable incomes with food costs rising as children grow older.<sup>39</sup> Low-income households can often only afford cheap, concentrated energy from foods full of fat, salt and sugar rather than healthier, more expensive foods such as wholegrains, fish, vegetables and fruit.<sup>40</sup> A household with a teenager, reliant on social welfare, is required to spend 30 per cent of their income to meet the cost of a healthy food basket.<sup>41</sup> Rural households are particularly at risk of food poverty with higher costs of accessing a healthy diet.<sup>42</sup> The latest research on the gap in costs between rural and urban shows that in 2020, the weekly cost of a healthy food basket for a two-parent family with two children (one attending primary school and one attending secondary school) living in a rural area was €169 compared to €147 in an urban area.<sup>43</sup>



**Weekly cost of a healthy food basket for a two parent family with two children in 2020**

<b>€169</b>	<b>€147</b>
RURAL	URBAN

34 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2022' (CSO 2022).

35 *ibid.*

36 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3TUOiqh>> accessed 1 November 2022.

37 Carney and Maître, *Social Inclusion Technical Paper No. 3, Dublin and Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection* (DEASP 2012).

38 Költő and Gavin et al *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018*. (Department of Health & Galway: Health Promotion Research Centre NUIG 2020).

39 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2020?* (2021).

40 Adam Drewnowski, *The Real Contribution of Added Sugars and Fats to Obesity, Epidemiologic Reviews*, Volume 29, Issue 1, January 2007, Pages 160–171.

41 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2020?* (2021).

42 *ibid.*

43 *ibid.*

A survey published in February 2023, found that amongst respondents who were parents, one-third were always or sometimes worried about being unable to provide sufficient food for their children.<sup>44</sup> This was an increase from a similar survey conducted in 2022 whereby one-quarter of parents who responded had such concerns.<sup>45</sup> There was also an increase in the proportion of parents that said in the past year, they skipped meals or reduced portions to ensure children have enough to eat (rising to 29 per cent from 24 per cent).<sup>46</sup> Just over one-third of parents indicated that they have never reduced their spending in order to afford food costs.<sup>47</sup> The continued impact of the cost of living crisis is no doubt impacting these families in a more pronounced way as well as expanding outwards the numbers struggling (see section on Income Adequacy). Benchmarking social welfare rates to a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL), is critical and could mitigate against food poverty as such a benchmark takes account of the cost of an adequate and nutritious diet.

### Providing access to food through schools and other settings

In-kind support (i.e. provision of food) for access to food is provided through the operation of the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) Food and Basic Material Support administered by the Department of Social Protection. The Food and Basic Material Support programme is allocated almost €95 million and 'is designed to support Member States in addressing the basic needs of the most deprived people in our community'.<sup>48</sup> The fund provides food to groups of people most in need including children in low-income households as well as those experiencing homelessness, certain members of the Traveller and Roma communities and victims of domestic violence.<sup>49</sup> Food Cloud is the national partner organisation that administers the food element of the programme to charities nationwide who are working at local level with children and families. These include organisations like Barnardos, Family Resource Centres, The Society of St Vincent De Paul, Youth Work Ireland, Youth Reach and others projects working with Travellers, victims of domestic violence and families experiencing homelessness.<sup>50</sup> There are 270,000 people supported each year by the scheme.<sup>51</sup>

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44 Barnardos, *Food Insecurity in Ireland – Impact on children and their parents*, (Barnardos 2023).

45 Amarach, *Food Poverty the Impact on Vulnerable Children and Families* (Barnardos 2022) <https://bit.ly/3bo0vlO>

46 Barnardos, *Food Insecurity in Ireland – Impact on children and their parents*, (Barnardos 2023).

47 *ibid.*

48 Department of Social Protection, '*ESF+ Food and Basic Material Support*' <<https://bit.ly/3VQE1NA>> accessed 9 May 2023.

49 *ibid.*

50 A list of charities in receipt of FEAD Food Product support can be found at: <<https://bit.ly/44P4MWD>> accessed 9 May 2023.

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

Schools are an excellent setting to reach children, teachers, families and the surrounding community.<sup>52</sup> They provide a social environment where children can access and enjoy food, without financial constraints.<sup>53</sup> Generally, there are two approaches to food education and school food: education separated from school meals, and education integrated into the provision of school meals.<sup>54</sup> A systematic review of 42 European interventions to promote healthy diet and obesity prevention provides strong evidence that multi-component interventions (food availability, education curriculum integration, and parent involvement) had relatively strong effects on dietary improvements among children.<sup>55</sup> The message is that multi-component interventions are more effective than only providing food to children.

Ireland is unusual in the European Union (EU) context in not providing a universal school meal programme.<sup>56</sup> However, a targeted School Meals Programme is funded by the Department of Social Protection. The programme provides funding towards the provision of food through the allocation of a per pupil rate for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the vast majority of which is in the form of cold food provision. Funding provided during the 2021/2022 school year, enabled 1,257 schools and 221 organisations to participate in the scheme benefitting 228,007 children.<sup>57</sup> In the most recent Budget announcement, there is an allocation of €91.6 million for school meals in 2023, an increase from 2022 (€68.1 million).<sup>58</sup> The objective of the scheme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided to them.<sup>59</sup>

In September 2019, the Department of Social Protection launched a hot school meals pilot which involved 37 primary schools benefitting 6,744 students for the 2019/2020 academic year.<sup>60</sup> The *Programme for Government* committed to

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52 Healthy Food For All, *A Good Practice Guide to School Food Initiatives* (Healthy Food for All 2009).

53 *ibid.*

54 M Oostindjer and JAschemann-Witzel et al, *Are school meals a viable and sustainable tool to improve the healthiness and sustainability of children's diet and food consumption? A cross-national comparative perspective* (2017) *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 57:18, 3942-3958.

55 *ibid.*

56 *ibid.*

57 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <https://bit.ly/3TUOiqh> accessed 1 November 2022.

58 Government of Ireland *Budget 2023 Expenditure Report* (DPER 2022).

59 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 14 July 2020 [15434/20].

60 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, School Meals Programme, Written Answers 14 July 2020 [15434/20]. All primary schools (over 3,000) were invited to apply with 506 schools registering interest, suggesting high demand for the limited pilot. The schools chosen to participate in the pilot were selected randomly, having regard to geographical spread, numbers enrolled, range of suppliers and the overall budget available.



'continue to review and expand the rollout of the Hot School Meals initiative'.<sup>61</sup> Since then the government has made sustained investment in expanding the provision of hot school meals:

- Budget 2020 and 2021 provided €4 million and €5.5 million respectively to provide hot school meals to an additional 35,000 children currently receiving the cold lunch option.<sup>62</sup>
- An additional €3 million funding in Budget 2022 meant a further 16,000 students, from schools that previously expressed an interest in the scheme, would benefit from January 2022.<sup>63</sup>
- In July 2022, the government announced that an additional 320 schools, that were awarded DEIS status as part of Budget 2022, would be invited to participate in the school meals programme. This extension included 284 schools who could provide hot school meals from September 2022.<sup>64</sup>

There has been an overall expansion of the hot schools meal scheme from an initial cohort of 37 to over 500 schools since the commencement of the pilot scheme in 2019.<sup>65</sup>

An evaluation of the entire School Meals Programme (which includes both cold food provision and hot school meals) was published in March 2023.<sup>66</sup> A wide range of stakeholders were consulted throughout the process.<sup>67</sup> This included, members of the school community, parents suppliers, charities and most importantly children who consume school meals.<sup>68</sup> Amongst the key overall findings is that the programme is viewed as a positive initiative with many important impacts.<sup>69</sup> This included pupils more likely to have positive rather than negative attitudes to the meals, parents reported children had an better attitudes to food and improved concentration and members of the school community indicating an improvement in

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61 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government, Our Shared Future* (Government Publications 2020) 96.

62 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 16 January 2023.

63 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces extension of Hot School Meals Programme' (Press release 22 November 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3GeUvpe>> accessed 31 January 2022.

64 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 16 January 2023.

65 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 16 January 2023.

66 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

67 *ibid.*

68 *ibid.*

69 *ibid.*

outcomes such as attendance and concentration.<sup>70</sup> A review of academic literature undertaken as part of the evaluation noted improved performance in school and positive impacts on mental health however, while the qualitative consultations also report such impacts, more in-depth longitudinal research is needed to show a causal effect.<sup>71</sup> The provision of school meals is identified as a means of tackling food poverty in the evaluation.<sup>72</sup> However, this is only effective at the school level as the current targeted approach focuses on provision at a school level (e.g. DEIS schools) as opposed to disadvantaged children generally who may attend DEIS or non-DEIS schools.<sup>73</sup>

The evaluation makes a number of important recommendations for further action.<sup>74</sup> Most significantly, the evaluation recommends all children should receive a hot school meal and this should be achieved by taking a progressive universalist approach to expanding the programme.<sup>75</sup> In response to this, the Minister for Social Protection stated that from 2024 hot meals will begin to be rolled on a phased basis to primary schools not currently delivering this option.<sup>76</sup> The Minister commits to universal provision by 2030 albeit with the ambition 'to move faster'.<sup>77</sup> The universal provision of hot meals in a school setting counters stigma and provides a social environment where children can access and enjoy food without financial constraints.<sup>78</sup>

The Minister also announced an increase to the current rates of funding for school meals back dated to January 2023.<sup>79</sup> The current rates of funding for school meals are €0.60 for breakfast or a snack; €1.40 for a cold lunch and €1.90 for dinner.<sup>80</sup> The rate for hot school meals is €2.90. In many instances, meals are prepared offsite and delivered to the school.<sup>81</sup> The rates payable have been unchanged since 2003 and recent increases in inflation have meant that providers are now struggling to

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70 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

71 *ibid.*

72 *ibid.*

73 *ibid.*

74 *ibid.*

75 *ibid.*

76 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces plans for roll-out of Hot School Meals to all Primary Schools', <<https://bit.ly/44Mfs8n>> accessed 9 May 2023.

77 *ibid.*

78 Healthy Food for All, *A good practice guide to School Food Initiatives* (Healthy Food for All 2009).

79 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces plans for roll-out of Hot School Meals to all Primary Schools', <<https://bit.ly/44Mfs8n>> accessed 9 May 2023.

80 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

81 Heather Humphries TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, *School Meals Programme*, Written Answers 14 July 2020 [15434/20].

continue to provide meals to schools.<sup>82</sup> The new rates of funding are €0.75 for breakfast (increase of 15c); €1.70 for a cold lunch (increase of 30c) and €2.50 for dinner (increase of 60c). The rate for hot school meals rose to €3.20 (increase of 30c).<sup>83</sup>

The report raises concerns about the issue of 'holiday hunger'.<sup>84</sup> This phenomenon relates to the inability of children to access 'an adequate supply of nutritious food' outside of school term times.<sup>85</sup> Participants in the evaluation study noted the challenges with providing meals over the long summer holidays but principals in particular saw the potential in expanding the programme during shorter holiday periods such as Easter and mid-term.<sup>86</sup> The report recommends that the Working Group on Food Poverty Chaired by Minister of State Joe O'Brien should align any future developments as this group comprises the cross government approach needed to address this.<sup>87</sup>



In the UK, the establishment of holiday clubs in schools and communities in response to this issue ensured children got access to nutritious food but also the opportunity to engage in healthy activities as opposed to being more sedentary (a particular issue for low income families who may not be able to afford participation in paid activities) during holiday time.<sup>88</sup> Generally, the Irish school meals programme does not provide funding to cover school holidays or for days when the school is

82 Carl O'Brien, "It's at breaking point': Thousands of pupils risk losing school meals', *The Irish Times*, 21 December 2022.

83 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces plans for roll-out of Hot School Meals to all Primary Schools', <https://bit.ly/44Mfs8n> accessed 9 May 2023.

84 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

85 Pamela L. Graham et al. *School Holiday Food Provision in the UK: A Qualitative Investigation of Needs, Benefits, and Potential for Development Frontiers in Public Health*, (2016) Vol. 4, Article 172.

86 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

87 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023).

88 Pamela L. Graham et al. *School Holiday Food Provision in the UK: A Qualitative Investigation of Needs, Benefits, and Potential for Development Frontiers in Public Health*, (2016) Vol. 4, Article 172.

closed. Calls have been made for this to be extended through the summer months and other holiday periods.<sup>89</sup> There is a need to clearly identify a means of continuing this initiative to combat holiday hunger.

Complementary to school provision, a pilot scheme to provide hot meals in ELC services was announced in November<sup>90</sup> and a policy of the provision of meals in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings and School Aged Childcare will be developed.<sup>91</sup> The new funding scheme of €150,000 will pilot the provision of hot meals to children in ELC settings. Pilot sites will include ELC settings operating in areas of disadvantage. Results from this pilot scheme will inform the wider work which is under way to develop a model to address the impacts of disadvantage in ELC. To further support the provision of nutritious foods in these settings Early Childcare Nutrition Standards have been published.<sup>92</sup>

### A cross-government approach to tackling food poverty

The Programme for Government has committed to 'work across government to address food poverty in children and ensure no child goes hungry'.<sup>93</sup> Further action on this is provided in the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* which commits to developing a programme of work to explore the drivers of food poverty and to identify mitigating actions.<sup>94</sup> This will require coordinating activities across several government departments. It is positive to see some joint working between departments on the school meals rollout through the development of nutrition standards for the Hot School Meals Scheme,<sup>95</sup> and the launch of the first *Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 Year-Olds, Children's Food Pyramid* in October 2020.<sup>96</sup>

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89 Kitty Holland 'Thousands at risk of holiday hunger if school meals dropped' Irish Times, 11 June 2020.

90 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Minister O'Gorman announces new scheme to pilot the provision of hot meals to children in early learning and childcare settings', 22 November 2022.

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

92 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Department of Health *Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services* (DCEDIY, HSE, Saferood 2023).

93 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government, Our Shared Future* (Government Publications 2020) 96.

94 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection 'Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025' (DEASP 2020).

95 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection, 21 December 2020. The Department of Health, the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education and Skills are working together on the development of the standards.

96 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 12 January 2021.

In May 2021, a cross-government Working Group on Food Poverty was established by Minister of State with responsibility for social inclusion, Joe O'Brien TD which also includes community and voluntary organisations.<sup>97</sup> The Group has focused on two pieces of work. The first was a mapping exercise to establish what government initiatives currently exist to address food poverty.<sup>98</sup> This resulted in the publication of a report in July 2022 highlighting the various schemes, initiatives and programmes delivered across government departments to address food poverty. The report highlighted that in 2021, €89 million was provided in funding for programmes that directly address food poverty (such as that provided under ESF+) with a further €399 million allocated to schemes with a broader focus but with a food poverty aspect.<sup>99</sup>

The second piece of work involved commissioning case study research on a small number of geographic areas on the prevalence and drivers of food poverty alongside a mapping exercise of the actors and service providers in these areas.<sup>100</sup> As part of the research an in-depth literature review of food poverty and its impact on children will be developed.<sup>101</sup> While children and young people will not be directly consulted as part of this research it is envisaged that individuals and organisations who do take part will capture the impact of food poverty on the household as a whole (i.e. including its impact on children and young people).<sup>102</sup> The findings will help to inform the work of the Group and will include recommendations to assist individuals and families experiencing food poverty.<sup>103</sup> This research was due to be completed by the end of 2022 but has not yet been published.<sup>104</sup>

In Budget 2023, Minister O'Brien announced an allocation of €400,000 in funding to support the piloting of a case worker approach to tackling food poverty.<sup>105</sup> The purpose of this approach is to focus on providing a holistic approach rather than

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97 Membership of the group includes the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; Education; Health; Rural and Community Development and Social Protection. Organisations from the community and voluntary sector are also involved in the group including the Children's Rights Alliance, Crosscare and Society of St Vincent de Paul.

98 *ibid.*

99 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <https://bit.ly/3TUOiqh> accessed 1 November 2022.

100 Joe O'Brien TD, Minister for State for Social Inclusion, Food Poverty, Written Answers, 25 November 2021 [57822/21].

101 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

102 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

103 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

104 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

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

merely providing direct food support, for example, this could include looking at whether a family is accessing all income supports they are entitled to. A tender document has been published with responses due by May 2023.<sup>106</sup>

A mid-term review of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* is currently being undertaken.<sup>107</sup> As part of this review a public consultation took place in 2022 with further stakeholder engagement also planned.<sup>108</sup> The review will assess existing goals and commitments, including those related to food poverty.



## Recommendations

### Budget 2024

- Realise the commitment made in response to the publication of the evaluation of the school meals programme to fund all DEIS schools to provide a hot school meal in 2024 [Estimated Cost: €7.7 million].<sup>109</sup>
- Alongside the commitment to expand hot meals to all DEIS primary schools, invest additional resources to ensure that all Special Schools and DEIS Secondary schools can provide a hot school meal in 2024 [Estimated Cost: €6.3 million].<sup>110</sup>
- Put in place an implementation plan for the roll-out of universal provision of hot meals in all schools by 2030 at the latest.
- Fund and develop a pilot initiative for the expansion of school meals during holiday time by leveraging existing community infrastructure and relationships between schools and summer camps.

106 'RFT for the provision of case worker services by organisations involved in emergency food provision' available at <https://bit.ly/3VTkprW> accessed 10 May 2023.

107 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

108 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 11 November 2022.

109 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023), Appendix 9.

110 RSM, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, (DSP 2023), Appendix 9.



# Recommendations

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## Medium-term

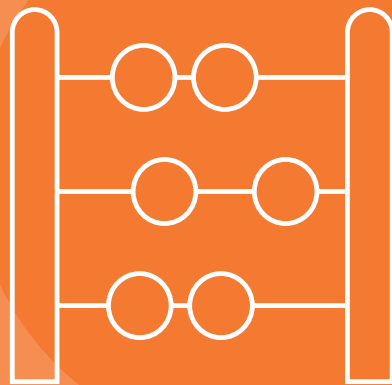
- Building on the case model approach funded under Budget 2023, develop best practice models working at a local level to address food poverty. Scale these initiatives up through the support of government and philanthropic funding.
  - Finalise and publish the research on exploring the drivers of food poverty and identify mitigating actions in line with the commitment in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.
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## Long-term

- Using the mapping exercise currently being undertaken by the Food Poverty Working Group led by the Department of Social Protection and the research on the drivers of food poverty, develop a national action plan to tackle food poverty with a view to associated plans being put in place at local level.



# Early Childhood Education and Care





## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

**“I had tried a couple of places for jobs - couldn’t find anything that would cover school hours - and the youngest was out at half past one at the time. It was a lot of anxiety around the whole situation to be honest. When you can only work a few hours, you can’t pay childcare then after that. Nobody wants to take you then either. It is very difficult to find an actual job that will take you within school hours.”<sup>1</sup>**

The *EU Recommendation on Investing in Children* recommends that the State ‘provide access to high quality, inclusive early education and care; ensure it is affordable and adapt provision to the needs of families’.<sup>2</sup> The Recommendation calls on Member States to reduce inequality by investing in early childhood education and care.<sup>3</sup> This can be achieved by providing access to high-quality services which

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1 Fiona Dukelow, Joe Whelan, and Margaret Scanlan, *In Transit - Documenting the lived experiences of welfare, working and caring for one-parent families claiming Jobseeker’s Transitional Payment*, (ISS21 UCC 2023).

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

3 *ibid.*

are affordable and responsive to the needs of families.<sup>4</sup> Specific incentives should be provided to ensure children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in early childhood education and care in a way that does not stigmatise or segregate.<sup>5</sup>

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that support for parents, in the early years of a child's life, is particularly important. In interpreting this provision, the UN Committee requires the State 'to take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services, maternity protection and facilities for which they are eligible'.<sup>6</sup> Ireland agreed to be reviewed every five years on its progress in implementing the rights in the Convention and was last examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee called for increased access to affordable childcare for parents engaged in the labour market, and especially those experiencing disadvantage.<sup>7</sup> The Committee also recommended that the Irish Government increase the level of funding allocated to childcare and move towards a publicly funded model childcare.

### Access to affordable ECEC for all children and their families

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is defined as non-parental care provided to children before they enter the formal education system.<sup>8</sup> Historically, Ireland's comparative expenditure on ECEC has lagged behind other countries. Data from the Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows, up to a few years ago, Ireland's public spending in this area was in the second lowest place.<sup>9</sup> The OECD is clear that if ECEC is not sufficiently subsidised, fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in it.<sup>10</sup> This echoes the concerns made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to discrimination in early childhood where the provision of services does not follow a universal model.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, the Government pledged to continue increasing investment in ECEC in

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4 ibid 778.

5 ibid 778.

6 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 7 on Implementing Rights in Early Childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1 para 21.

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

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

9 OECD, 'OECD Family database PF3.1: Public spending on childcare and early education' <<https://bit.ly/3az4cRP>> accessed 14 February 2022.

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

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

order to bring Ireland in line with OECD averages.<sup>12</sup> Budget 2023 made a significant step forward in this regard by committing to investing €1 billion in early years, a commitment contained in *First5* which has been realised 5 years ahead of schedule.<sup>13</sup>

At present, the State provides subsidies directly to all providers of childcare services in an attempt to reduce the financial cost for parents and carers availing of services at market prices.<sup>14</sup> Public funding is only provided for programmes offered through providers registered with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Other forms of childcare such as that provided by relatives or unregistered childminders are not covered by publicly funded childcare subsidies or schemes.<sup>15</sup>

Comparatively, parents in Ireland are paying amongst the highest monthly fees for ECEC in Europe.<sup>16</sup> The provision of services by a market-model is a common factor for the three countries with the highest fees.<sup>17</sup> The latest available data shows that in 2020/21 average weekly fees in Ireland were €186.84 for a full day or €110.92 for part-time and €74.20 for sessional.<sup>18</sup> However, there is great geographical disparity. Across the country fees were highest in Dun Laoghaire/ Rathdown (at €244.08; €139.10; €84.71 respectively) versus the lowest in Carlow (€152.08; €88.36; €71.27 respectively).<sup>19</sup>

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has been in operation since November 2019 and is the primary scheme aimed at supporting parents with childcare costs.<sup>20</sup> Under NCS parents with the least income receive the highest subsidy rate<sup>21</sup> in line with

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12 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 'Minister Zappone announces Expert Group to develop a new Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare' (Press Release 18 September 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2YEo1Bk>> 14 February 2022.

13 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, "Minister O'Gorman secures €1 billion investment in early learning and childcare", (Press Release 28 September 2022).

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

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

16 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019. Eurydice Brief: Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

17 *ibid.*

18 Pobal, *Annual Early Years Profile Report 2020/2021* (Pobal 2022).

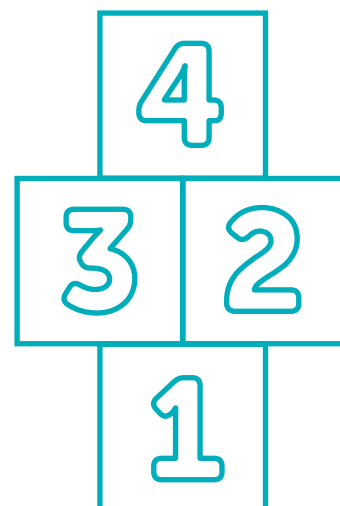
19 *ibid.*

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

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

the principle of progressive universalism.<sup>22</sup> Investment in the NCS in Budget 2023 has focused on the universal aspect of the scheme and from January 2023 families will receive a minimum universal subsidy of €1.40 per hour, an increase of €0.90 on the previous rate of €0.50.<sup>23</sup> The increase to the universal element of the NCS has meant that the cost of childcare has reduced for all parents.

While fees are high, the average hourly wage of staff working in the sector was €12.60.<sup>24</sup> The hourly rate for Early Years assistants, who constitute 49 per cent of all staff working with children, is €12.33 for those working with children participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE - a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children),<sup>25</sup> but just €11.77 for those working with non-ECCE children.<sup>26</sup> These rates of pay are close to the Living Wage of €12.30 per hour (2020/21).<sup>27</sup>



Since 2020, a number of critical phases to establishing an agreed wage for the sector have been complete. In December 2020, discussions commenced between employers and unions to advance a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for childcare.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent establishment<sup>29</sup> and work of this JLC led to the introduction of Employment Regulatory Orders for the sector to be introduced in September 2022.<sup>30</sup> A month prior to the introduction of the EROs a survey found that three-quarters (73 per cent) of managers and owners of early years services believe the EROs will have a positive effect on recruitment and retention, however, of this percentage 60 per cent

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

23 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman secures €1 billion investment in early learning and childcare', Press Release 28 September 2022.

24 Pobal, *Annual Early Years Profile Report 2020/2021* (Pobal 2022).

25 The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year and the programme year runs from September to June each year. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 'Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE)' <<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2459ee-early-childhood-care-and-education-programme-ecce/>> accessed 29 June 2022.

26 Pobal, *Annual Early Years Profile Report 2020/2021* (Pobal 2022).

27 *ibid.*

28 SIPTU, 'SIPTU to discuss childcare professionals' pay with Minister for Children and IBEC' (Press Release 10 December 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3g4FKhL>> accessed 14 November 2022.

29 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 'Minister English establishes Joint Labour Committee for the Early Years' Service Sector' (Press Release 21 June 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3e9tEzh>> accessed 20 December 2021.

30 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, "'Historic' new pay agreement to provide pay increases and wage structure for early learning and childcare workers - Ministers English and O'Gorman', (Press Release 7 September 2022).

indicated this would be dependent on future increases.<sup>31</sup> Over half of workers, 55 per cent, have indicated they would stay in the sector if there are agreed rates of pay with potential increases,<sup>32</sup> indicating that the EROs represent an important starting point to improve retention and recruitment in the sector.

As part of the overall system reform the Government appointed an Expert Group to develop a set of principles on which childcare in Ireland should be based and how additional funding should be structured drawing on international evidence.<sup>33</sup> Notably, the Group's Terms of Reference state that it was not asked to propose changes to the current model of delivery (i.e. privately operated provision) but that it should seek to further achieve the policy objectives of quality, affordability, accessibility and contributing to addressing disadvantage in a privately-operated market through increased public funding and public management.<sup>34</sup>

The Expert Group on the Funding Model's final report, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* was published in December 2021.<sup>35</sup> Arising from the report has been the introduction of a new Core Funding stream which seeks to ensure better staff pay and conditions, the improved management of fees and will ensure sustainable funding.<sup>36</sup> It will play a critical role in addressing the most challenging issues facing the sector. The introduction of Core Funding was contingent on EROs being in effect.<sup>37</sup>

While initially Budget 2022 committed to €207 million for year 1 of Core Funding this grew to €221 million in early 2022, in response to cost pressures and to €259 million in September 2022 based on capacity growth in the sector.<sup>38</sup> The funding is linked to quality improvement and requiring a freeze in parents' fees. More than 94 per cent

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31 SIPTU Big Start Campaign, *Early Years Staffing and Pay Survey*, (SIPTU 2022).

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.* The Group was asked to review the existing policy and approach against these principles and its effectiveness in delivering against objectives on quality, affordability, accessibility and contributing to addressing disadvantage; and finally drawing on international evidence, to consider how additional funding could be structured to deliver on the guiding principles and objectives.

34 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 'Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Expert Group: Terms of Reference' <<https://bit.ly/3oKzwbV>> accessed 14 February 2022.

35 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman launches major reform of funding for early learning and childcare following Report of Expert Group' (Press Release 7 December 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3H2Fkk1>> accessed 19 December 2021.

36 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 143.

37 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman publishes funding agreement for new €221 million Core Funding scheme', Press Release, (28 June 2022).

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

of services have signed up to Core Funding to date.<sup>39</sup> Providers are also be required to offer the NCS, which has led to a significant expansion of the number of providers offering access to the scheme.<sup>40</sup> From the period January 2022 to January 2023 the number of children in receipt of NCS subsidies has increased by 100 per cent and currently 111,000 are in receipt of support.<sup>41</sup>

## Support for families on low incomes

There is a need to poverty proof the ECEC system. To support parental labour market participation, *Investing in Children* calls for all families, particularly those in vulnerable situations and in disadvantaged areas to have access to ECEC. An analysis of OECD data indicates that supporting parents from low-income families to participate in full-time employment is a critical objective in terms of significantly reducing child poverty.<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding this, challenges exist in relation to accessing work with decent pay and conditions and a substantial number of households continue to experience in-work poverty.<sup>43</sup> Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most when ECEC services are closely linked to employment, health and social policies that promote a more equal distribution of resources across a population.<sup>44</sup>

In Ireland, while access to the National ECCE programme (universal two-year pre-school programmes) is free for all children, access to other forms of ECEC is not. Parents with an income below €26,000 per annum qualify for the maximum hourly childcare support subsidy under the NCS.<sup>45</sup> An enhanced hours subsidy provides up to 45 hours of childcare per week where both parents are engaged in work; or study; or transitioning out of work or study; or are unavailable to care for the child.<sup>46</sup> While the Expert Group on the Funding Model considered the requirement to be in work or study to be 'reasonable', they recognised the valid concerns of the impact of the 'limitation on children from disadvantaged families'.<sup>47</sup> Providing access to affordable

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

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

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

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

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

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

45 Government of Ireland, *National Childcare Scheme Policy Guidelines* <<https://bit.ly/2H91t6i>> accessed 30 June 2022.

46 *ibid.*

47 Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare*, (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth: 2021),132.

childcare is the single most important measure in addressing child poverty based on the evidence that what works is providing quality employment alongside quality childcare.<sup>48</sup>

A 2021 review of the NCS found that the benefits of the scheme were higher for low-income families and those living in disadvantaged areas, and more than half of families reported they had more money to spend, 14 per cent of very disadvantaged families said they had less money to spend under the scheme, partly due to the scheme's higher threshold rates for subsidies.<sup>49</sup> Another challenge with the NCS is the fact that subsidies do not take account of the actual variance in cost across Ireland. The fact that Ireland has a private market-based system means that childcare costs vary hugely across the State. Therefore, there are some instances whereby the maximum NCS subsidy will not cover the actual cost of childcare for parents.

The OECD is clear that if ECEC is not sufficiently subsidised, fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in it.<sup>50</sup> This echoes the concerns made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to discrimination in early childhood where the provision of services does not follow a universal model.<sup>51</sup> The State needs to provide free (or nearly free access to ECEC, for example, a small contribution of no more than €10 for people on the lowest incomes) for parents living in consistent poverty. This would include those currently on welfare payments or in low paid jobs.

The NCS has a Sponsor referral where special arrangements are made for vulnerable children and families, a referral is required from a Sponsor Body for a Sponsor Referral. The sponsor referral addressed instances where childcare is needed on child welfare, child protection, family support or other specified grounds. There are strict criteria applicable for a referral to be made. The need for a referral is determined by the relevant Sponsor Body and their decision is based on the particular need of the child in line with their defined criteria.<sup>52</sup>

There is a need to provide practical supports to marginalised families, such as families from the Traveller Community, to access ECEC. Traveller organisations supporting families on the ground have found that families are often not aware of the subsidies available for ECEC or how to apply for them. Even with the information about the supports available, families often face other barriers, such as low levels of literacy,

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

49 Frontier Economics, *12-Month Review of the National Childcare Scheme: A report prepared for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Ireland) (DCEDIY 2021)* 16.

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

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

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

to completing the necessary paperwork as well as a lack of flexibility with regard to hours of provision. Consideration should be given to utilising the European Social Funds available for the implementation of the Child Guarantee to invest in community workers on the ground to support Traveller families in accessing ECEC for their children.

Other short to medium-term solutions utilising existing mechanisms and available data while the new DEIS type-model is being developed, could include the adoption of a new eligibility criterion to access higher levels of subsidisation under the NCS. For example, the Medical Card could act as an important lever for access to childcare. Qualification for the Medical Card can mean that a child qualifies for other benefits including free school transport, no State exam fees, and some financial help with purchasing schoolbooks.<sup>53</sup> The Department are currently conducting a review of the ECCE programme and as part of this review harder to reach groups, such as Traveller and Roma families will be consulted.<sup>54</sup> This is to understand why the uptake is lower amongst these groups and to identify barriers which can be addressed through policy.<sup>55</sup> The report is due for completion in Q4 2023.<sup>56</sup>

Successive governments have invested in Child Income Supports and Child Benefit as a universal payment more so than provision of services as the main method of tackling child poverty.<sup>57</sup> However, as part of the calculation of reckonable income under the NCS, Child Benefit and child maintenance are currently included. Child Benefit is not assessed as means for any other payment or service, representing a significant shift in policy and practice.<sup>58</sup> Including Child Benefit as reckonable income pushes a lone parent working 19 hours per week over the income threshold to qualify for the maximum childcare support subsidy.<sup>59</sup> This demonstrates a lack of policy coherence in a context where Government wishes to support more lone parents in employment and where poverty rates among working lone parents are increasing.

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53 Citizens Information, 'Medical Cards' (Citizens Information, 11 December 2018) <<https://bit.ly/2lHXJNA>> .

54 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 24 February 2023.

55 *ibid.*

56 *ibid.*

57 Social Justice Ireland, 'Child Benefit and Child Poverty', July 2012, 2012-07-19-briefingonchildbenefitandchildpovertyrecovered.pdf (socialjustice.ie)

58 Letter to Minister Katherine Zappone, October 2019.

59 *ibid.*



## A new model to tackle disadvantage

*First 5* committed to develop a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) type model for early childhood education and care.<sup>60</sup> The Report of the Expert Group on the Funding Model addresses this commitment by recommending the introduction of a new funding stream to tackle socio-economic disadvantage.<sup>61</sup> The report proposes two funding strands, universal and targeted, to tackle disadvantage. The universal strand will build on elements of the Access Inclusion Model (AIM) and the targeted strand will be informed by the (DEIS) programme. Enhancements to existing programmes are also recommended.<sup>62</sup>

Work on the development of this targeted model of early years is currently underway. This new strand of funding – currently known as Equal Participation Model – will provide a mix of universal and targeted supports through services accessed by children and families experiencing disadvantage.<sup>63</sup> Traveller and Roma children are key cohorts in this model. A scoping phase has already been completed and the DCEDIY are currently undertaking consultations and engagement following a presentation of the model at the Early Learning and Care Stakeholder in December and proposals will be brought to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in 2023.<sup>64</sup> Complementary to this a pilot scheme to provide hot meals in ELC services was announced in November and a policy of the provision of meals in ELC and SAC will be developed. This will help to address disadvantage by tackling food poverty in a similar way to the provision of school meals. There is a clear need for the new model to provide a range of wraparound services to ensure the child and their family are supported to reach their full potential. This could include access to transport, additional wrap-around supports such as family and parenting programmes. This will be critical for those children who may be experiencing multiple disadvantages or where the family is dealing with challenges such as addiction, domestic violence or poor parental mental health.

There is a recognition that it will take time to put in place this new funding stream as it will be based on developing a model based on additional data to identify early years settings with 'high concentrations of disadvantaged children'.<sup>65</sup> The changes made to NCS eligibility are one way that the Expert Group thought the Department could bridge the gap 'to avoid a situation in which, by the time our recommended

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60 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018) strategic action 8.3.

61 Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 119.

62 *ibid.*

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

64 *ibid.*

65 Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 130.

supports to address disadvantage are being introduced, a significant number of the most disadvantaged children would not be accessing services...'<sup>66</sup> This has included providing increased support under the NCS subsidised ours by removing the practice of deducting hours spent in education (including pre-school) from Spring 2022.<sup>67</sup>

The Expert Group also recommended that settings in receipt of targeted funding should be required to develop and publish 'an annual 'tackling disadvantage plan' while the DCEDIY should develop a 'short set of national indicators outlining the benefits that it expects to achieve from this additional funding'.<sup>68</sup> The findings of the *12 Month Review of the National Childcare Scheme* contains clear actions to conduct research 'analysing the financial viability of services in disadvantaged areas under the NCS'.<sup>69</sup> These actions will be critical to developing a new funding model for the sector that supports all children but particularly those experiencing disadvantage and social exclusion.

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66 Expert Group on the Funding Model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare* (DCEDIY 2021) 132.

67 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Budget 2022 Overview and FAQ for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) Providers, (DCEDIY 2021)

68 Ibid, 95-6 and 131.

69 Frontier Economics, *12-Month Review of the National Childcare Scheme: A report prepared for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Ireland)* (DCEDIY 2021) 212.



# Recommendations

## Budget 2024

- Building on the significant investment of €1bn in early years in 2023, Budget 2024 should invest an additional 0.15 per cent of GDP in early years and commit to increasing investment by this rate in the two subsequent budgets. Government should set out a plan to deliver a longer-term objective of moving closer to world leader, Iceland, which invests 1.8 per cent of GDP.
- Increase NCS subsidies by €1.00 per hour to ensure that all families continue to benefit from sustained investment in ECEC.
- Exclude Child Benefit and child maintenance as reckonable income for the purposes of the National Childcare Scheme.
- Provide 98% of support for childcare for families on the lowest incomes by providing higher levels of subsidisation under the National Childcare Scheme for all families in receipt of the Medical Card.<sup>70</sup> This can be done by amending the current IT system to include an additional field for Medical Card holders.
- Consider using the European Social Funds available to implement the EU Child Guarantee, invest in establishing Community Workers to support Traveller families to access ECEC by providing practical information, work with them in applying for the NCS and ECCE schemes and engage in community awareness about the supports available.
- Allocate sufficient funding in Budget 2024 to support the implementation of the first phase of the new Equal Participation Model. This should include a focus on wraparound services, provision of food and parental support.

70 The State could choose an alternative measure to control the cost of fees. For example, through contract, the State could require that only a certain fee is charged to parents in particular income brackets.



# Recommendations

## Medium Term

- The Early Years JLC is the only effective means of addressing pay and conditions for Early Years Professionals. As such all stakeholders, DCEDIY, employers and unions, should continue to engage in the JLC process to ensure that improvements to the pay and conditions of workers is prioritised and adequate resources ringfenced for this purpose.
- The review of the National Childcare Scheme should consider whether the NCS delivers the best outcomes for children and takes into account their best interests.
- Develop a mechanism to allow workers to access funding to participate in programmes that provide them with a higher qualification.
- Future Budgets should include an increased allocation in early years to support the further rollout of the Equal Participation Model.
- Introduce a new ethnic identifier to enable monitoring of the impact of supports to targeted groups eg. Traveller children.

## Long-term

- In the context of the EU Child Guarantee and the recommendation by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality and building on the findings of the Expert Group on the Funding Model, commission a further review to explore the further steps needed to define what a public funding model means and what steps in addition to recommendations from the Funding Model group would be needed to enhance provision.
- Continue to increase public investment in Early Childhood Education and Care and implement the recommendations of the Expert Group on the Funding Model including:
  - the continued investment in Core Funding for services and,
  - the development of national indicators to track progress linked to this investment.

## Spotlight Solution:

### PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY - DUBLIN

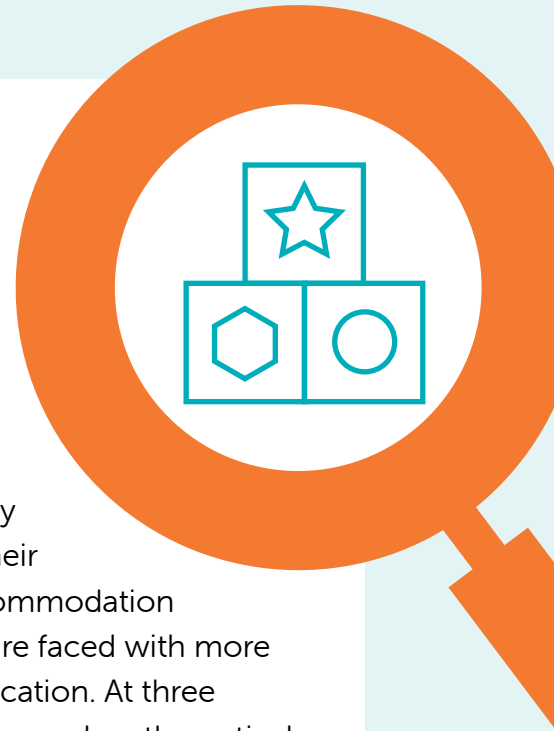
#### Introduction

A child's family circumstances and the environment they grow up in play a central role in their development in their formative years. Children growing up in unsuitable accommodation or families living in areas affected by poverty or crime, are faced with more barriers to overcome when it comes to their child's education. At three years of age, there are already big differences in language and mathematical development between children depending on their family circumstances. This gap continues to widen if it is not addressed before children start pre-school.

Early childhood home visiting helps children and families by connecting parents with a Home Visitor who guides them through the early stages of raising a family. This early intervention can support parent-child bonding, infant wellbeing and deliver positive developmental outcomes. The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) works with children and young people who are experiencing compounding circumstances which in turn, curtail their educational experiences. Their *ParentChild+ Home Visiting Programme* and *Home from Home* programme are examples of the impact that early intervention and home visiting can have for children and families.

#### Early Learning Initiative

ELI divide their work into two departments to support children locally and nationally. Dublin's Inner-City Centre focuses on universal plus, wrap around, holistic integrated supports for children, parents, and families through the delivery of high-quality Home Visiting, Parent Support, Literacies and Educational Guidance Programmes. It is a best practice demonstration site for ELI's National Centre and other communities across Ireland. Programmes, having been successfully piloted and evaluated in Dublin's Inner City, are manualised and rolled out to other areas through the National Centre, primarily Home Visiting and Family Engagement in the early years.



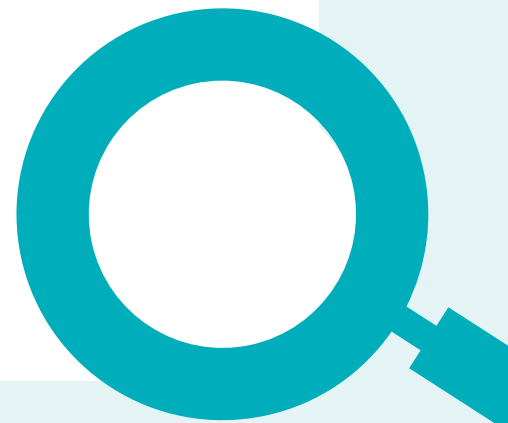
ELI builds an excitement about education through multiple progressive sustained interventions such as *ParentChild+ Home Visiting Programme* and *Home from Home* programme. Programmes are run in the same family, street and community with learning seen as enjoyable and something to be shared between families, schools, services, and corporate partners. These practices sustain high levels of parental involvement and increases the likelihood of children, with continued enthusiastic committed support from their parents, progress through the education system to third level, and develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions required to achieve their educational, career and life goals.

The programme employs bilingual, multilingual, local, and culturally reflective Home Visitors, adapting Home Visiting programmes for families living in temporary emergency accommodation and for children with additional needs, and imparting social-emotional literacy skills through ELI designed resources such as the Let's Talk book.

Many families around Ireland now also benefit from ELI's Home from Home programme which is a home visiting programme designed to meet the needs of families living in emergency accommodation. In collaboration with the Children and Young People's Services Committees and Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support programme, in 2022 ELI reached over 1,300 families living in International Protection and fleeing the war in Ukraine, through the *My Place to Play initiative*. In 2021- 2022, the ELI programmes supported 14,835 participants: 7,411 parents, across 6,334 families. ELI teams delivered 15,773 home visits in person and virtually during this time.

**"I learnt so much with my child and I would love the opportunity to share the skills my home visitor taught me with other families."**

—A parent who graduated with her child in June 2022



## Spotlight Solution:

### PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY - CORK

#### Introduction

Located in the Cork City Northwest area, Let's Grow Together is implementing area-based prevention and early intervention programmes that support early childhood development, relationships, and environments.

Many children and families in the Northwest area of Cork City experience significant levels of poverty and adversity. There are several neighbourhoods in the area that are considered 'extremely disadvantaged' with higher levels of unemployment, lower levels of post-secondary qualifications and many in the area report 'very bad' health. Children and families in the surrounding communities face additional issues including significant wait times for primary care and early intervention services, poor maternal mental health and the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis. Many children and families in the area are also living in sub-standard housing conditions and homeless hubs.

The disadvantage experienced by this community in Cork is not unique and there are many communities across the country that experience the same issues and adversity. Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes like Let's Grow Together are an example of how you can break the cycle of disadvantage by providing the intervention and support early in a child's life.

#### Let's Grow Together

Let's Grow Together works in partnership with everyone important in children's lives, empowering families, and enabling children to grow through the relationships in their community. By delivering a suite of programmes that strengthen children's relationships, environments, and attachments, Let's Grow Together aims to mitigate the damaging effects of disadvantage and to intercept the cycle of inter-generational poverty.

While providing direct services and supports to families through its different programmes, Let's Grow Together also aims to set the foundations for infant and child development, wellbeing and quality of life outcomes within the community.



Let's Grow Together's prevention and early intervention services and supports can start even before a child is born. The Infant Mental Health (IMH) Home Visiting Programme is designed to support infants and their caregivers in the home and is delivered by an interdisciplinary team from pregnancy through to when children are turning four. The Home Visiting Programme creates opportunities to support emerging infant-parent relationships and the development of secure attachments and provides a range of supports from Preparation for Parenthood to Developmental Guidance to Emotional Support and Advocacy.

The Speech, Language and Literacy Strategy provides universal prevention and early intervention for parents, caregivers and educators to support emerging speech, language and communication. The focus in the programmes is placed on the quality of the interactions between the child and a key adult in their life, which helps build positive relationships early on. The programmes include babies' first relationships with parents and caregivers, to the provision of training and support programmes at primary school level. Let's Grow Together are also part of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library – the internationally renowned programme that delivers a book a month to children, at no cost to the family. Each month a book is chosen to suit the growing needs of the child at pivotal stages of development. The initiative provides a window to imagination and the development of literacy skills and social skills, while removing any financial barriers that can often impact a child's access.

Early Years Education and Care settings are a valued partner locally and so are the schools, who are offered the Incredible Years programme which takes a whole-community approach to training parents and school staff in the area. The programme aims to embed positive communication practices between parent and child and also between the child and family with their school. Let's Grow Together also looks to develop solutions to the wider issues that impact the local communities they serve.

**“Let's Grow Together is one of the most remarkable, comprehensive children's programmes in the world.”**

—Professor Kevin Nugent, Founder of the Brazelton Institute,  
Boston Children's Hospital





# Education



## **2022 v 2023** – Overview statistics and policy developments

### **STATISTICS:**

In the 2021/22 school year, there were 3,106 Primary Schools and 730 Post Primary schools in the State.

Of which 687 Primary and 197 Post-Primary were categorised as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS).

There was an increase in the number of DEIS schools for the academic year 2022/23 of 280 primary and 38 post-primary schools respectively.

### **POLICY DEVELOPMENTS:**

- ❓ Budget 2023 committed to provide ‘funding for free schoolbooks for all pupils in primary schools within the Free Education Scheme from September’. This will benefit approximately 540,000 students in 3,239 schools, including 135 special education schools.

## EDUCATION

**“Girl: This obviously doesn’t go for every school, but I personally go to a DEIS school which means that we have reduced costs for school meals which can be like a big weight off a family’s back, and that they could go into school, and they could get like a full meal.**

**Child in Secondary School”.<sup>1</sup>**

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) every child has a right to education. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear that the overall objective of this right is to maximize the child’s ability and opportunity to participate fully in their society.<sup>2</sup> Ireland was last examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2023. The issue of education is identified in the Concluding Observations of the Committee as one of six areas where urgent measures should be taken. The Committee called on the Irish State to strengthen measures to ensure all children in disadvantaged groups have equal access to education. This included ensuring ‘support to cover hidden costs of education’<sup>3</sup>, equal access to quality education for Roma and Traveller children,<sup>4</sup> collection of disaggregated data on education, including information on ethnicity, and on the use of reduced timetables.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Youth Advisory Panel Ombudsman for Children’s Office, *Pieces of Us A Children’s Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, (OCO 2022), 51.

2 UNCRC General Comment No. 1 on Article 29(1) the Aims of Education (2001) CRC/GC/2001/1 para 12.

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

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

5 *ibid.*

The Committee also raised concerns about discriminatory effect the Leaving Certificate and 'alternative methods of certification on children in disadvantaged situations'.<sup>6</sup>

Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty and break down cycles of disadvantage.<sup>7</sup> In Ireland, a person's socio-economic background remains a strong determining factor of their level of educational attainment. A person is almost three times more likely to go on to higher education if their parents have a higher education than someone whose parents have not completed primary-level education.<sup>8</sup> Living on a low income can prevent children and young people from participating fully in education.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, those living in low income families during childhood are less likely to access post-second-level education than those living in higher income families.<sup>10</sup> Those with only primary education have an increased chance of being categorised as being at risk of poverty with research indicating that this can be up to 26 per cent higher than those with third level education.<sup>11</sup>

This section focuses on specific aspects of the EU Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children* related to education. *Investing in Children* recommends that the State 'provide for the inclusion of all learners, where necessary by targeting resources and opportunities towards the more disadvantaged'.<sup>12</sup> The Recommendation further emphasises that the State take measures to address barriers which hinder children attending school, including financial barriers, by providing targeted educational aid.<sup>13</sup> The introduction and implementation of policies to reduce early school leaving, and initiatives for those at risk of early school leaving is a further element outlined in *Investing in Children*. The Recommendation also identifies the need for responses to social diversity and the deployment of role models to support integration of children from ethnic minorities into schools.

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6 UNCRRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 36.

7 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (DEASP 2020) 48.

8 Central Statistics Office, 'Census of Population 2016 – Profile 10 Education, Skills and the Irish Language' (CSO 2016) <<https://bit.ly/2FJtGyG>> accessed 28 June 2022.

9 Joint Committee on Education and Skills *Report on education inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019).

10 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022).

11 *ibid.*

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

13 *ibid.*

## Targeting resources towards those experiencing disadvantage

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

A new DEIS Plan, was published in 2017.<sup>14</sup> This plan outlines the Government's vision for social inclusion in education and contains a set of objectives and actions to support children who are at greatest risk of educational disadvantage.<sup>15</sup> One of the objectives set out in the plan was to develop a more robust and responsive framework for assessing individual schools for inclusion in the DEIS programme.<sup>16</sup> In March 2022, the Department of Education published the new DEIS identification model committed to in the Programme for Government and announced an expansion of the DEIS programme representing a €32 million investment in the programme. The extended programme aims to bring an additional 310 schools into the DEIS programme with an additional 37 existing DEIS schools being reclassified, meaning they will receive increased supports.<sup>17</sup>

In the 2021/22 school year, there were 3,106 Primary Schools and 730 Post Primary schools in the State, of which 687 Primary and 197 Post-Primary were categorised as DEIS.<sup>18</sup> In the current academic year, 2022/2023 there was an increase in the number of DEIS schools by 280 primary and 38 post-primary schools respectively.<sup>19</sup> This followed the announcement in Budget 2022 of an additional €18 million in funding to support the expansion of the DEIS scheme.<sup>20</sup> This increase means more children in disadvantaged areas will benefit from the increased supports and programmes provided by DEIS schools.

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

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

16 Department of Education and Skills, *DEIS Identification Process*, (DES 2017) <<https://bit.ly/3hGSR6K>> accessed 28 June 2022.

17 Department of Education, 'DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools' <<https://bit.ly/3QTaUGE>> accessed 28 June 2022.

18 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education, 27 January 2022.

19 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education, 16 November 2022.

20 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2022 – Expenditure Report*, (Government of Ireland 2021), 73.

The DEIS programme has been recognised as having a positive effect on tackling educational disadvantage for the majority of young people.<sup>21</sup> However, research published in 2015, indicated that a large proportion (up to 50 per cent) of disadvantaged students attend non-DEIS schools.<sup>22</sup> With the expansion of the DEIS programme to more schools since then, further research to update this data is needed. There is a relatively sharp distinction between DEIS and non-DEIS schools,<sup>23</sup> which means that accurately classifying school socio-economic/demographic profile is crucial for the delivery of appropriate services. Schools with relatively high levels of disadvantage may fall below the cut-off for additional support, with research suggesting that up to 22 per cent of principals at primary level indicate their school is not appropriately classified.<sup>24</sup>

As disadvantaged children are not always located in DEIS schools, consideration should be given to ensuring that the resources follow the child rather than the school. The Pupil Premium model, in the UK, allocates funding to schools on a per capita basis. A “pupil premium” is allocated for children who qualify for free schools meals (£1,345 per pupil per year for primary schools and £955 per pupil at secondary level) and for children in care (£2,345 per pupil per year).<sup>25</sup> Schools can decide how to spend these resources based on the view that school leaders are best placed to identify what would be of most benefit to eligible children.<sup>26</sup> Guidelines suggest a tiered approach by focusing on teaching development, academic support or wider approaches to non-academic barriers.<sup>27</sup> This type of model could complement the DEIS model and help address the Programme for Government commitment to “provide additional supports for students who are homeless, resident in family hubs, or in direct provision”.<sup>28</sup>

The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention.<sup>29</sup> The work of the Tusla Education Support Services is

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- 21 Department of Education, *Review of Class Size in DEIS Urban Band 1 Primary Schools* (DE 2022) 6.
- 22 Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Gillian Kingston, *Learning from the evaluation of DEIS* (ESRI 2015) 79.
- 23 Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Gillian Kingston, *Learning from the evaluation of DEIS*, (ESRI 2015).
- 24 Dympna Devine, Jennifer Symonds, Seaneen Sloan, Abbie Cahoon, Mags Crean, Emma Farrell, Aisling Davies, Tamsyn Blue, Julie Hogan, *Children’s School Lives – An Introduction, Report No 1*, Children’s School Lives (UCD School of Education 2020).
- 25 Department of Education (UK) *Policy paper: Pupil premium*, <<https://bit.ly/3epNLtN>> accessed on the 28 June 2022.
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 Education Endowment Foundation, *The EEF Guide to the Pupil Premium*, (EFF 2019) <<https://bit.ly/36Hx4FW>> accessed 28 June 2022.
- 28 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*, (Government of Ireland 2020).
- 29 TUSLA, ‘Tusla Education Support Services’, [TESSTusla - Child and Family Agency](https://www.tusla.ie/) accessed 24 May 2023.

governed by this Act and comprises of the Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS), two school support services the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP).<sup>30</sup> The purpose of these services is to work collaboratively with schools, families and other services to ensure children and young people can obtain.<sup>31</sup> Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) play an important role, particularly in relation to early intervention, to support school attendance for children aged 6 to 16 years. There are currently 120 EWOs supporting 4,000 schools working on a referral basis where concerns arise regarding school attendance or where there is a risk of expulsion. EWOs engage in home visits and collaborative working with other agencies.

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme is a key intervention provided as part of the DEIS programme. The HSCL coordinator, normally a teacher from a relevant school without teaching duties, works closely with parents and guardians to improve children and young people's educational outcomes.<sup>32</sup> The primary way this intervention is delivered is through home visits<sup>33</sup> and the provision of courses and classes that enable parents to support a pupil's learning.<sup>34</sup>

Currently 693 schools categorised as DEIS Urban Primary and DEIS Post Primary that operate the HSCL scheme.<sup>35</sup> This equates to an equivalent of 530 Whole-Time-Equivalent (WTE) posts carrying out HSCL duties for a total of 207,000 pupils.<sup>36</sup> In recognition of the higher likelihood of experiencing educational disadvantage by Traveller and Roma children and young people, there has been a further targeted expansion of the HSCL. Whilst the overall educational attainment level of Irish Travellers increased between 2011 and 2016, with more Travellers completing secondary school than before, many still do not.<sup>37</sup> It is welcome therefore that four additional HSCL posts have been assigned as part of the pilot project established under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.<sup>38</sup> In October 2022, an allocation of €400,000 to the Department of Education under the 2022 Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan for funding of 10 new HSCL coordinator posts in 14 non-DEIS post primary schools to support Traveller and Roma families. These

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30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 TUSLA, 'HSCL-Home School Community Liaison', <https://bit.ly/43p4Jjl> accessed 12 April 2023.

33 The HSCL Co-ordinator plays an important role within the school community in terms of fostering inter-agency and inter-disciplinary work which can benefit the pupil.

34 TUSLA, 'HSCL-Home School Community Liaison', <https://bit.ly/43p4Jjl> accessed 12 April 2023.

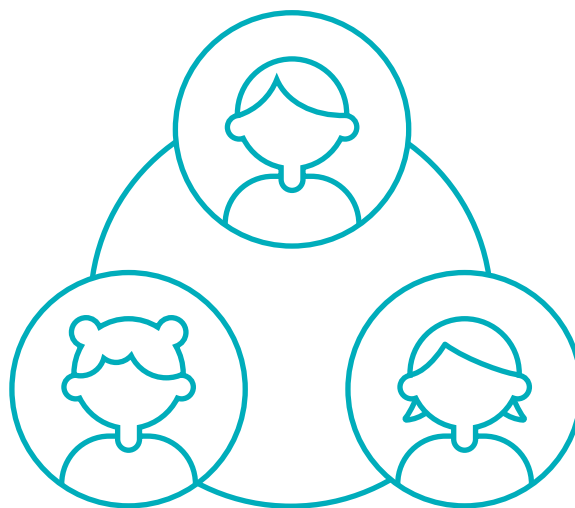
35 Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 29 March 2023 [15552/23].

36 *ibid.*

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

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

HSCL co-ordinators will have access to funding to implement and run initiatives to encourage attendance, retention, and progression for Traveller and Roma pupils.<sup>39</sup> The support that HSCL provides to parents and guardians is critical for these families as research with Traveller and Roma parents has found that they want their children to have a better educational experience than they had.<sup>40</sup> In the absence of parents' direct experience or 'legacy knowledge' of secondary school, the research observed parents found it difficult to support their children in the transition between primary and secondary schools.<sup>41</sup> Supporting transitions is a central part of the HSCL work<sup>42</sup> and therefore provides an important intervention for this cohort of children to support their participation in education. There is a need to further expand access to HSCL supports as well as capturing the impact that this initiative is having on the educational outcomes of children experiencing educational disadvantage. Consideration could be given to appointing a HSCL Coordinator to a cluster of non-DEIS schools in order to maximise the impact this work can have in a community.



Another aspect to TESS's work is, a more concentrated example of support within the school environment, the Dublin North East Inner City (NEIC) City Connects initiative. This initiative provides intensive and tailored support for all children attending 10 primary schools in the NEIC area.<sup>43</sup> The individual pupil supports needed are identified through a review carried out by the City Connects Coordinator who consults with the child's parents/guardians.<sup>44</sup> A personalised plan outlines key activities and services needed to enable the child to thrive.<sup>45</sup> This approach, developed in the United States, has been proven to have positive benefits in terms of learning performance both in primary and second level education.<sup>46</sup>

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

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

41 *ibid.*

42 Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and Department of Education, *Information Booklet for DEIS schools participating in the Home School Community Liaison Scheme* (

43 Dublin North East Inner City, *City Connects*, <https://bit.ly/3M6NAok> accessed 8 May 2023.

44 *ibid.*

45 *ibid.*

46 *ibid.*



## Addressing the financial barriers to education

The UNCRC calls on States to take steps to achieve the right to education on the 'basis of equal opportunity' and to 'take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need'.<sup>47</sup> In June 2021, building on the *Investing in Children Recommendation*,<sup>48</sup> the European Child Guarantee was adopted by the European Union (EU). It aims to prevent and combat child poverty and social exclusion by supporting the 27 EU Member States to make efforts to guarantee access to quality key services for children in need.<sup>49</sup> To achieve this commitment, each State is required to identify and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in education along with ensuring provision of educational materials, including books and uniforms.<sup>50</sup>

In 2022, parents of children in 4th class in primary school spent an average of €424 on back-to-school costs, with books being €124, making up almost a third of the total cost of education.<sup>51</sup> At post-primary level, school books represent the biggest outlay for parents of 1st and 5th year students costing €237 and €221 respectively and accounting for a similar proportion of overall costs as those parents with a 4th class child.<sup>52</sup>

Costs for parents 2022	4 <sup>th</sup> Class	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	5 <sup>th</sup> Year
Uniforms	€122	€199	€199
Books	€124	€237	€221
Digital	€50	€182	€104
Classroom resources	€46	€75	€66
Voluntary contributions	€82	€121	€132
Total	€424	€814	€722

Source: Barnardos, *Back to School Survey 2022*, (Barnardos 2022), 7.

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

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

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

50 *ibid* 26.

51 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2022' (Barnardos 2022).

52 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2022' (Barnardos 2022).

The cost-of-living crisis has put increased pressure on families preparing their children to return to school. Almost half of all parents stated this was having an impact on their ability to meet the cost of sending their children back to school in September 2022.<sup>53</sup> A small minority of parents reported it was having no impact.<sup>54</sup> Just over one-fifth of primary school parents and over one-third of secondary school parents stated they would have to pay for back-to-school costs by getting a professional loan, using a credit card or by borrowing from friends and family.<sup>55</sup>



As far back as 2013, the then Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection called for a 'five-year template for the delivery of an entirely free schoolbook system, based on the UK model and to discontinue the use of workbooks in all schools.'<sup>56</sup> The UK model has been in place since the 1940s.<sup>57</sup>

The Department of Education allocates a grant to schools to provide assistance for books which includes schoolbook rental schemes. In 2017, it issued a circular to management boards to take measures to reduce school costs including the setting up of book rental schemes.<sup>58</sup>

Budget 2020 marked an historic first step to move towards the provision of free schoolbooks. This was achieved by allocating €1 million for the development of a new pilot scheme to be administered by 102 primary schools for the school year 2020/21.<sup>59</sup> The aim of this pilot was to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents.<sup>60</sup> In Budget 2023, a commitment to provide 'funding for free school books for all pupils in primary schools within the Free Education Scheme

53 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2022' (Barnardos 2022).

54 *ibid.*

55 *ibid.*

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

57 Education Act 1944.

58 Department of Education and Skills, 'Circular 0032/2017: Measures to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs' (DES 2017).

59 Department of Education 'Minister McHugh announces additional funding of €1 million to reduce the cost of school books in DEIS schools' (Press Release January 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3J7uQAX>> accessed 31 January 2022.

60 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 11 November 2020.

from September’ was announced.<sup>61</sup> The scheme, will eliminate school book costs for the families of all children in primary schools.<sup>62</sup> It will benefit approximately 558,000 students in 3,230 schools, including 130 special education schools.<sup>63</sup> This initiative goes further than any previous announcement when it comes to the cost of education.

A central aspect of the new scheme is that ring-fenced funding will be paid directly to schools.<sup>64</sup> Through this funding, schools can purchase school books, workbooks, copybooks and resources for their classrooms.<sup>65</sup> Parents will no longer have to pay for these items and while the school retains ownership of the items a deposit must not be obtained to participate in the scheme.<sup>66</sup> Schools will also be eligible for an administration grant, for an allocated number of days, to assist with the roll-out of the scheme.<sup>67</sup> This allocation can pay for an existing member of staff to carry out this work or another suitably identified individual.<sup>68</sup> Finally, it is anticipated that an evaluation of the scheme will be carried out in the first half of 2024. This evaluation will consider issues related to effectiveness, possible improvements and the quality of service from book providers.<sup>69</sup>

Every child attending primary school will benefit from this measure, however, the provision of school books is particularly welcome for those children and families experiencing educational disadvantage. The burden that school costs places on families on a low income each year is substantial and this will help to alleviate much needed pressure for many. However, it is critical that the momentum to address school costs is maintained. As a next step, the government should develop a roadmap for the introduction of free schoolbooks for young people attending secondary school. Mirroring the rollout of the primary school scheme, the government could initiate a pilot scheme for secondary schools which would inform further rollout Budget 2024 could maintain momentum by increasing school capitation rates. Doing so will ensure that schools are no longer reliant on contributions from parents to meet day-to-day running costs.

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61 Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, ‘Statement by Minister McGrath on Budget 2023’, Speech, 27 September 2022 (Houses of the Oireachtas).

62 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 16 November 2022.

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

64 Department of Education *Schoolbooks Grant Guidelines for Primary and Special Schools*, (Department of Education 2023).

65 *ibid.*

66 *ibid.*

67 *ibid.*

68 *ibid.*

69 *ibid.*

## Policies to reduce early school leaving

Article 29 of the UNCRC clarifies that the right to education encompasses more than academic achievement and sets out a number of aims including the ‘development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’.<sup>70</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has provided guidance to address early school leaving stating that ‘to develop the fullest potential of adolescents, consideration must be given to the design of learning environments which capitalise on their capacity for learning, motivation to work with peers, and focus on experiential learning, exploration and limit testing’.<sup>71</sup>

Although patterns of early school leaving continue to differ across EU national contexts and systems of education, research consistently shows that a disproportionate number of young people who leave school early are from disadvantaged social class backgrounds.<sup>72</sup> Both national and international studies show that early school leavers have common characteristics in that they are more likely to be male, have low school attainment, experience behavioural problems, have ongoing social, emotional or health issues, have special educational needs, are living in poverty and have ill-health or have experienced trauma.<sup>73</sup>

A disproportionate number of young people who have experienced poverty become what is termed “early school leavers”.<sup>74</sup> One of the main misconceptions about early school leavers is that they are academically incapable of completing mainstream education, however, 53 per cent will continue their education in facilities such as a voluntary education setting or Youthreach where they can receive necessary support and continue a more participant-centre form of education.<sup>75</sup> Alternative education has developed in many jurisdictions as a response to state-provided mainstream education.<sup>76</sup> International experience indicates that alternative education providers are informal, have smaller classes with a student-centred curriculum and a focus on experiential learning to support the personal, professional, and emotional development of each student.<sup>77</sup>

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70 *ibid*, Art 29(1)(a).

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

72 Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O’sullivan, Selina Mccoy, Paul Redmond and Seamus Mcguinness “*Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme*” (2019) Research Series Number 82.

73 *ibid*.

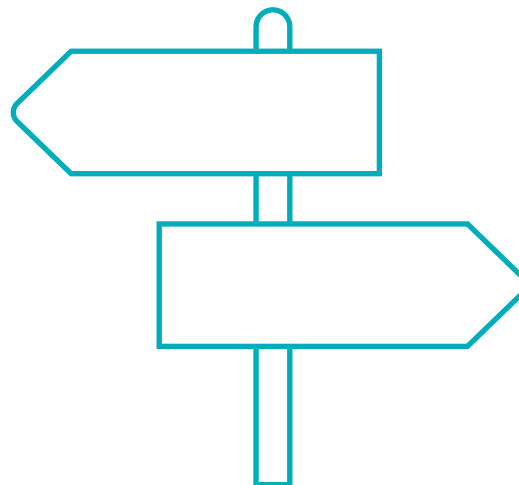
74 Lynch S. “From exclusion to inclusion: Defining alternative education in Ireland” 4.

75 *ibid* 5.

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

77 *ibid*.

In Ireland, young people who leave school before the age of 16 have limited<sup>78</sup> state-funded opportunities for continuing their education. Except for Youthreach, which is a state-provided programme of 'second chance' education, the area of alternative education is not explicitly defined and mentioned in the Irish education system.<sup>79</sup> While Youthreach supports some students in their progression in education, it is not suitable for all students who leave school early. In this context some alternative education providers have stepped in to provide education at both Junior and Leaving Cert level, however there is no funding line to support it and a lack of information on the types and numbers of alternative programmes of education in Ireland.



The Department of Education could consider how to grow and expand upon and fund out-of-school education provision to ensure a child-centred approach to education by providing alternatives best suited to the individual child.

It is welcomed that, in May 2022, the Department of Education published its Review of out-of-school educational provision.<sup>80</sup> The Review found that despite Ireland having a high retention rate to Leaving Certificate, there is a small group of students who find it difficult to engage in mainstream education.<sup>81</sup> Factors that may contribute to this include the young person's own needs and personal situation and/or their relationship with school and their learning. The Review notes that countries with higher retention rates than Ireland place more of an emphasis on vocational

78 Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs) provide non-residential educational facilities for children who have either become involved in minor delinquency, or are at risk of becoming involved. A pupil may be referred to one of these schools by a number of agencies or by the court system. Youth Encounter Projects provide these children with a lower pupil teacher ratio and a personalised education plan. Department of Education, High Support Special Schools, Youth Encounter Projects (YEP) and Children Detention Schools < <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/743aab-high-support-special-schools-youth-encounter-projects-yep-and-childr/>> accessed 28 June 2022. The Youthreach programme provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Youthreach < <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/5666e9-youthreach/>> accessed 28 June 2022.

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

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

81 *ibid* 10.

education pathways.<sup>82</sup> The Review also found that ‘no clear tracking system exists for students who become disengaged or are at risk of becoming disengaged from mainstream education.’<sup>83</sup> This means that it is not possible to determine an accurate number of children and young people aged 15 and under who are not receiving any education or who are attending out-of-school settings. Further, the structure of support for students at risk of becoming disengaged from education, and how it is provided, is not currently standardised.<sup>84</sup>

The findings of the review suggest that out-of-school education settings are providing an ‘educational and holistic service’ to the cohort of students who have become disengaged from mainstream education settings.<sup>85</sup> Out-of-school education settings were found to have the ability to provide ‘flexible, individual education plans with prolonged support on a one-to-one basis to students.’<sup>86</sup> The out-of-school model adopts a wrap-around approach to meeting student needs, using supports from local community services, Government Departments, and agencies.<sup>87</sup> However, the review notes that there is no consistent approach applied with regard to education curriculum, certification and education pathways across the sector.<sup>88</sup>

The unstructured nature of the provision of out-of-school education was highlighted by the Review group as the governance approach adopted varies from provider to provider.<sup>89</sup> The Review notes that strengthened governance arrangements would allow for a more ‘sustainable and responsive model of support’ for children and young people disengaged from mainstream settings.<sup>90</sup> The Review noted that there were little to no out of school education provision in the west and northwest regions and that settings were primarily focused in the main urban areas in Dublin, Cork and Limerick.<sup>91</sup> However, this does not mean there is no requirement for out of school education provision in the west and northwest regions. In some circumstances, Youthreach Centres accommodated a small number of students under the age of 15 if no other provision was available.<sup>92</sup> The Review found a ‘data-based approach, in consultation with Tusla, would need to be considered to identify where out-of-school education provision was required to meet the needs of students who had

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82 *ibid* 10.

83 *ibid* 10 and 22.

84 *ibid* 10 and 83.

85 *ibid* 11.

86 *ibid*.

87 *ibid*

88 *ibid*.

89 *ibid*.

90 *ibid*

91 *ibid* 11-12.

92 *ibid* 11-12.

become disengaged from mainstream education with more prompt reporting and recording at school level required to identify those students most at risk.<sup>93</sup>

An implementation group has been established to oversee the fulfilment of the recommendations of the Review. It is important that in the implementation of the Review that children over the age of 16 are not excluded from alternative education settings. Many children attending alternative education settings are currently over the age of sixteen and are supported to reach a leaving certificate qualification. Although it is encouraging that there is an emphasis on short-term and in-school interventions, it is crucial that children and young people who cannot remain in mainstream education may easily access a more long-term intervention if necessary. The work of the Implementation Group provides an opportunity to consider the availability of alternative forms of education provision for students who are identified as being at risk of disengagement from mainstream education and early school leaving. It is essential that alternative forms of education provision are adequately funded and available throughout the country to ensure every child has the opportunity to continue with an education that can help them realise their full potential.

### Integration of ethnic minorities within school

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed several concerns about the experiences of Traveller and Roma children. In its concluding observations from Ireland's latest examination in January 2023, the Committee called on the Irish State to strengthen measures to ensure, Roma and Traveller children have equal access to quality education.<sup>94</sup> The Committee recommend that Ireland amend school admissions legislation; introduce measures that target improving educational outcomes for Roma and Traveller children; develop the National Traveller Education Strategy.<sup>95</sup>

*Investing in Children* calls on member states to facilitate the integration of Roma children and those from an immigrant background through the preparation of teachers for social diversity. While the overall attainment level of Irish Travellers increased between 2011 and 2016, with more Travellers completing secondary school than before, many still do not.<sup>96</sup> Comprehensive data on Roma children and young people is lacking, however, recent analysis highlights that the number of Roma children attending mainstream and special primary school classes has increased across the 2016 to 2018 period.<sup>97</sup>

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93 *ibid.*

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

95 *ibid.*

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

97 *ibid* 44.

Given the absence of accurate population numbers, the proportion of Roma children attending primary or secondary school is not available.

The marginalisation of Traveller and Roma culture within the Irish education system adversely affects young people's sense of belonging and place.<sup>98</sup> A review of the position of Traveller history and culture in the school curriculum undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment concluded that 'the dissonance between the social, linguistic and cultural environments of the home and school can account for disaffection' which is then compounded by conscious and unconscious bias against Travellers in the school community.<sup>99</sup>

A key commitment under the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021* (NTRIS) was that access, participation and outcomes for Travellers and Roma in education should be improved to achieve outcomes that are equal to those for the majority population.<sup>100</sup> The NTRIS includes ten education actions to improve outcomes for children at primary and post primary level. These include actions on Traveller culture and history, bullying research and school admissions.<sup>101</sup> On foot of these, a number of actions were commenced that attempt to better understand and address the barriers that Traveller and Roma children face in education, including a new two-year inclusion strategy pilot project.<sup>102</sup> This 'STAR' pilot began in September 2019 with three sites – Galway, Wexford and Dublin, with a fourth site in Cork joining in 2020.<sup>103</sup> The specific areas the pilot covered are Tuam, Bunclody/Enniscorthy, Finglas/Ballymun/Coolock and Cork. The project has been extended to June 2024.<sup>104</sup> The Department of Education has stated that the pilot project had an original cost of circa €2.2m for the first two years.<sup>105</sup> It was then extended for a third year, and it is anticipated that annual funding will remain at a similar level for the next two years.<sup>106</sup>

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98 Kathleen Marie Lawrence, *Traveller outcomes in education: A Traveller perspective* (Maynooth University 2017); Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018).

99 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Traveller culture and history in the curriculum: a curriculum audit* (NCCA 2019) 61.

100 Department of Justice and Equality, *The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021* (Department of Justice and Equality 2017) 25-26.

101 *ibid.*

102 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education, 20 January 2021.

103 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 20 January 2021.

104 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 29 November 2022.

105 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 17 February 2023.

106 *ibid.*



As well as supporting educational participation and engagement, the aim of the pilot is to increase engagement with Traveller groups. The Government has stated that the pilot will inform the development of policy and innovative solutions to issues identified as barriers to participation and engagement.<sup>107</sup> With all sites operational, the pilot is currently available in around 59 schools, to over 1,300 children.<sup>108</sup>

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107 Enda Hughes, Principal Officer, Department of Education, Joint Committee on Education and Skills and Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 3 December 2019.

108 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education, 20 January 2021.



# Recommendations

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## Budget 2024

- Expand the Home School Community Liaison programme to non-DEIS schools on a phased basis.
  - Increase the number of Educational Welfare Officers to 240 in order to adequately resource the services of TESS and to promote an early intervention approach to tackling educational disadvantage.
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## Medium-term

- Expand the free schoolbook scheme to secondary school. This should be introduced on a phased basis with specific targets for DEIS and non-DEIS schools.
- Building on the work of the review of out of school education, develop a national policy and approach to providing out of school provision for young people who fall out of mainstream education. The goal of the policy should be both to work towards supporting young people to return to mainstream education and providing alternative education and pathways for learning and accreditation for those who cannot attend mainstream education.
- Building on the approach undertaken in the baseline study, and on the recommendations contained within it, ensure that solutions aimed at improving the experience of Traveller and Roma children in schools are co-created by the communities.
- Introduce a tapering of supports under the DEIS programme to address the sharp distinction between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and reflecting the fact that a significant proportion of disadvantaged children attend non-DEIS schools.

## Spotlight Solution:

### ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF CHILD POVERTY THROUGH WRAPAROUND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORTS

#### Introduction

For children and young people growing up in communities with the highest levels poverty and deprivation, schools can be a safe haven, not only opening the door to education but to accessing other supports that they may need.

North East Inner City (NEIC) Dublin is one of the most socio economically deprived areas in the country. In these communities, the cycle of poverty and the high levels of crime and addiction can make it a challenging environment for children and families. For the children attending local schools, there are often a multitude of issues teachers and support staff have to address. Needs can vary from singular needs requiring the support of one service, for example speech and language therapy or psychological supports, to children with a concentration of needs that require supports from multiple levels.

In recent years, the NEIC has been the area with the highest levels of homeless accommodation in the State (Gardiner Street) and also an increased population of children from migrant communities such as the Roma community, many of whom are living in this accommodation. In addition, there are a small number of children for foetal alcohol syndrome or neo natal abstinence syndrome may present. There are also a number of children living in foster care with relatives whilst under the care of the State and a small number of children who have experienced severe trauma in their young lives, such as the murder or suicide of a parent.

The NEIC Multi Disciplinary Team approach that is in operation at Rutland National School, brings multiple disciplines, skillsets and understandings together to develop real, targeted supports for children experiencing serious difficulties in their home life or school life. The programme ensures a circle of support is built around the child at their school, which removes the challenge and cost of accessing a number of services elsewhere. It is a best practice example of how supports for children can be provided within the school setting. For children growing up in areas seriously impacted by the affects of poverty and deprivation, this integrated approach brings all support



services under one roof and makes engagement with these services more accessible for the student and for the parent/guardian.

**“Great for us as teachers to have a team of experts at hand, we’ve gained knowledge in terms of Occupational Therapist and Speech and Language Therapist. The drop-in advice clinic for teachers has been really helpful to get advice on children who haven’t yet been referred.”** –Teacher

### NEIC Multi-Disciplinary Team

The NEIC Multi-Disciplinary Team was established in response to a recent feud and the layers of intergenerational poverty and trauma in the area. The Team includes a National Educational Psychologist Service psychologist, an Occupational Therapist and a Speech and Language Therapist, who each work across a cluster of three schools in Dublin’s North East Inner City. The wider project is comprised of three clusters of 10 schools and a HSE Clinical Psychologist works in an umbrella capacity supporting parents across the three clusters. The MDT team provide universal supports for all children at various points throughout the school year.

Children are referred by their teachers or parents which enables a prevention and early intervention approach for children with multiple needs. The Home School Liaison Officer or Special Educational Needs Coordinators will meet with the parent(s)/guardian to ensure their concerns are heard and consent is given. The MDT team can offer 1:1 support individually or in a small group setting, tailoring the support to each child and their own personal needs.

Some of the children who receive support from all three disciplines offered in the MDT approach have experienced significant childhood trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences. For a number of these, their lives are quite complex. The wraparound support a multi-layered team can provide can be hugely beneficial, particularly as there can be overlap with what supports the child needs. The Team can the respond and have one service take the lead so that the support and intervention is not overwhelming for the child.

The integrated approach of the multi-disciplinary team is a shared learning

for all professionals – MDT team have the opportunity to work with children in their social context of school and recognise how busy classrooms are and how difficult it can be for teachers to meet individual needs of children when there are often many competing needs. As the team is based in the school and the therapists collaborate closely with school staff and parents, the school is very aware of what services a child is receiving. Prior to the MDT team being established, Rutland say they may not have as aware of who was receiving what service or what level of support. This enables the school to enhance the learning environment to create positive learning experiences for each and every one of their students.

**“For children like Sean\*, who have learning difficulties, the MDT is a good support network for any parent. Without the team, I wouldn’t have gotten some of the answers for Sean\*. They gave me so many examples of things to do with him, sensory wise, ideas to help him not lash out at his siblings. Without their support, I wouldn’t have known what to do with him.”** –Parent

## Spotlight Solution:

### HOME SCHOOL COMMUNITY LIAISON TRAVELLER AND ROMA PILOT

#### Introduction

In Ireland, a person's socio-economic background remains a strong determining factor of their level of educational attainment, with children living in poverty being less likely to access post-second level education. The Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS) model classifies schools with a high concentration of students at risk of educational disadvantage to target supports and resources, including Home School Community Coordinators. However, 50% of children and young people living in poverty and at risk of poverty do not attend a DEIS school. Traveller and Roma children are more likely to experience educational disadvantage than their peers with latest statistics showing that only 27.1 per cent of Traveller students sat the Leaving Certificate exam.

The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) seeks to promote partnership between parents, teachers and community family support services. The primary way this intervention is delivered is through home visits and the provision of courses and classes that enable parents to support a pupil's learning. A new Traveller and Roma HSCL pilot is building on the work of the Supporting Travellers and Roma (STAR) pilot teams (which include an Education Welfare Officer, Home School Community Liaison and two Traveller and Roma workers) operating in four locations and is bringing HSCL to other non-DEIS schools.

This pilot demonstrates how HSCL supports can be provided in non-DEIS schools for a cohort of children who are at risk of educational disadvantage.

#### Home School Community Liaison Traveller and Roma Pilot

To tackle educational disadvantage for Traveller and Roma communities, funding from the 2022 and 2023 Dormant Accounts has been used to create 10 new Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator posts. The posts have been established serving 14 non-DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) post-primary schools with high numbers of Traveller



and Roma students. These HSCL co-ordinators have access to funding to implement and run initiatives to encourage attendance, retention, and progression for Traveller and Roma pupils. The pilot currently works within 14 non-DEIS schools.

Research with Traveller and Roma parents has found that they want their children to have a better educational experience than they had. In the absence of direct experience of secondary school or positive experiences of the education system, this becomes more difficult. The HSCL programme prioritises the relationship between children and their parents/guardians, bridging this knowledge gap and supporting the whole family to engage with the child's journey in education.



# Health





**2022 v 2023** – Overview statistics and policy developments

**STATISTICS:**

In 2022 83.3 per cent of babies received their developmental screening within 12 months in July to September 2022.

This is an increase from the 2021 figure whereby just 53.6 per cent received their screening check within 12 months between July and September 2021.

There were 4,293 children on a waiting list for CAMHS services in December 2022 compared to 3,357 in November 2021.

The current Medical Card income threshold for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week while the poverty line for this household in 2022 was €692.16.

## ACCESS TO QUALITY HEALTH SERVICES

**Girl: “I do think that like there does need to be a better infrastructure of like the public, free mental health services, because... people have not had good experiences, and I do think that just the government probably does need to consult like young people who actually would use those services to like see where they need to improve on that.”**

Child in Secondary School.<sup>1</sup>

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.<sup>2</sup> Ireland was last examined by the Committee in 2023. In its Concluding Observations the Committee expressed serious concerns relating to mental health policy for children and young people and identified it as one of six areas where urgent measures should be taken.<sup>3</sup> The Committee urged the Irish state to ensure that children with a disability have swift access to services and supports as well as reducing the waiting time for assessments and tackling the shortage of appropriate professionals in this area.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Youth Advisory Panel Ombudsman for Children's Office, *Pieces of Us A Children's Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, (OCO 2022).

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

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

4 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 29.

The Committee also made recommendations around the issue of accessibility and affordability of health care services including the expansion of free GP care and the barriers created by a two-tier system.<sup>5</sup>

Longitudinal data indicates that exposure to economic vulnerability, a measure of poverty that combines low income, deprivation and an inability to make ends meet, has an impact on children’s physical and mental health outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Children who experience economic vulnerability are more likely to be obese or overweight, and they have a greater likelihood of having a chronic illness or disability.<sup>7</sup> Measurement of self-concept – which includes attributes such as happiness and freedom from anxiety– found that those with long exposure to economic vulnerability have a poorer self-concept.<sup>8</sup> Given these findings it is critical that Irish health policy provides for specific targeted interventions to support children who experience disadvantage.

The EU Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children* calls on Member States to ensure that all children can access quality health services including those concerned with ‘disease prevention’ and ‘health promotion’.<sup>9</sup> It recommends Member States should tackle barriers to healthcare for families and children in poverty such as those related to cost and information.<sup>10</sup> Prevention strategies for early childhood should be inclusive of needs around nutrition, health and social measures.<sup>11</sup> Children with disabilities or mental health difficulties should be given special attention along with undocumented children, teen parents and families with substance abuse issues.<sup>12</sup>

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

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

7 *ibid.*

8 *ibid.*

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

10 *ibid.*

11 *ibid.*

12 *ibid.*

## Addressing the costs of healthcare

*Investing in Children* calls on Member States to remove obstacles to healthcare including those related to cost. This aligns with Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which places particular emphasis on the development of primary healthcare, including access to General Practitioner (GP) care.<sup>13</sup>

In 2017, the expansion of primary care services, including the introduction of universal free GP care was recommended under the ten-year programme of reform for the health and social care services, *Sláintecare*. Under legislation introduced in 2020, Health (General Practitioner and Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020, access to GP care will be extended for children under 13 years of age.<sup>14</sup> Funding was provided in Budget 2022 to cover the first of three phases of expansion.<sup>15</sup> This will see GP care provided for six and seven year olds in the first instance with the timing for further phases of expansion, to eight and nine year olds and 10 to 12 year olds yet to be announced. A re-commitment to the expansion of GP care to children under eight was outlined in Budget 2023.<sup>16</sup> However, the precise timing of when this will be rolled out remains unclear with the Minister for Health stating in March 2023 that it would be 'as early as possible'.<sup>17</sup>

While it is welcome that free GP care will be extended on a universal basis for all children on a phased basis, a full Medical Card is essential for those in low-income households. This would ensure access to more extensive primary care services such as optical and aural services, prescriptions, and out-patient health services and medical appliances.<sup>18</sup> Medical Card holders may also be exempt from paying school transport charges and exam fees.<sup>19</sup>

As the full Medical Card is a targeted support, recipients generally must satisfy a means test.<sup>20</sup> Families whose income is derived solely from social welfare will normally qualify for the Medical Card. Other groups such as children in foster care and those living in Direct Provision qualify for the card without a means test.<sup>21</sup> However, those on low incomes from a combination of work and social welfare may not meet the criteria for qualification. This is due to the inadequacy of the income

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

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

15 Department of Health, 'Budget 2022: Minister Donnelly announces €21 billion, the biggest ever investment in Ireland's health and social care services' (Press Release 14 October 2021) <<https://bit.ly/3Ox9aRs>> accessed 15 June 2022.

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

17 Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, General Practitioner Services, 21 March 2023 [12468; 13290/23].

18 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 01 June 2022.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*

21 *ibid.*

thresholds for the Medical Card. These rates have not been revised since 2005. The current Medical Card income threshold for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week<sup>22</sup> while the poverty line for this household in 2022 was €692.16.<sup>23</sup> A review of these thresholds is required if coverage of the Medical Card is to be more comprehensive for those that need it.

Medical Card recipients also have access to free in-patient care. Given the substantial costs incurred by families of children in hospital<sup>24</sup> these costs further add to the burden and stress for families in vulnerable situations. In September 2022, the Minister for Health announced that, the existing charge of €80 per night for in-patient care in a public hospital would be removed for all under 16 years.<sup>25</sup>

## Two-tiered healthcare system

The public versus private system of healthcare in Ireland means that while those on a low income with a Medical Card have no financial barriers to accessing GP service, there are challenges to accessing other services.<sup>26</sup> While higher income families can access private counselling the costs associated with such a service for those on a low income can be too great.<sup>27</sup> This means that lower-income families are reliant on statutory services which as previously outlined are not accessible in a timely manner.<sup>28</sup> For those who stretch their income to pay for a private service there is a negative impact on the household budget.<sup>29</sup>

One of the challenges in meeting the demand for services is the limited number of newly qualified psychologists that graduate each year. The Psychological Society of Ireland estimates that a modest investment of €1.3m would help increase the workforce by providing funding for trainees linked to the HSE.<sup>30</sup> In the interim qualification period these individuals could work under supervision and increase capacity within existing public services.

A further innovative approach could be locating resources within school settings. Two reports published by the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher

22 *ibid.*

23 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2022* (Social Justice Ireland 2022).

24 Children in Hospital, *Childhood Illness, Financial Stress The Hidden Costs of Hospital Care for Children* (Children in Hospital 2019).

25 Department of Health, 'Minister for Health announces abolition of public in-patient charges for children under 16' (Press Release 21 September 2022).

26 Prof E McCarthy and Prof C Comiskey, *The InBetweeners, Identifying and quantifying the unmet mental health needs of children and adolescents in Tallaght* (CDI Tallaght 2019).

27 *ibid.*

28 *ibid.*

29 *ibid.*

30 Psychological Society of Ireland, Pre-budget Submission 2022 <<https://bit.ly/3Noyfgl>> accessed 27 June 2022.

Education, Research, Innovation and Science, one on the Impact of Covid on Primary and Secondary Education<sup>31</sup> and second on mental health and school bullying<sup>32</sup> have recommended that emotional counselling and therapeutic supports be provided in all primary and secondary schools. This would mean that children and young people would be able to access supports in the school without the need to pay and would ensure that children could access supports in a non-stigmatising way when they need it.

## Preventative supports in early childhood

The Public Health Nursing service provides one-to-one support for parents of all babies and is seen as having a key role in ensuring that babies and young children have access to primary, preventative and specialist healthcare.<sup>33</sup> Public health nurses play a critical role in advising and supporting parents and referring families to other interventions.<sup>34</sup> They are a consistent point of contact for parents and children in the first 3 years of a child's life<sup>35</sup> and are an important link through to early childhood education and care services, particularly prevention and early intervention services.

Public health nursing is under pressure due to a historical hiring embargo, current recruitment challenges and the implications of a generalist model of public health nursing.<sup>36</sup> The latest figures indicate there has been a fall in the workforce numbers from 1,537 pre-pandemic in December 2019 to 1,481 in September 2022.<sup>37</sup> The redeployment of Public Health Nurses throughout the pandemic, including their involvement in the vaccination programme, severely curtailed routine visits and checks undertaken by these health professionals.<sup>38</sup> This reduced level of contact with new-born babies and their parents has meant that just 54.8 per cent received their developmental screening within 10 months between July and September 2020.<sup>39</sup> In the same period in 2021, just 53.6 per cent received their screening check within

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31 Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *The Impact of Covid on Primary and Secondary Education* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021).

32 Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021).

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

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

35 *ibid.*

36 *ibid.*

37 HSE, *Performance Profile July to September 2022*.

38 Health Service Executive, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the societal restrictions on the health and wellbeing of the population, on our staff and on health service capacity and delivery: A plan for healthcare and population health recovery* (HSE 2022).

39 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2020* (HSE 2020) <<https://bit.ly/2S4T8Gk>> accessed 27 June 2022.

12 months<sup>40</sup> and this figure rose to 83.3 per cent in July to September 2022.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, the rate was 98 per cent.<sup>42</sup> The community-based nature of this service has meant that any interactions with the service during the pandemic varied based on where families live.<sup>43</sup> There has also been a reduction in health visits to schools for hearing, vision and dental screenings.<sup>44</sup>

Public Health Nurses may lack the time and supports necessary to move away from primarily treating ill health and towards health promotion and early intervention in children's early years.<sup>45</sup> The 2017 *Houses of the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report* recommends investing in child health and well-being services by putting in place Public Health Nurses that are dedicated to child health work. *Sláintecare* also recommends the hiring of 900 community registered nurses to free up Public Health Nurses with specialist child training to carry out their child health work.<sup>46</sup>

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

‘in line with the principles set out in *Sláintecare*, develop a dedicated child health workforce, adopting a population-based approach, focussed initially in areas of high population density and disadvantage, recognising that this will require additional resources’.<sup>47</sup>

Public Health Nurses remain, alongside General Practitioners and their Practice Nurses, the first and consistent point of contact for parents and children in the first three years of a child's life through the National Healthy Childhood Programme, and they play a critical role in advising and supporting parents and referring families to other interventions.

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40    ibid.

41    Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2022* (HSE 2022).

42    ibid.

43    Sheila Wayman, ‘Child development checks in a time of pandemic’, *The Irish Times*, 24 March 2021.

44    Health Service Executive, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the societal restrictions on the health and wellbeing of the population, on our staff and on health service capacity and delivery: A plan for healthcare and population health recovery* (HSE 2022).

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

46    ibid.

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

## Promotion of Breastfeeding

Malnutrition is responsible, directly or indirectly, for 60 per cent of the 10.9 million deaths annually among children under 5.<sup>48</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child affirmed that exclusive breastfeeding of a child up to 6 months and continued, along with solids until 2 years of age should be protected and promoted as breastfeeding is providing the best source of nutritious food to the infant while also providing the best defence against malnutrition and diseases.<sup>49</sup>

Article 24(2)(e) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States to ensure society, in particular parents are 'informed, have access to education and are supported in [...] the advantages of breastfeeding....'. The HSE *Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland – HSE Action Plan 2016-2021* sets out the priority areas to be addressed to enhance breastfeeding supports and to enable more mothers in Ireland to breastfeed. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of some actions, the action plan was initially extended until the end of 2022<sup>50</sup> and now until the end of 2023.<sup>51</sup> A review of the progress made under this plan will be undertaken in 2023 in order to inform any future work.

According to the Irish Maternity Indicator System, in 2021, 62.3 per cent of babies were breastfed following birth. Exclusive breastfeeding (i.e. without any additional supplementary food or drink) was 35.6 per cent while non-exclusive breastfeeding was 22 per cent prior to discharge.<sup>52</sup> Comparatively, breastfeeding rates in Ireland are low by international standards and the lowest in Europe.<sup>53</sup> Research, published in 2014, found that just over half of mothers (56 per cent) initiate breastfeeding in hospital compared with over 90 per cent in Scandinavian countries.<sup>54</sup> The figure falls to 48 per cent once mothers leave hospital and just a quarter of mothers who initiate

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48 World Health Organisation, *Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding* (WHO 2003) 5.

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

50 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Frank Feighan TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Promotion 15 September 2021 [43546/21].

51 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Hildegard Naughton TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Strategies 28 March 2023 [14771/23].

52 HSE, *Irish Maternity Indicator System National Report 2021* (HSE 2022).

53 R. Layte & C. McCrory, *Growing up in Ireland, National Longitudinal Survey on Children, Maternal Health Behaviours and Child Growth in Infancy, Analysis of the Infant Cohort of the Growing Up in Ireland Study* (ESRI, Trinity College Dublin, Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014) 48; Women from the original twelve EU countries and African countries are four and 10 times more likely, respectively, to be breastfeeding at discharge from hospital compared to an Irish woman.

54 Economic and Social Research Institute and HSE National Office of Health Promotion, 'Breastfeeding in Ireland 2012: Consequences and Policy Response' ( Press Release 1 October 2012) <<https://www.esri.ie/news/breastfeeding-in-ireland-2012>> accessed 27 June 2022.



breastfeeding continue to do so at six months.<sup>55</sup> There is no mechanism to monitor breastfeeding rates after discharge from hospital.<sup>56</sup> Factors most likely to influence breastfeeding initiation and duration rates are maternal age, level of education, socio-economic background,<sup>57</sup> and whether the mother had undergone a Caesarean section.<sup>58</sup>

## Services for children with a disability

Children with a disability have the right 'to special care, education and training designed to help them to achieve the greatest possible self-reliance and to lead a full active life in society' according to Article 23 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

The lack of availability of services for children with a disability was the top finding from a survey of over 1,000 parents conducted in 2022.<sup>59</sup> Included in the issues highlighted by families participating in the survey was communication from the HSE indicating that a service required would not be delivered for two years.<sup>60</sup>

Over a decade ago the process of re-configuring the delivery of disability services begun with the final Disability Network Team reconfigured in December 2021.<sup>61</sup> While the reconfiguration of services is complete, parents report difficulties with staff turnover and gaps in terms of professionals on the team.<sup>62</sup>

At the end of 2022, a Census of staff allocated to 91 Children's Disability Network Teams across the nine Community Healthcare Organisations (CHOs) was carried out.<sup>63</sup> The Census found that despite an allocation of 2,102.62 Whole Time Equivalent staff members, there were 1,395.30 roles filled resulting in 707.32 vacancies.<sup>64</sup> Of the posts filled 1,183.01 were therapy or clinical roles.<sup>65</sup> Across the nine CHO areas the vacancy rate varied from a high of 43 per cent to a low of 19

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55 R. Layte & C. McCrory, *Growing up in Ireland, National Longitudinal Survey on Children, Maternal Health Behaviours and Child Growth in Infancy, Analysis of the Infant Cohort of the Growing Up in Ireland Study* (ESRI, Trinity College Dublin, Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014) 45.

56 *ibid* 40.

57 *ibid* 46.

58 *ibid* 40.

59 Inclusion Ireland, 'Progressing disability services for children and young people - *Parent experience survey report* (Inclusion Ireland February 2022).

60 *ibid*.

61 Inclusion Ireland, *Progressing disability services for children and young people - Parent experience survey report* (Inclusion Ireland February 2022).

62 *ibid*.

63 Inclusion Ireland, 'Children's Disability Network Teams: National Staff Census and Workforce Review', (n.d.) <<https://bit.ly/43Gx991>> accessed 18 April 2023.

64 *ibid*.

65 *ibid*.

per cent.<sup>66</sup> A large proportion of the vacancies were in various stages of recruitment (560.62), on the day the Census was taken.<sup>67</sup> Given these challenges with staffing it is not surprising that over 18,000 children are waiting for an initial contact from a CDNT with over 50 per cent waiting for this contact for over 12 months.<sup>68</sup>

According to data from the HSE, in December 2022 there were almost 20,000 children on the waiting lists waiting for speech and language therapy, with over 2,300 waiting for over a year.<sup>69</sup> There was over 11,935 children waiting on psychological therapy, and 14,501 waiting on occupational therapy.<sup>70</sup> Of those children waiting for a psychology services, there are 4,270 waiting greater than a year.<sup>71</sup> Over 5,400 children were waiting over a year for occupational therapy.<sup>72</sup>

It is difficult to see how waiting lists will be reduced in the short-term to medium term as the given the shortage in professionals. As part of a review being carried out by the OECD on Ireland's skills strategy the Department of Health has identified key gaps in the HSE in relation to a number of professions related to these teams.<sup>73</sup> While the Department of Higher Education is actively engaging with key actors to progress additional places for healthcare professionals in the next academic year, there are practical limitations on the expansion of the number of places on such courses.<sup>74</sup>

## Mental health

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.<sup>75</sup> This right covers the full spectrum of health and wellbeing and fulfilling the right requires 'a comprehensive multisectoral response ... through integrated systems ... that involve parents, peers, the wider family and schools and the provision of support and assistance through trained staff'.<sup>76</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child endorses a public health and psychosocial support approach to mental health rather than overmedicalisation

66 Inclusion Ireland, 'Children's Disability Network Teams: National Staff Census and Workforce Review', (n.d.) <<https://bit.ly/43Gx991>> accessed 18 April 2023.

67 *ibid.*

68 pq-5784-23-duncan-smith.pdf (hse.ie)

69 pq-5784-23-duncan-smith.pdf (hse.ie)

70 pq-5784-23-duncan-smith.pdf (hse.ie)

71 pq-5784-23-duncan-smith.pdf (hse.ie)

72 *ibid.*

73 Minister for Further and higher Education, Simon Harris T.D., Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Departmental Strategies, 26 April 2022 [20218/22].

74 *ibid.*

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

76 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), *General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence*, 6 December 2016, CRC/C/GC/20, para 58.

and institutionalisation.<sup>77</sup> In its Concluding Observations on Ireland's most recent examination, in January 2023, the Committee raised concerns about insufficient and inadequate mental health services and long waiting lists.<sup>78</sup> The Committee urged the Irish State to increase its resources in this area as well as ensuring that the number of mental health professionals meet the needs of children.<sup>79</sup>



Research conducted with a representative sample of children and young people in Ireland suggests that approximately one in three young people will have experienced some type of mental disorder by the age of 13, with this rate rising to more than one in two by the age of 24 years.<sup>80</sup> While mental health problems are not selective, certain groups of children are at greater risk of poor mental health, including children who have experienced abuse or neglect,<sup>81</sup> including domestic abuse,<sup>82</sup> children living in poverty,<sup>83</sup> children who have experienced discrimination, including homophobia or transphobia,<sup>84</sup> and children with chronic physical health conditions.<sup>85</sup>

77 *ibid.*

78 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 31.

79 *ibid.*

80 Cannon and Coughlan *et al*, *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group* (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland 2013) 7.

81 Norman and Byambaa *et al*, *The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, *PLoS Medicine*, 2012; Schaefer and Moffitt *et al*, *Adolescent victimization and early-adult psychopathology: Approaching causal inference using a longitudinal twin study to rule out non-causal explanations*, (2018) *Clinical Psychological Science*.

82 Roberts and Campbell *et al*, *The role of parenting stress in young Children's mental health functioning after exposure to family violence* (2013) *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(5).

83 Wickham, Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, Barr, *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: A longitudinal analysis of the UK millennium cohort study* (2017) *The Lancet Public Health*, 2 (3).

84 Tina Dürrbaum, Frank A. Sattler, *Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: A meta-analysis* (2020) *Journal of LGBT Youth* 17:3; Liu & Mustanski, *Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* (2012) *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 42(3).

85 Vanessa E. Cobham, *et al.*, *Systematic Review: Anxiety in Children and Adolescents With Chronic Medical Conditions*, (2020) *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59(5).

In January 2023, the Interim Report of the Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services was published. It demonstrated service failings on the part of CAMHS, most notably – a lack of governance and regulation leading to deficits in service provision, 140 young people lost to follow up, many teams not having training to provide standard therapies, a lack of emergency provision particularly outside of Dublin resulting in GPs referring young people to emergency departments, and failings in the monitoring of anti-psychotic medication.

Amongst the ongoing issues facing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are long waiting lists for treatment.<sup>86</sup> The latest available data shows there continues to be a significant growth in the numbers waiting for a service. There were 4,293 children on a waiting list for CAMHS services in December 2022, 603 of whom were waiting for longer than a year.<sup>87</sup> This compared to 3,357 in November 2021.<sup>88</sup>

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86 Maresa Fagan, 'Barnardos 'deeply concerned' over mental health waiting list for children and teens', *Irish Examiner* 9 June 2020.

87 [pq-3837-23-sean-sherlock.pdf \(hse.ie\)](#)

88 Dyane Connor, 'CAMHS waiting list grows by more than a quarter' RTÉ News, 23 May 2022 <<https://bit.ly/3tEffU9> > accessed 15 June 2022



# Recommendations

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## Budget 2024

- Revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum these should be set above the poverty thresholds.
- Implement First 5 recommendation and invest in creating a dedicated public health nurse service for children and develop a strategy for 'home visits' to ensure every child has access to prevention and early intervention supports they deserve in their own community.

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## Medium-term

- Invest in the development of the mental health workforce by targeting resources towards training places for clinical psychology and additional posts in primary care psychology.
- Ensuring that all children with a disability have access to timely and fully-resourced professional services delivered locally.
- Prioritise the development of the next National Breastfeeding Strategy.

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## Long-term Sustainable Solutions

- Expand the GP Medical Card to all children under the age of 18.
- Fully implement the commitments contained in Sláintecare.

# Housing and Homelessness



**2022 v 2023** – Overview statistics and policy developments

**STATISTICS:**

The number of children living in emergency accommodation, increased from 2,811 in March 2022 to 3,472 in March 2023.

The 'at risk of poverty' rate after rent or mortgage interest rose for children from 23.7 per cent in 2021 to 27.7 per cent in 2022. This equates to almost 330,000 children.

In households headed by a lone parent, the at risk of poverty rate after rent or mortgage interest rose from 51.0 per cent to 58.9 per cent equating to 111,596 one parent families.

The number of households with children in need of housing support fell from 21,932 in November 2021 to 21,086 in November 2022.

In March 2022, there were just four properties within the standard HAP limits, however, in March 2023, there was no properties available within this limit.

In March 2022, when the HAP discretionary rate was just 20 per cent, there were 60 properties available for households with children. In March 2023, despite the adjustment to the discretionary limit there were just 21 properties available to rent. This is perhaps reflective of a continued contraction of the market.

### **POLICY DEVELOPMENTS:**

- ❓ The discretionary HAP limit was increased in 2022 from 20 per cent to 35 per cent.
- ❓ At the end of October 2022 a temporary moratorium on evictions was introduced. This came to an end on 31 March 2023.
- ❓ Budget 2023 introduced a new Rent Tax Credit to support private renters. However, as families availing of the HAP are in receipt of a social housing support they will not be eligible to claim this.



## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

**“I have ADD and dyslexia. I did 1st year but due to chronic anxiety I can’t go back to school. I have a home tutor so I’m up to date, but it’s torture being away from everyone. My mum had to pay for private diagnosis... Due to what happened my elder sister in CAMHS my mum will never go HSE route again. We rent. We have been homeless... my mum is divorced and is a teacher, we get HAP [Housing Assistance Payment]. No landlord will take HAP... I did the constitution in history and I do not feel valued as a child in Ireland”.**

Young person, age 16, lives in a town<sup>1</sup>

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1 Youth Advisory Panel Ombudsman for Children’s Office, Pieces of Us A Children’s Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (OCO 2022).

**“Cost of housing. My family have rented in the same place for years and are now being asked to move because they are selling the house. I cried, I don’t know where I am going to live. Things are very expensive and my mam sometimes has little money”.**

Boy, age 11, lives in a city<sup>2</sup>

### Provide children with a safe, adequate housing and living environment

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires the State to assist parents and guardians who are in need by providing ‘material assistance and support programmes particularly regarding nutrition, clothing and housing’. This right is reflected in two pillars of the European Commission’s Recommendation Investing in Children, in particular the need to provide adequate resources and affordable quality services.

Ireland was last examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee urged Ireland to ‘address the root causes of homelessness among children’.<sup>3</sup> The Committee called for the phasing out of emergency accommodation and increase the supply of long-term social housing.<sup>4</sup> In the context of children of minority groups, the Committee calls for a clear timeline for a Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy which should include measures for the realisation of rights for these groups including adequate housing.<sup>5</sup>

The infringement of a child’s right to adequate housing and living environment, can have a significant adverse impact on their development and wellbeing. Global evidence reviews have found that homelessness is associated with multiple

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2 Youth Advisory Panel Ombudsman for Children’s Office, *Pieces of Us A Children’s Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, (OCO 2022).

3 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

4 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.

5 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 42.

negative physical, mental, and behavioural health outcomes, with the duration of homelessness compounding and elevating the risk of adverse outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Children who experience homelessness are also more likely to have developmental and learning delays and poorer academic attainment.<sup>7</sup>

Analysis of data from the Growing Up in Ireland survey has found lower reading scores are prevalent amongst those who live in social housing or in multi-generational households (i.e. living with grandparents).<sup>8</sup> Socio-emotional difficulties and lower prosocial behaviour is found to be connected to disorderly neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> The analysis also highlights that bad housing conditions are associated with more instances of wheezing and poorer health amongst children while those living in disorderly neighbourhoods have more frequent visits to the hospital.<sup>10</sup>

*Investing in Children* connects children’s living environment with their development and learning needs and calls on Member States to provide ‘a safe, adequate housing and living environment’.<sup>11</sup> Achieving this requires actions which address affordability, quality accommodation and issues related to ‘environmental hazards, overcrowding and energy poverty’.<sup>12</sup> Families at risk of homelessness need to be supported to ensure evictions are avoided. In instances where homelessness is experienced, temporary shelter needs to be provided along with long-term solutions.<sup>13</sup> Taking each of these aspects of the *Investing in Children* recommendation this section considers the gaps and solutions in Irish housing policy.<sup>14</sup>

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

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

8 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023).

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*

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

12 *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.*

## Affordability

Housing costs often comprise the largest proportion of expenditure in household budgets.<sup>15</sup> The percentage of income that goes on housing can impact on a household's consumption of other goods and services and subsequently economic growth.<sup>16</sup> Households who have particular challenges in affordability include those renting privately and those on low incomes.<sup>17</sup> Low-income households pay between two-fifths and half of their income on housing versus just one-fifth for the general population.<sup>18</sup>

The lack of housing affordability in Ireland is most evident in the EU-SILC statistics which highlight significant increases in the at risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest. The at risk of poverty rate describes the proportion of the population who have an income below 60 per cent of the national median income. A separate indicator looks at income after the payment of rent and mortgage interest. Therefore, it considers the number of households who have an income below 60 per cent of the median once housing costs (rent and mortgage interest) are accounted for.<sup>19</sup>

While 13.1 per cent of the population were at risk of poverty in 2022 this jumped to 21.9 per cent after rent and mortgage interest are taken into consideration. For children under 18 years of age the rate increased from 15.2 per cent to 27.7 per cent respectively, while almost 60 per cent of one-parent families were at risk of poverty after rent and mortgage interest.<sup>20</sup> The at risk of poverty rates across all of these measures increased in 2022 when compared to the 2021 data.<sup>21</sup>

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15 Eoin Corrigan et al *Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market* The Economic and Social Review, Vol. 50, No. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 119-157.

16 *ibid.*

17 *ibid.*

18 *ibid.*

19 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022 (CSO, 2023).

20 *ibid.*

21 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2021 (CSO, 2022) and Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022 (CSO, 2023).

**Table 1: At risk of poverty rate compared with at risk of poverty rate after rent or mortgage interest<sup>22</sup>**

	Population	0-17 years	1 adult with children under 18
At risk of poverty rate	13.1	15.2	23.8
At risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest	21.9	27.7	58.9

Source: CSO, *Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2022*

Under the Housing Act 1988 local authorities have responsibility to provide housing for individuals and households who are unable to afford to do so for themselves.<sup>23</sup> Households who are on their local authority's housing list can qualify for help with their rent through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).<sup>24</sup> In November 2022, 36 per cent (21,086) of all households identified as needing housing support and on the social housing list contained children.<sup>25</sup> This was a decrease of almost 900 households based on the 2021 figures.<sup>26</sup> The provision of HAP has increasingly become a primary means to support low-income households address affordability in the private rental sector.<sup>27</sup> In certain other circumstances, such as families who have been victims of domestic violence, Rent Supplement is available as a short-term support.<sup>28</sup>

Rent limits for both Rent Supplement and HAP have not kept pace with market value and the standard limits for each have not been reviewed since 2016 and 2017, respectively.<sup>29</sup> To address the insufficiency of the HAP limits, local authorities previously had the discretion to increase the standard rent limits by 20 per cent in order to secure accommodation. From July 2022, the discretionary flexibility on rent limits was increased to 35 per cent.<sup>30</sup> This was introduced following the completion of an analytical exercise to examine the level of discretion available to

22 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO, 2023).

23 Citizens Information 'Housing and other supports for homeless people' <<https://bit.ly/3xZIMcg>> accessed 29 June 2022.

24 Citizens Information 'Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)' <<https://bit.ly/2L3Qxqj>> accessed 29 June 2022.

25 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2022 – Key Findings* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage March 2023).

26 *ibid.*

27 Michael Doolan et al *Low Income Renters and Housing Supports* (ESRI 2022).

28 Citizens Information 'Rent Supplement' <<https://bit.ly/3l1PHGv>> accessed 29 June 2022.

29 Department of Social Protection, 'Rent Supplement Limits' <<https://bit.ly/3NEjSFj>> accessed 4 February 2022; S.I. No. 56/2017 – Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017.

30 Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2022, *S.I. No. 342 of 2022*.

local authorities needed to maintain adequate levels of HAP support.<sup>31</sup> However, prior to the introduction of this increase, evidence indicated that not all households who would benefit from accessing a higher rate of HAP are actually receiving it.<sup>32</sup>



The inadequacy of the Rent Supplement and HAP rates to meet the market price of rent is borne out by the lack of available properties within their set thresholds.

In March 2023, there were no properties available within the standard HAP limits for both families with one child and families with two children.<sup>33</sup> Within the discretionary limits there were just 21 properties available for families with children.<sup>34</sup>

Local authorities may permit a tenant to pay a 'top-up' to their landlord, a payment which is in addition to their differential rent.<sup>35</sup> The payment of a 'top-up' is permitted if the local authority deems the payment affordable for the household and so long as they are not spending more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.<sup>36</sup> Vulnerable families are often left with no option but to pay an *unofficial* 'top-up' directly to their landlord, in addition to their differential rent contribution to the local authorities.<sup>37</sup> A review of contacts from tenants to information and support services in 2019 and 2020 published in 2022, indicates that families with children dependent on social welfare income are exposed to an increased burden in relation to a rent review and often need to pay an additional 'top-up' to landlords.<sup>38</sup> This exposes families to a greater risk of poverty as further evidenced in SILC. Households renting with such forms of social housing support have an at risk of poverty rate of 12.7 per cent but this rises to 67.6 per cent after rent or mortgage interest.<sup>39</sup> The corresponding figures for those in owner occupied housing are 8.7 per cent and 9.5 per cent respectively.

While Rent Supplement and HAP are important supports in terms of affordability, many prospective and current tenants face discrimination from landlords who refuse to accept them as a means of rent payment.<sup>40</sup>

31 Communication received from the Department Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 8 December 2022.

32 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16.

33 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* (Simon Communities March 2023).

34 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* (Simon Communities March 2023).

35 Threshold and Society of St Vincent de Paul, *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): Making the Right Impact?* (Threshold and SVP 2019) 11-16.

36 *ibid.*

37 *ibid.*

38 Morley Economic Consulting, *Renting and Risk - an analysis of the vulnerabilities of renting* (Threshold and Citizens Information Board 2022).

39 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2022* (CSO, 2023).

40 Threshold, *HAP and Rent Supplement Discrimination* (Threshold 2021).

Discrimination based on the use of these supports is prohibited under the Equal Status Acts<sup>41</sup> and the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) operates as a means of redress in such incidents. Between 2016 and 2020 the WRC issued decisions for 148 cases brought under the housing assistance ground versus just 14 decisions on the nine other grounds of discrimination on cases related to the private rental sector over the same period.<sup>42</sup> This indicates that this is, comparatively, a highly prevalent issue.<sup>43</sup> An analysis of 97 cases from this time period shows that in 56 cases the claim of discrimination was upheld (a rate of 58 per cent).<sup>44</sup>

## Ensuring access to quality housing by addressing overcrowding and energy poverty

A human rights approach to housing has quality as a central feature. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission commissioned the ESRI to undertake in-depth research on adequate housing in Ireland. First, a collective measure of housing quality is considered, based on the age profile of the housing stock in Ireland. Second, a number of individual indicators relating to housing quality including overcrowding and the ability to heat the home are explored.<sup>45</sup> A further individual measure establishes a housing quality index which takes account of issues such as dampness, dark rooms, lack of central heating and poor insulation.<sup>46</sup>

In general, a large proportion of the housing stock in Ireland was built post 1980.<sup>47</sup> However, for the 40 per cent of dwellings built before this time, occupiers may incur extra costs such as needing to replace windows or spend more money on adequately heating their home.<sup>48</sup> Analysis of SILC data in 2018 indicates that almost one-quarter of homes built before 1940 'had two or more quality problems

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41 On 1 January 2016, the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015 introduced "housing assistance" as a new discriminatory ground. This means that discrimination in the provision of accommodation or related service and amenities against people in receipt of rent supplement, HAP or other social welfare payments is prohibited. Further information is available at Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 'Housing Assistance Payment' <<https://bit.ly/3rr3rnr>> accessed 4 February 2022.

42 Rory Hearne and Judy Walsh, *Housing Assistance and Discrimination Scoping Study on the 'Housing Assistance Ground' under the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018*, (IHREC 2022).

43 *ibid.*

44 *ibid.*

45 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

46 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021). 125.

47 *ibid.*

48 *ibid.*

compared to 5-6 per cent for those built in 1991.<sup>49</sup> Overcrowding is also experienced by less than six per cent of all households in the general population.<sup>50</sup>

## Traveller and Roma Families

Ethnicity has been identified as a strong variable in terms of overcrowding.<sup>51</sup> For Irish Traveller households overcrowding is a significant issue with 40 per cent living in overcrowded accommodation.<sup>52</sup>

The latest data shows there are over 200,000 children living in homes that have issues with leaks, damp and rot.<sup>53</sup> Such measures of poor quality are evident amongst Roma and Traveller groups. Many Roma live in accommodation without basic facilities such as a kitchen, cooker, running water or heat and some Roma children live in overcrowded housing with rats, damp and sewerage.<sup>54</sup> Approximately 1,700 Traveller families are living in inadequate, unsafe and impermanent conditions.<sup>55</sup> The poor quality of Traveller housing is particularly apparent in Local Authority halting sites where 952 families were living in 2019 (the latest available data).<sup>56</sup> Of this number, 350 families had particularly low quality accommodation with only an outside cold tap, no electricity and shared access with other families to a port-a-loo or outside toilet.<sup>57</sup> In addition, 311 families were living on unauthorised sites and 218 of these families have no access to any services at all.<sup>58</sup>

Further evidence of the poor quality of accommodation Traveller children are exposed to was highlighted by the Ombudsman for Children's Office who published an investigation report *No End in Site*.<sup>59</sup> The investigation found serious and significant failings on the part of a Local Authority in relation to a Traveller halting site. The report highlighted that 66 children were found to be living in extremely overcrowded and rodent-infested accommodation without adequate heat, sanitation or safe play areas. Instead, they were playing amongst rubbish which hadn't been

49 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

50 *ibid.*

51 *ibid.*

52 CSO, 'Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion' <<http://bit.ly/2AtCuoX>> accessed 25 January 2019.

53 Eurostat, 'Children (aged 0 to 17) living in a dwelling with a leaking roof, damp walls, floors or foundation, or rot in window frames or floor - EU-SILC survey' <<https://bit.ly/3y4WPgE>> accessed 29 June 2022.

54 Pavee Point & DJE, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018).

55 The Irish Traveller Movement, 'Comments on the 18th National Report of Ireland on the implementation of the European Social Charter' (2021) RAP/RCha/IRL/18.

56 *ibid.*

57 *ibid.*

58 *ibid.*

59 Ombudsman for Children, *No End in Site* (OCO 2021).



removed and arriving to school with dirty clothes and shoes because the route they took was muddy and full of water.<sup>60</sup> The Ombudsman for Children highlighted the abject failure of the Local Authority to consider the best interests of children, living on the site, including those with additional needs.<sup>61</sup> In December 2022, an update published by the OCO found that overall living conditions have improved for many children and significant work has taken place to implement the report's recommendations.<sup>62</sup> However, work remains to be done on continuing to make improvements to the site, continuing to build relationships and trust between the local authority, residents and advocacy groups and ensuring that children and young people can be involved in this work.<sup>63</sup> There are further signs of progress, with funding provided for Traveller-specific accommodation fully drawn down by local authorities in the last three years.<sup>64</sup>

## Energy Poverty

The inability to heat one's home, also a measure of quality, is often referred to as energy poverty a concept which encompasses 'household income, energy costs and the energy efficiency of a home'.<sup>65</sup> While overall a small percentage of households report being unable to heat their home the issue of fuel poverty is more pronounced amongst lone parent households compared to all other household types.<sup>66</sup> For instance, the latest deprivation data from the CSO SILC shows a higher incidence of being unable to keep the home adequately warm by one-parent (18.3 per cent) versus two-parent households (5.4 per cent).<sup>67</sup> Housing tenure is also an important factor with this measure of deprivation more common amongst those in the rent (or rent free) sector (13.4 per cent) versus owner occupiers (4.5 per cent).<sup>68</sup>

The consequences of living in energy poverty impacts on children's health with an increased likelihood that they will have asthma and two or more courses of antibiotics in a 12-month period.<sup>69</sup> Children experiencing energy poverty are

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60 *ibid.*

61 *ibid.*

62 Ombudsman for Children, *No End in Site: One Year On* (OCO 2022).

63 *ibid.*

64 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 'Full expenditure of Traveller-specific Accommodation budget for third year in a row', 24 March 2023.

65 Society of St Vincent de Paul *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> 2.

66 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

67 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2022*, (CSO 2022).

68 *ibid.*

69 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

predominantly living in the social housing and private rented sectors with over three-quarters of those impacted living in these tenures.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, energy poverty has been linked to a higher level of poor parental mental health, particularly amongst mothers.<sup>71</sup>

As noted in the section on adequate income, rising energy costs and inadequate social welfare must be addressed in order to protect families from energy poverty.<sup>72</sup> However, there is limited coverage of energy efficiency schemes for non-owner occupiers.<sup>73</sup> For example, the majority of those who qualified for the Warmer Home Scheme were recipients of Fuel Allowance and predominantly older people in owner occupied housing. For many households with children experiencing energy poverty are living in social housing or the private rented sector. Similar issues were identified with the Warmth and Well-Being Scheme which targeted households with individuals with respiratory problems. While 900 homes were supported through this scheme it included just 30 households with children.<sup>74</sup> Targeted interventions for families living in the private rented sector are needed in order to ensure energy poverty is addressed in a sustainable way.

## Prevention of Evictions

In fulfilling the right to housing States have a responsibility to prevent and address homelessness by various measures for example, appropriate legislation.<sup>75</sup> Private rental tenancies come under the provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004. The Act sets out a number of grounds for ending a tenancy such as the use of the property for personal or family use or if the landlord wishes to sell the property.<sup>76</sup> In Q4 2022, Threshold noted the most frequent type of query raised by renters in the private rented sector with them related to tenancy termination. For all reasons except where the landlord was going to sell the property, over half of these notices were found to be invalid.<sup>77</sup>

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70 *ibid.*

71 Greta Mohan, "The impact of household energy poverty on the mental health of parents of young children." *Journal of Public Health* 44, no. 1 (2022): 121-128.

72 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Growing up in the cold: a policy briefing on the nature and extent of energy poverty in households with children* (SVP 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2RjkogN>> accessed 14 June 2022.

73 *ibid.*

74 *ibid.*

75 UN Habitat "The Right to Adequate Housing" Fact Sheet No. 21/Rev.1 <<https://bit.ly/3NTpzQ0>> accessed 15 June 2022.

76 Residential Tenancies Board 'Grounds to end a tenancy' <<https://bit.ly/3NySt74>> accessed 29 June 2022.

77 Threshold, *Quarterly Impact Report Q4 2022*, (Threshold 2023).

An analysis of contacts to Threshold and the Citizens Information Centres in 2019 and 2020 (published in 2022), found that families with children, those in receipt of social welfare or social housing support were more likely to be exposed to termination of tenancies initiated by the landlord, invalid notices of termination and therefore a threat of homelessness.<sup>78</sup>

The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 was enacted between 27 March 2020 and 1 August 2020. The provisions of this Act included restrictions around the serving of notice of terminations by landlords.<sup>79</sup> These emergency measures to prevent homelessness were then replaced by the introduction of the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020.<sup>80</sup> This legislation introduced better protections for tenants by prohibiting rent increases in all cases, and tenancy terminations in all but limited and exceptional cases. The provisions of this Act expired in 2021.

The impact of these measures saw a significant decrease in the number of children living in emergency accommodation by the end of 2020, and this trend continued into 2021.<sup>81</sup> However, as the numbers began to increase once again, homeless organisations linked this trend reversal to the discontinuation of the pandemic measures, along with an inability to tackle the structural causes of the homelessness.<sup>82</sup>

At the end of October 2022, the government introduced legislation that would allow for a temporary ban on no fault evictions.<sup>83</sup> Under the Residential Tenancies (Deferment of Termination Dates of Certain Tenancies) Act 2022, 'no fault' tenancy terminations would be deferred until after the 31 March 2023.<sup>84</sup> The Minister for Housing confirmed the end of the moratorium on evictions on the 7 March 2023 and announced that he would bring forward a number of measures to further support private rented sector tenants.<sup>85</sup> This includes the offer of first refusal to tenants in

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78 Morley Economic Consulting, *Renting and Risk - an analysis of the vulnerabilities of renting* (Threshold and Citizens Information Board 2022).

79 Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, S.5.

80 Government of Ireland, *The Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020: What this means for landlords and tenants* (2020).

81 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Homelessness Data' <<https://bit.ly/3op7UCh>> accessed 1 February 2022. For a visual representation see Focus Ireland, 'Latest Figures on Homelessness in Ireland (Family)' <<https://bit.ly/36cayoL>> accessed 4 February 2022.

82 Focus Ireland, 'Homeless numbers increase to 8728 as Focus Ireland calls for a reintroduction of eviction bans and rent freezes due to recent Covid-19 restrictions' (28 August 2020) <<https://bit.ly/2DWsqZV>> accessed 4 February 2022.

83 Evictions related to the failure of the tenant to meet their obligations are not covered by this legislation (e.g. evictions related to rent arrears).

84 Residential Tenancies (Deferment of Termination Dates of Certain Tenancies) Act 2022.

85 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister O'Brien announces additional measures to increase supply of social homes as winter eviction ban is phased out', 7 March 2023.

instances where the landlord has put the property up for sale as well as work to develop a cost rental model for those at risk of homelessness not in receipt of social housing supports.<sup>86</sup>

Since July 2022, landlords are required to send a copy of the Notice of Termination (NoT) to the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) on the same day it is served to the tenant.<sup>87</sup> Failure to do so renders the NoT invalid.<sup>88</sup> In Q3 2022, the first quarter that this new rule applied, there were 4,741 NoTs received by the RTB<sup>89</sup> with a further 4,329 in Q4.<sup>90</sup> While these figures are not comparative to the period prior to Q3 2022, the scale of NoTs is extremely worrying given the continued contraction in the private rental sector market. There are considerably fewer properties available to rent, with just 1,087 homes available nationwide on 1 November 2022.<sup>91</sup>

## Providing Temporary Shelter

The right to housing comes with a duty to monitor the numbers of people who are homeless and those at increased risk of being disadvantaged with regard to housing.<sup>92</sup> The numbers in homeless accommodation increased throughout 2022, with a small seasonal decline evident in December.<sup>93</sup> However, while there was some sign of a stagnation of the figures at the start of 2023, in April there were over 12,000 people were living in Emergency Accommodation. These latest statistics show that there were 3,594 children living in Emergency Accommodation and 1,491 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years.

**Table 1: Number of Children and Young People Living in Emergency Accommodation**

Indicator	April 2023
No. of Children in Emergency Accommodation	3,594
No. of Young People (18-24 year olds) in Emergency Accommodation	1,491

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, April 2023*

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- 86 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Minister O'Brien announces additional measures to increase supply of social homes as winter eviction ban is phased out', 7 March 2023.
- 87 Residential Tenancies Board, *Notices of Termination (NoTs) Received by the RTB, Q3 2022*, (RTB 2023).
- 88 *ibid.*
- 89 *ibid.*
- 90 *ibid.*
- 91 Daft.ie, *The Daft.ie Rental Price Report* (Daft.ie 2021).
- 92 *ibid* para 13.
- 93 Keith Adams, 'Homelessness: Why Do The Figures Drop in December?', Blog post 3 February 2023, (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland).

Local authorities responding to homelessness are still engaging in prevention work which is helping to divert many children and families from the experience of living in emergency accommodation. By the end of 2022, 5,478 adults (and their dependents) were either prevented from entering or had exited emergency accommodation.<sup>94</sup> Of the number exiting homelessness (2,709), one-third exited to private rented (including HAP) tenancies.<sup>95</sup> In the first quarter of 2023, 215 families exited emergency accommodation.

Official statistics published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage only give a limited view of the prevalence of homelessness in Ireland given the specific remit of this department.<sup>96</sup> They do not include families that are homeless but are accommodated in own-door accommodation or transitional housing. Nor do they include women and children in domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers living in emergency accommodation, or people who have been granted asylum or some other form of protection but cannot find accommodation outside the Direct Provision system. While these figures are collected and monitored by other agencies, they are not included in the monthly reported data published by the Department and people in these types of accommodation are not categorised as homeless.

Families who have had to leave their home and are ‘couch surfing’ or relying on friends or family for emergency assistance are also not captured in the official monthly statistics. Some insights on the numbers staying with families is provided for in the Social Housing Assessment. There were 57,842 households on the social housing waiting list in November 2022, 37 per cent of which were living with their parents, relatives and/or friends.<sup>97</sup>

Policy on family homelessness has focussed on ensuring that families receive initial support in facilities specifically designed to meet their needs, rather than generic emergency accommodation. This has led to the establishment of ‘family hubs’ which have onsite cooking and laundry facilities for families, with access to support staff and some activities for children. In December 2022, there were 36 family hubs in operation nationally providing 870 units of family accommodation.<sup>98</sup> While family hubs are an important first response, and research with children and parents living

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94 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2023).

95 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report Quarter 4 2022* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2023).

96 Colette Bennett ‘Rebuilding Ireland for Everyone: A review of the government’s housing strategy for young and old’ in Brigid Reynolds and Sean Healy (eds) *The Challenges of Success: Addressing population growth in Ireland* (Social Justice Ireland 2019).

97 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2022* (Government of Ireland 2022).

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

in family hubs suggests several problems, including a lack of space and privacy.<sup>99</sup> Families who are placed in this type of accommodation are provided with access to a support team whose main aim is to exit them from homelessness into appropriate accommodation as soon as possible.<sup>100</sup>

In 2019 the Ombudsman for Children's Office published a report exploring children's views and experience of living in family hubs.<sup>101</sup> Children who participated in the consultation expressed feelings of shame, sadness, anger, embarrassment, confusion, frustration and worry as well as a sense of injustice at being homeless while other people have a secure home.<sup>102</sup> The lack of space and privacy was particularly difficult for teenagers having to share a room with parents and younger siblings.<sup>103</sup> As part of the consultation children and young people were asked about what the government should do to tackle the housing and homeless crisis.

**“Are they [the Government] in charge of landlords? Tell the landlords to keep the prices down and to build more houses”.**

*(Lena, aged 9)<sup>104</sup>*

Organisations working with families experiencing homelessness have identified a need for targeted interventions for children living in emergency accommodation. These interventions, which could be delivered by a dedicated child or family support worker, should provide tailored support to help children and their families deal with the trauma of homelessness and/or the challenges that they faced before becoming homeless, or in some instances both of these contexts. Such interventions can help children to address some of the detrimental impacts of homelessness and by extension, they help to reduce the pressure and stress on parents. This enables parents to engage much more fully both with supporting their children through a traumatic experience, as well as on the process of exiting homelessness. Given the

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99 Ombudsman for Children's Office, *No Place Like Home: Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs* (OCO 2019) 14.

100 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government Heritage on 22 February 2023.

101 Ombudsman for Children, *No Place Like Home Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs* (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2019)

102 *ibid* 2.

103 *ibid*.

104 *ibid* 54.

continued rise in the numbers of children living in emergency accommodation, and the dearth of properties available to support their exit, it is critical that the government provide tailored support to these children to mitigate against the trauma these children will experience. Child Support Workers are a vital link connecting families with specialist supports, therapeutic services, social workers, and schools. They work directly with children and support their well-being, with homework and where appropriate engage therapeutic interventions.

One Parent Families make up a disproportionate number of homeless families. In February 2023, over half of all families experiencing homelessness were one parent families.<sup>105</sup> Lone parents have a lower rate of homeownership, and a higher rate of occupancy in both the private rental and local authority sectors.<sup>106</sup> These families are also likely to have more affordability issues and experience housing deprivation, such as an inability to heat their home.<sup>107</sup>

Traveller families face significant barriers to accessing their right to housing and are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness than settled families.<sup>108</sup> The lack of data on ethnicity in homeless statistics can mean that the extent of Traveller homelessness is invisible.<sup>109</sup> In 2019, the *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review* was published<sup>110</sup> and a Programme Board has been established to oversee implementation of the reports recommendation.<sup>111</sup> Among the recommendations progressed by the Programme Board is research on the issue of homelessness amongst the Traveller and Roma communities.<sup>112</sup> This work will include consideration of the recommendation to commission research to better understand homelessness in the Traveller population.<sup>113</sup> In one recent study by Focus Ireland, Traveller families represented a disproportionate number of homeless families: they made up seven

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105 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report, February 2023* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2022).

106 H Russell et al, *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021).

107 *ibid.*

108 Independent Expert Group on behalf of the Minister of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review* (DHPLG 2019).

109 Cork and Kerry RTAWG, *Traveller Homelessness A Hidden Crisis* (Cork and Kerry RTAWG 2023).

110 Independent Expert Group on behalf of the Minister of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review* (DHPLG 2019).

111 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 28 January 2022 and 8 December 2022. The Board is comprised of two Traveller representatives, two County and City Management Association (CCMA) representatives, two representatives from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and is independently chaired by the Chair of the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee (NTACC). The Board has met on a total of ten occasions.

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

113 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 13 January 2021.

per cent of homeless families while making up less than one per cent of the general population.<sup>114</sup>

Roma also experience significant discrimination in accessing accommodation.<sup>115</sup> The Roma Needs Assessment reported that some families had their water turned off or fuses removed by landlords when their rent was overdue.<sup>116</sup> Since the pandemic began there have been reports that it is increasingly difficult to accommodate homeless Roma families in emergency accommodation, if they were not already registered in PASS (Pathway Accommodation and Support System) and this has exacerbated with time.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, one of the qualifying criteria for the allocation of social housing is employment,<sup>118</sup> but given that the national needs assessments suggest that just 17 per cent of Roma are employed,<sup>119</sup> most Roma will be ineligible for social housing support. In 2021, 41 Roma families (with 111 children) were living in homeless accommodation in Dublin of which almost 40 per cent had no keyworker.<sup>120</sup>

Long-term and durable solutions to the homeless crisis requires rethinking the current approach of marketisation of social housing, and the effectiveness of the HAP model – particularly when it is not keeping pace with market value – to support low-income families at risk of homelessness. Sustainable and durable progress is needed on homelessness prevention. This requires development of adequate housing supply, affordable rents backed by strong legal protections for tenants, and ancillary rapid-rehousing services for those families who have already become homeless.<sup>121</sup> Unless there is a cohesive policy at a strategic level that recognises and mitigates the multi-faceted drivers of family homelessness, many children will continue to experience insecure or inadequate housing, with wide-ranging adverse impacts on their health and development.<sup>122</sup>

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114 A Long et al, *Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories, and Finding a Home* (Focus Ireland 2019) 24.

115 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

116 *ibid.*

117 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from Pavee Point, 16 October 2020.

118 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Circular Housing 41/2012 - Access to Social Housing Supports for non-Irish nationals' (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2012) <<https://bit.ly/3oLnUSj>> accessed 4 February 2022.

119 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

120 The National Roma Network, *Roma Accommodation Advocacy Paper*, (The National Roma Network 2022).

121 Niall Pleace *Preventing Homelessness: A Review of the International Evidence* (Simon Communities of Ireland 2019) 7.

122 Amy Clair, 'Housing: an Under-Explored Influence on Children's Well-Being and Becoming' (2019) *Child Indicators Research* 12:609–626.



The previous Government resisted calls for the right to housing to be inserted into the constitution, but promisingly, the current Programme for Government has committed to a referendum on this issue.<sup>123</sup> To enable effective collaboration between housing agencies, local authorities and central government, all parties must recognise housing as a fundamental right which everyone is entitled to. In November 2021, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage published the terms of reference and a call for expressions of interest for a Commission on Housing.<sup>124</sup> The Commission has been tasked with a wide range of functions including examining the issue of a referendum on housing which would be undertaken by a sub-group of the Commission.<sup>125</sup> In January 2023, it was reported that the exact wording for the Referendum would be available later in the month<sup>126</sup>, however work remains ongoing with a final timeline yet to be agreed.<sup>127</sup>

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123 Government of Ireland, Programme for Government, Our Shared Future (Government Publications 2020) 121.1

124 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Minister O'Brien Calls for Expressions of Interest for Membership of Commission on Housing', Press Release (23 November 2021).

125 Government of Ireland, Expressions of interest sought re appointment as Member of the Commission on Housing, (Government of Ireland 2022)

126 Jack Horgan-Jones, 'Right-to-housing referendum: Recommendations due this month on wording of vote' The Irish Times, 4 January 2023.

127 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government Heritage on 22 February 2023.



# Recommendations

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## Budget 2024

- Ensure that every child living in homeless accommodation has a child and family support worker to help them to navigate the challenges they face in this situation.
  - Invest in homeless prevention services to support families from becoming homeless. Aligned to this, consider introducing legislative measures that increase tenancy rights and introduce measures to secure long terms tenancies.
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## Medium-term

- Introduce legislation which would require housing authorities to regard the best interests of the child as primary and to protect and assist families, including by providing them with safe accommodation.
  - Prioritise building social housing and meeting the target of building an average of 10,000 homes each year as outlined in Housing for All.<sup>128</sup>
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## Long-term

- Commit to a date for the referendum on the right to housing.

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128 Government of Ireland, *Housing for All A new Housing Plan for Ireland*, (Government of Ireland 2021).

## **? Spotlight Solution:**

### **HIGH INTERVENTION SUPPORT FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

#### **Introduction**

Child homeless has increased over 20 per cent from this time last year. Families living in temporary or emergency accommodation are living in cramped conditions where there is often no space for children to learn how to walk, for cooking, washing, play or doing homework.

For many years Focus Ireland have operated their Coffee Shop 365 days of the year, offering hot meals and an Advocacy and Information Service for people experiencing homelessness, in particular rough sleepers. As Ireland experienced a surge in family homelessness, in 2019 Focus Ireland established a Family Centre. The Family Centre provides high intervention, wraparound supports for children and families experiencing homelessness including dedicated Child Support Workers.

With sustained investment and an increased number of Child Support Workers, more children would be in a position to avail of this service and at a time when child homelessness is rising, it is of paramount importance that dedicated supports are provided to support children spending their childhood in homelessness.

**“Focus Ireland provided me with support which made me feel like I wasn’t alone, yet being homeless is one of loneliest experiences I have ever faced. Focus Ireland gave me a light to my dark journey. I will forever be grateful for all you have done for us Louise (Child Support Worker) and Focus Ireland. Thank you.”** —Sonia, parent

#### **Focus Ireland Family Centre**

The Family Centre is a bespoke space to support children and families who are experiencing homelessness or living in temporary emergency accommodation. It provides high intensity wrap around services alongside



food, laundry and play facilities, and quiet spaces to do homework. There is also practical support to help people experiencing homelessness to move onto long-term accommodation. Most importantly, specialised Child Support Workers are available to work one-on-one with children.

The Child Support Workers link in with social workers, psychologists and school liaison officers about accessing school in emergency accommodation and afterschool facilities for children. Parenting support is delivered through a model called the Circle of Security. For families that are non-Irish nationals, there are often language barriers, and the Family Centre uses the translation service Context to provide translation and interpreting services.

The Family Centre provides a safe space for “messy play” and sensory one-on-one play which is often not possible in emergency accommodation due to cramped conditions or a lack of privacy. Parents can cook hot meals in the Family Centre, another facility which is often unavailable in emergency accommodation. With the support of a Bord Gáis Energy dedicated fund, Focus Ireland’s Child Support Workers can apply for funding to ensure that children have access to specialist medical supports or even therapeutic supports such as equine therapy.

Caseworkers are also based in the Family Centre to assist families with specialised supports and plans to exit homelessness, working alongside the specialised support provided by dedicated Child Support Workers.

In 2022, the Family Centre supported 491 children. While the Family Centre provides important practical supports for families a key goal of the Child Support Workers at the Family Centre is to provide positive experiences for children experiencing homelessness. This includes, organising fun family days out to petting zoos, visits to playgrounds and play centres and for Christmas 2022 a visit to Santa’s grotto for the children alongside a gift giving drive for Christmas presents.

**“Alannah is my keyworker she has been so helpful to me and my family. She is always there when I need her. I completed the Circle of Security Parenting programme with her, and this has changed my parenting for the better. Thank you.”** –Juliet, parent



# Participation, Play, Culture and Recreation



## PARTICIPATION, PLAY, CULTURE AND RECREATION

**“Adults should listen to kids more  
- We have good ideas too.”**

**“We shouldn’t be scared to speak  
up about things that will affect  
our future.”<sup>1</sup>**

The third pillar of the EU Recommendation *Investing in Children* concentrates on children’s right to participate.<sup>2</sup> This pillar focuses on two distinct aspects of participation. The first centres on children’s participation in play, including recreation and sport, and cultural activities.<sup>3</sup> The second aspect of this pillar focuses on children’s participation in decision-making.<sup>4</sup>

Under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to ‘rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts’.<sup>5</sup> Ireland was last examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee calls on the States Parties to strengthen initiatives that support this right.<sup>6</sup> Such activities should be available for children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage as well as those with disabilities, migrant children and those seeking asylum.<sup>7</sup> The Committee also recommends children are involved in the development and monitoring of relevant policies related to this.<sup>8</sup> Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States to ‘assure

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1 Elaine May, MayKay and The SuperTones children’s choir, ‘What Will You Say?’, (The Ark 2023) available at <https://bit.ly/3M7V49g>.

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

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*

5 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art. 31.

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

7 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(b).

8 UNCRC, ‘Concluding Observations Ireland’ (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(c).

to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.<sup>9</sup> The Concluding Observations published in 2023 call on Ireland to ensure all children can express their views and have them taken into account in decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Measures should be strengthened to promote and empower children's participation particularly those who are in disadvantaged situations.<sup>11</sup> Most critically the Committee urges Ireland to hold a referendum to reduce the voting age to 16 years.<sup>12</sup>

*Investing in Children* calls on Member States to specifically address barriers to participation in culture such as cost and access and emphasises the importance of participation outside of school.<sup>13</sup> The provision of safe spaces in local communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage is also critical.<sup>14</sup> *Investing in Children* calls on Member States to ensure that children are included in decision-making about how services they are involved in are run, as well as being consulted on relevant policy planning. In relation to existing participation structures, the inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is of particular importance.<sup>15</sup>

### Access to safe places to play

Facilities provided at a local level play a significant role in the recreational lives of children and young people. These can include libraries, playgrounds, parks, and so on. Policy makers should aim to ensure that the creation of safe spaces for families to gather and for children to play are a priority. Consideration needs to be given to safety, age-friendly design, family-friendly and equitable access.<sup>16</sup>

The Growing Up in Ireland survey found that nine per cent of mothers of nine-year-olds felt it was not safe to play outdoors in their local area during the day and 42 per cent felt there were no safe parks, playgrounds and play spaces in their local area.<sup>17</sup> Housing and communities that are not child or youth friendly, or are perceived by children and their parents to have unsafe public spaces, are associated

9 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art. 12.

10 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 18.

11 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 18.

12 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 18.

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

14 *ibid.*

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

16 Woods CB, Powell C, Saunders JA, O'Brien W, Murphy MH, Duff C, Farmer O, Johnston A., Connolly S. and Belton S "The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2018" (CSPPA 2018)

17 Growing up in Ireland Study Team, *The Lives of 9-Year-Olds* (ESRI and TCD 2009)

with poverty, non-participation in play and recreational opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Analysis of data collected by Growing Up in Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic examined the impact that local environment had on maternal mental health during this time and concludes that investment in green spaces 'will pay dividends in supporting the mental wellbeing of women and their families'.<sup>19</sup> Children living in temporary accommodation and those living in Direct Provision centres do not have adequate access to safe play and recreation facilities.<sup>20</sup> A lack of access to a safe space to play for Traveller children was highlighted by the Ombudsman for Children's Office report, *No End in Site*, which highlighted the inadequate conditions 66 children were living in.<sup>21</sup> The negative implications of play deprivation may be significant to a child's development as play impacts their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.<sup>22</sup> Play also has a crucial role in creating stronger bonds between parents and their children.<sup>23</sup>

*First Five* acknowledges the emergence of child-friendly approaches to local planning and design internationally, as well as the importance of local planning and delivery structures to the successful implementation of the strategy. The commitment in *First Five* to develop guidelines for local authorities on the development of child-friendly communities will ensure that children have 'safe environments to play, explore and learn'.<sup>24</sup> It is welcome that a review of existing guidelines has been completed as part of this action, but further progress is needed on the development of best practice in the incorporation of child-centred approach to planning.<sup>25</sup> Some local councils, such as Laois County Councils have developed recreation and play strategies that plan for the continued development of Sport,

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18 National Children's Office, *Teenspace: National Recreation Policy for Young People* (The Stationery Office 2008) and National Children's Office, *Ready, Steady! A National Play Strategy* (The Stationery Office 2004).

19 James Laurence, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth, *What Protected the Wellbeing of Mothers during the Pandemic?* (ESRI 2023).

20 Kathy Walsh, and Brian Harvey, *Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness - The Families' Perspective* (DRHE 2015) <<https://bit.ly/2UpaT4J>>; Working Group on the Protection Process, *Report to Government on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers* (Working Group on the Protection Process 2015) para 1.59,2.22.

21 Ombudsman for Children, *No End in Site* (OCO 2021).

22 Milteer R and others, 'The Importance Of Play In Promoting Healthy Child Development And Maintaining Strong Parent Child Bond: Focus On Children In Poverty' (2012) 129 *Pediatrics*.

23 *ibid.*

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

25 DCEDIY, *First Five Annual Implementation Plan 2019* (2019) 82.



Recreation and Play,<sup>26</sup> however a national play plan is needed to ensure that this is consistent throughout the country and that there is a focus on the provision of green spaces in local communities for children and young people.

## Addressing barriers to participation in culture

*Investing in Children* recognises the impact that participation in play, recreation, sport and cultural activities has for young people's development, health and wellbeing. It is important to encourage engagement in cultural activities from a young age to influence participation in these activities later in life.<sup>27</sup>

Children and young people should have access to cultural and arts activities both inside and outside school. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in arts and cultural activities than children from more affluent families.<sup>28</sup> The Growing up in Ireland survey found that only 34 per cent of children from the lowest income group attended a sports club or group for one hour or more per week. This is compared to 63 per cent of children from the highest income group.<sup>29</sup> They can also face a number of barriers to participating in activities related to culture, in particular, cost.<sup>30</sup> Taking part in cultural activities like singing, painting, dance, and theatre benefits children academically and in developing better social skills and positive relationships.<sup>31</sup> More recent Growing Up in Ireland research published in 2022 continues to confirm a strong social gradient with regard to participation in cultural activities, i.e. children whose parents are graduates are more likely to participate.<sup>32</sup> Children whose parents are employed in professional or managerial employment also have a higher level of participation with lower levels recorded for those living in rented accommodation and children in migrant families.<sup>33</sup> Thus indicating that there is a need to identify interventions that support and encourage those from disadvantaged cohorts to participate more. Providing a subsidy or addressing the cost of participating in cultural activities could enable many children in low-income families to access culture.

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26 Laois County Council. 'The Recreation, Play and Sports Strategy 2018-2022' <<https://laois.ie/departments/sport-and-leisure/the-recreation-play-and-sports-strategy-2018-2022/>> accessed 1 July 2022.

27 Emer Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*, (The Arts Council and ESRI 2016) 98.

28 *ibid* 100-101.

29 *Growing up in Ireland Study Team, Key Findings: Infant Cohort (at 5 Years). No. 3: Well-Being, Play and Diet Among Five-Year-Olds (ESRI and TCD 2015)*

30 Emer Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*, (The Arts Council and ESRI 2016) 100-101.

31 *ibid*.

32 Emer Smyth, *The Changing World of 9 Year Olds*, (ESRI 2022).

33 *ibid*.

In the past five years there has been progress in acknowledging the right to participate in culture at a policy level. The right for everyone to participate in culture ‘irrespective of where they come from, where they live, their religious beliefs or their economic or social backgrounds’ is a central value of *Culture 2025*, the first Framework policy for the entire culture sector.<sup>34</sup> It also underpins the Arts Council’s *Equality Human Rights and Diversity Strategy and Policy*,<sup>35</sup> and has shaped the thinking behind the all-of-government Creative Ireland culture and wellbeing programme.

The new *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027*, a cross-government initiative with support from the departments with responsibilities for culture and the arts, children, education and further and higher education, recognises the importance of creativity in contributing to children’s wellbeing and personal development.<sup>36</sup> The Plan emphasises the prioritisation of marginalised children and young people, including ethnic minorities and those living poverty, who have low levels of participation in creative and cultural activities through the initiation of equity, diversity and inclusion work.<sup>37</sup> Objective 2 of the strategy specifically focuses on this work and names the Local Creative Youth Partnerships and schools as key actors to facilitate work in this area.<sup>38</sup> Strategic Objective 4 seeks to promote creativity in the education system and school curriculum frameworks.<sup>39</sup>

These are positive actions given that evidence indicates that children who are exposed to arts and culture during school time are more likely to engage in cultural activities outside school hours including ‘music, dance or drama lessons and to read for pleasure’.<sup>40</sup> Children living in poverty may be deprived of the benefits of safe and creative playtime and access to age-appropriate extracurricular activities.<sup>41</sup> It is important to encourage engagement in cultural activities from a young age to influence participation in these activities later in life.<sup>42</sup>

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34 Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, *Culture 2025* (DAHRRGA 2016) <<https://bit.ly/2REfOxv>> accessed 26 May 2021

35 The Arts Council, ‘Equality, Human Rights and Diversity’ <<https://bit.ly/3wVXEpy>> accessed 1 July 2022.

36 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

37 *ibid.*

38 *ibid.*

39 *ibid.*

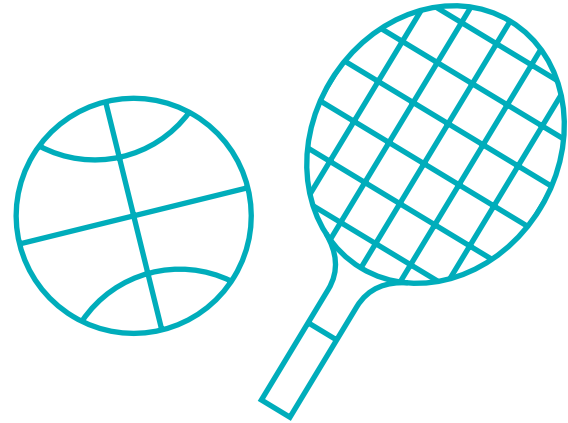
40 Emer Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study* (ESRI 2016), xi.

41 Milteer R and others, ‘The Importance Of Play In Promoting Healthy Child Development And Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus On Children In Poverty’ (2012) 129 *Pediatrics*.

42 Emer Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*, (The Arts Council and ESRI 2016) 98.

## Sports

Children from families in lower socio-economic groups have similar rates of participation in extra-curricular sport to middle-class children, however they are less likely to participate in activities at sports centres and other locations not linked to their school.<sup>43</sup> Data from the Growing up in Ireland survey shows that 63 per cent of children (five year olds)



in the highest income group attended a sports club/group for one hour or more per week compared to just 34 per cent of those in the lowest income group.<sup>44</sup> The impact of the costs of participating in sports (for example the cost of football boots, clothing and equipment) needs to be examined to determine if it has an impact on participation rates in sports for children coming from lower income families. Across Ireland, Local Sports Partnerships promote participation in sports in different communities, targeting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular.<sup>45</sup> Participation in sport decreases once young people enter second level school and early school leavers are less likely to participate in sports.<sup>46</sup> Young people who participate in sport tend to do better in exams, although many young people reduce their participation in sports during exam years.<sup>47</sup>

## Participation in Decision Making

The *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* aimed to make sure that children and young people have a voice in their everyday lives and regarding decisions that affect their lives such as in the community, education, health and legal settings.<sup>48</sup> A successor strategy is currently in development.<sup>49</sup> Initiatives which aim to support children and young people's participation include the development of 'Hub na nÓg' (Youth Hub) which aims to provide resources and Comhairle na nÓg which comprises of local youth

43 Growing up in Ireland Study Team, *Key Findings: Infant Cohort (at 5 Years). No. 3: Well-Being, Play and Diet Among Five-Year-Olds* (ESRI and TCD 2015).

44 *ibid.*

45 Sport Ireland, *Local Sport Partnerships Annual Report 2019* (Sport Ireland 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3bzat0Y>> accessed 19 May 2021.

46 Pete Lunn, Elish Kelly and Nick Fitzpatrick, *Keeping them in the game: Taking up and dropping out of sport and exercise in Ireland* (ESRI 2013).

47 *ibid.*

48 DCEDIY, *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Decision making* (DCEDIY 2019).

49 DCEDIY, 'Public Consultation on the next Government Policy Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making', <https://bit.ly/42KO4Xc> accessed 17 May 2023.

councils that meet in every local authority area of the country.<sup>50</sup> A representative from each area is elected to be part of a National Executive which meets once a month for a term of two years. The Department support the National Executive of Comhairle na nÓg and ensure they can engage and meet with relevant decision makers across including Ministers.<sup>51</sup> Prior to Budget 2022, the Comhairle put forward a proposal to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth that public transport should be reduced for young people aged 16 to 25 years by 50 per cent.<sup>52</sup> The spirit of the proposal was accepted and a youth travel card for 19 to 23 year olds was introduced providing half price fares across the travel network.<sup>53</sup> The National Youth Assembly has been established by the Department as a consultative forum on national topics of interest. This forum provides an important youth perspective on policy implementation<sup>54</sup> and members have the opportunity to make recommendations to Government.<sup>55</sup>

The power of children and young people to be engaged and influence the votes of their parents and grandparents, was evident in recent local, European and General elections. It is noteworthy that adults have credited their children and grandchildren with pushing them towards voting in a particular direction.<sup>56</sup> However, young people under the age of 18 cannot vote in Ireland in any elections. A range of multilateral bodies such as the EU, the Council of Europe and the UN have called for a voting age of 16. In 2013, the Constitutional Convention recommended that the voting age in Ireland be reduced to 16 years of age in all elections.<sup>57</sup> There is momentum towards extending the right to vote to young people at 16 and 17 years old internationally

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50 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive' <https://bit.ly/3AeSGcK> accessed 29 June 2022.

51 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive' <https://bit.ly/3AeSGcK> accessed 29 June 2022.

52 National-Executive-Presentation-on-Youth-Travel-Card.pdf (comhairlenanog.ie)

53 gov.ie - Budget 2022 to help transform how we travel (www.gov.ie)

54 Other opportunities to engage young people in policies that impact them have included the development of the *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025* published in November 2022. The development of the strategy included consultations with young people who have experience of homelessness.

55 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *National Youth Assembly of Ireland*, gov.ie - About the National Youth Assembly of Ireland (www.gov.ie) accessed 25 May 2023.

56 Harry McGee, 'Elections 2019: Climate change sees Greens move to centre of politics' *The Irish Times* (Dublin, 25 May 2019); *The Irish Examiner*, '#Elections2019: 'It's wide open', says Martin as first counts start rolling in', <<https://bit.ly/2UPmt9h>> accessed 16 July 2021.

57 A change to the voting age for Dáil and presidential elections would require a constitutional referendum. A change to the voting age for local and EU elections would require an amendment to the Electoral Act 1992, the European Parliament Elections Act 1997 and the Local Government Act 2001.

in countries such as Scotland and Austria.<sup>58</sup> The newly established Electoral Commission is due to examine and draw conclusions from the Scottish experience of lowering the voting age.<sup>59</sup> The Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023 initiated in by members of the Seanad includes provisions for the Commission to undertake research and possible changes to the voting age for elections in the state.<sup>60</sup> As of May 2022 the Bill is at second stage in the Seanad.<sup>61</sup>

Given that children and young people experience the highest rates of poverty and social exclusion, and many budgetary and political decisions impact them directly, a change to the voting age for 16 and 17 year olds should be considered to empower young people to have their voices heard and influence decisions that are based on their best interests. Expanding the right would lead to an increase in voter turnout in the long run<sup>62</sup> and increase political consciousness and engagement among adolescents.<sup>63</sup> Rights on paper are not enough and it is clear from research undertaken by young people themselves that when they are given the right information and opportunities to do so, they bring valuable insights to the table.<sup>64</sup> There is a need to give children and young people a true voice in our political system by lowering the voting age to 16.

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58 In the Scottish referendum on independence the right to vote was extended to 16 and 17 year olds with 75% of this age cohort voting. Given this success, the Scottish Government allowed young people aged 16 and 17 to vote in the Scottish Parliamentary elections. Austria has also lowered the voting age for all elections to 16. Seven of the 16 states in Germany have lowered the voting age and a region in Switzerland has introduced it. In Austria and Germany the voter turnout of young people aged 16 and 17 was equal to that of older age groups. Other countries such as the UK and Denmark are also considering such a move. Vote at 16 has been introduced in the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.

59 Elaine Loughlin, 'New Electoral Commission to look at reducing voting age', *The Irish Examiner* (Cork, 25 January 2023).

60 Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023

61 Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023

62 See, e.g., the *Council of Europe draft Resolution* on expansion of democracy by lowering the voting age to 16, Parliamentary Assembly, Minimum age for voting, Report, Doc. 12546, 22 March 2011, <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=13110&Language=EN>.

63 "If voting is in part a habit [...] acquired in late adolescence and early adulthood, then this habit will likely be strengthened by allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote." (Hart/Atkins 2011: 218); see also Dinas, 2012; Gerber et al., 2003; Plutzer, 2002; Parliamentary Assembly, Minimum age for voting, Report, Doc. 12546, 22 March 2011, <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=13110&Language=EN>.

64 Martinez Sainz, G. and Daminelli, J. *Voice, Rights, Action! Children's Knowledge about their Rights & Rights Education to Access Justice*. (Children's Rights Alliance 2022) 31



# Recommendations

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## Budget 2024

- Appoint an expert on play in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to lead the development of a new National Play Plan. The Plan should have a focus on the need for green spaces and recreational facilities in local communities. In developing this plan, a review should be carried out of what exists at local authority levels.
- As part of the scope of a new National Play Plan, an obligation should be placed on local authorities to develop play and recreation facilities for all children and young people, with a particular emphasis on children and young people experiencing poverty. To support this planning guidelines should be amended to provide for more play and green spaces for children and young people.
- Prioritise access to the arts and cultural events for children and young people who are experiencing poverty via increased central government investment in this area. Introduce an annual €30 subsidy to cover the cost of a child and an accompanying adult to attend one cultural or arts activity of their choice. Based on the population of under 18s in Census 2016, would cost an estimated €36 million.
- The national investment in arts for children should be proportional to that for adults.
- Invest in sporting activities linked to schools.



# Recommendations

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## Medium-term

- The Creative Ireland Programme needs to be expanded to include all DEIS schools nationwide.
  - The Creative Youth programmes which focuses on outside-of-school activities should prioritise children living in poverty and inequality.
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## Long-term

- Lower the voting age to 16 for Local and European Elections.

## Spotlight Solution:

### ACCESS TO CULTURAL AND ARTS ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH LIFELONG HEALTH CONDITIONS



#### Introduction

Research shows that children living in poverty are less likely to participate in arts and cultural activities than children from higher income families. They can face a number of barriers to participating in activities related to arts and culture, including cost. Coupled with this, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are three times more likely to have a serious health condition. Helium Arts offers free, specially designed art workshops for children and young people (age 8-18) living with a lifelong physical health condition – supported by professional artists, volunteers and on-site medical care.

#### Helium Arts

The work of Helium Arts has two strands, the hospital programme and community programme.

The hospital work takes place in paediatric Outpatient Departments while children wait for medical appointments located in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Castlebar hospitals. An artist is present to help children 'create while you wait'. Art materials/thematic prompts allow children to engage as they choose or just play. Working on site in hospitals allows Helium Arts to signpost to other more intensive community workshops which take place during school holidays or on Saturdays in community spaces.

**"Helium shows kindness, empathy, fun. Every child is treated equally regardless of their illness/disability."** —Parent of a child



The community programme works to reduce the social barriers to participation. The programme is free and located in areas of disadvantage in venues including Family Resource Centres. Travel is provided to those children living in direct provision. A paramedic is present at all workshops for children requiring medical attention, allowing parents to leave their child worry-free, sometimes for the first time at an extracurricular activity.

In 2022, Helium Arts supported 1,200 children. The positive impact on the children who avail of the services is evident when you listen to parents' feedback, with many saying that their child(ren) were socializing more and felt less left out or more socially included because of Helium Arts and the group-based workshops.

**"They let her be herself in a room of people just like her. It's like she looked up and realised, 'I'm not alone!'"** – Mother of Participant (aged 7)

**"It was a very nice, encouraging, and artistic environment. I grew more confident in sharing my work and got inspiration from others."** – Teenager



## Spotlight Solution:

### ACCESS TO SPACES OF PLAY, ARTS AND CULTURE FOR MARGINALISED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

#### Introduction

Research shows that children living in poverty are less likely to participate in cultural and arts activities than children from higher income families. For children and young people experiencing the highest levels of poverty and marginalisation, access to arts and cultural activities are often out of reach due to cost. However, without access to positive, creative experiences and extracurricular activities, these children lose out on the opportunities to start friendships, integrate into the community, develop creative and social skills and build their own self confidence and self-esteem.

The Glucksman is a leading museum nationally and internationally for creative learning and access to the visual arts with the aim of making contemporary art and creative practice accessible to all. There is a strong focus on facilitating participation in the programmes for people who may not ordinarily or easily access cultural experiences, such as families experiencing homelessness, young people from the Traveller community and young people living in Direct Provision.

The programmes run by the Glucksman are a best practice example of how enabling access to these programmes and tailored workshops has given children and young people who are marginalised by society, a means of communicating and expressing themselves, as well as an opportunity to be listened to. The young participants are given the space to explore their own sense of self and self-worth and take great pride in the graduations or exhibitions that give validation to their work.



**“My experience at the workshop in UCC was amazing. It helped me physically and mentally as I was inspired with all the activities we did. I was able to meet new people and I discovered I had a great singing voice.”** —Young Participant

## The Glucksman

The Glucksman has been focused on supporting children and young people living in Direct Provision for almost twenty years. It became clear early on, working with colleagues in University College Cork (UCC), that in order to enable children living in Direct Provision to fully participate in creative activities, the Glucksman would need to ensure that other supports such as transport and meals would be provided. Funding was sourced for a pilot project that has developed into a programme of supports for some of the most marginalised children in the area.

**“In places like a refugee centre, we’re always trapped, we don’t do anything...so when there’s an opportunity like this, it’s very big for us, it helps us improve.”** –Young Participant

Learnings from each workshop and initiative that has been run have been brought forward to develop a programme and an experience that suits the unique needs of each particular group of children. For example, early workshops brought the physical impact of living in direct provision to the fore. The children’s focus and attention could fall off very quickly, some could arrive drowsy or despondent. Running the project over several weeks and introducing short exercises were found to be a much more effective way of having sustained positive impact on the children. The Glucksman team design their programmes by listening and being led by the children taking part. For example, for children living in direct provision, workshops were brought outdoors in partnership with Scouting Ireland, to facilitate and support engagement in the creative processes involved. One of the young people involved in a Gluckmsan project described that for her one of the most important aspects of the project was getting out of the centre and feeling a sense of space, feeling like she could “breathe”.

In 2022, the Glucksman worked with UCC Fáilte Refugees Society to run a year-long project called All Together. All Together aims to provide meaningful, creative experiences for young people in the greatest need for extracurricular activities and positive opportunities. It also aims to increase the visibility of refugees and migrants in society. The project provided creative opportunities for young asylum seekers living in the rural, isolated Direct Provision centre in West Cork. The project connected young asylum

seekers with third level students and supported the young creatives to create innovative artworks that brought their voice and views into the public realm. The teenagers were supported to lead on all aspects of the project from making decisions on art mediums and the theme to the final outcomes.

The supported environment of the Gluckman provides a transformational impact on the children who participate in creative programmes, where they can enjoy not only creative activities, but also the university grounds, a meal in the restaurant and some freedom from their severely restricted living conditions.

**“Well, I must say the workshop was one of the best I’ve been to. They provided us with everything we needed for the course, even transport. The workshop included drawing, film making and photography. I am so happy that I got the opportunity to participate, it brought out my talent and I have become more confident standing in front of a crowd.”** –Young Participant





# Supporting Families and Youth Services



## SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND YOUTH SERVICES

**“And it was that, it was looking at seeing things from my children’s [point of view]... seeing me as a parent from my children’s perspective. I would never had stepped into their shoes without the guidance of this programme, ever.”<sup>1</sup>**

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that support for parents in the early years of a child’s life is particularly important. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises that prevention and intervention strategies during early childhood have the potential to impact positively on young children’s current well-being and prospects.<sup>2</sup>

The European Commission *Recommendation Investing in Children* calls on Member States to provide enhanced family support.<sup>3</sup> The Recommendation emphasises that parenting support should be destigmatised and that ‘early intervention and prevention are essential for developing more effective and efficient policies, as public expenditure addressing the consequences of child poverty and social exclusion tends to be greater than that needed for intervening at an early age’.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Nuala Connolly, Keith Adams, & Padraic Fleming, *Evaluation of the Partnership with Parents™ Programme* (Barnardos 2019).

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

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

4 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1060&langId=en>

The Recommendation of the Council of Europe<sup>5</sup> with regard to fulfilling children's rights in social services planning, delivery and evaluation states that social services delivery for the protection of vulnerable children should 'adhere to the following principles: (a) prevention and early intervention; (b) child-focused partnership with parents; (c) careful assessment of the child's needs with regard to protective factors ... as well as risk factors in the child's environment ...'<sup>6</sup>

A key commitment under *First 5* is the development of a national model of parenting support services in order to shape their further development.<sup>7</sup> In April 2022, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services* was published with a strong emphasis on a cross-government approach to improving the supports and services available to parents.<sup>8</sup> The plan recognises that these interventions are part of a wider range of services including family support, health and disabilities services.<sup>9</sup> The vision of the parenting model is that 'all parents are confident and capable in their parenting role helping to achieve the best outcomes for children and families'.<sup>10</sup> This will be achieved through greater awareness and access to parenting support services, developing more inclusive services and ensuring that they are needs-led and evidence-informed.<sup>11</sup>

## Increasing the Provision of Family Support

The type and intensity of support outside the home that is required is dependent on the needs of each individual child and their family. The Hardiker model is one way of understanding the different levels of need children have and is used as a way planning the delivery of services.<sup>12</sup> While all families may need a basic level of support (Hardiker Level 1) those with more complex needs (Hardiker Levels 2-4) will require

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5 The Council of Europe is a human rights institution. It includes 47 member states, 28 of which are in the EU. It promotes human rights through international conventions, monitoring member states' implementation progress and making recommendations through independent expert monitoring bodies. It oversees the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Court of Human Rights is a key institution.

6 Council of Europe, Council of Europe Recommendation on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families (Council of Europe 2011) 9.

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

8 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*

11 *ibid.*

12 Stella Owens, *An introductory guide to the key terms and interagency initiatives in use in the Children's Services Committees in Ireland*, (Centre for Effective Services 2019) <<https://bit.ly/3hVvfvc>> accessed 26 May 2021.

more tailored and intensive services.<sup>13</sup> Sufficiently resourced services across the spectrum of need ensure that all children experiencing disadvantage and adversity can thrive and reach their full potential.

The adoption of a progressive universalist approach to service delivery, working alongside targeted provision, ensures that all parents will receive some level of support with those needing greater support being able to readily access it. More tailored and intensive supports are needed for children and families experiencing complex issues, for example mental health difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

State-delivered or state-funded services are particularly pertinent for those in or at risk of poverty as they may not have the means to access support through their own means.<sup>15</sup> Children can be exposed to adversity at both the family and community level.<sup>16</sup> While the presence of poor parental mental health, domestic violence and addiction can occur across the socioeconomic spectrum of families<sup>17</sup> for those experiencing poverty these issues can be particularly prevalent.<sup>18</sup> The involvement of children in serious crime has been found to be an issue in communities across Ireland with disadvantaged areas and communities with high levels of anti-social behaviour common factors associated with prevalence.<sup>19</sup>

It is possible to intervene and improve the life chances of children experiencing poverty-related adversity by providing early childhood interventions to children and to their parents.<sup>20</sup> Family Support is an umbrella term under which clusters a broad

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13 Pauline Hardiker, Kenneth Exton and Mary Barker, *Policies and Practices in Preventive Child Care* (Aldershot 1991).

14 Morag Traynor, 'Poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)' (Children 1<sup>st</sup>, 27 September 2018) <<https://bit.ly/3f4T7LF>> accessed 21 May 2021.

15 *ibid.*

16 Ellis, Wendy R. and William H. Dietz, 'A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience Model' (2017) *Frameworks and Measurement*, 17(7).

17 Morag Traynor, 'Poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)' (Children 1<sup>st</sup>, 27 September 2018) <<https://bit.ly/3f4T7LF>> accessed 21 May 2021.

18 There is limited research on the prevalence of ACEs in Ireland (examples include Sharon Lambert, Graham Gill-Emerson, et.al., *Moving Towards Trauma Informed Care. A model of research and practice*, (Cork Simon Community 2017); Aoife Dermody A., Sharon Lambert et al., (2020) *An Exploration of Early Life Trauma and its Implications for Garda Youth Diversion Projects* (Youthrise and Quality Matters 2020). Internationally some research indicates there is a connection between child poverty and the prevalence of ACEs.

19 Catherine Naughton, and Sean Redmond, *National Prevalence Study Do the findings from the Greentown study of children's involvement in criminal networks (2015) extend beyond Greentown?* (DCYA, DoJ, Irish Youth Justice Service and University of Limerick 2017) <<https://bit.ly/340hZOj>> accessed 20 May 2021.

20 Katherine A. Beckmann, 'Mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences through Investments in Early Childhood Programs', (September – October 2017), *Academic Paediatrics*, 17(7), Supplement, S28–S29.



range of family-focused services and programmes. It is concerned with anticipating, recognising and responding to the needs of families, especially during a time of difficulty<sup>21</sup> and can be defined as:

**“both a style of work and a set of activities which reinforce positive informal social networks through integrated programmes. These programmes combine statutory, voluntary and community and private services and are generally provided to families in their own homes and communities. The primary focus is on early intervention aiming to promote and protect the health, well-being and rights of all children, young people and their families paying particular attention to those who are vulnerable or at risk.”<sup>22</sup>**

However, over time, since this definition was developed in a Departmental paper in 2004, a lack of clarity has emerged as to what public funding is provided for these services as noted in a recently published spending review from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.<sup>23</sup> The review notes the difficulty in isolating costs and activities related to Family Support services from Tusla’s overall budget.<sup>24</sup> The Review notes this is because the landscape of these services ‘is complex and diverse, featuring overlapping networks of service providers and stakeholders, varying levels of need, and a wide range of funding structures’.<sup>25</sup> While the review calls for greater clarity, to strengthen future research in this area, it calculated that expenditure on Family Support Services rose from €105.5m in 2018 to €125.1m in 2021 representing an 18.6 per cent increase.<sup>26</sup> The vast majority of this funding, was provided to Community and Voluntary sector organisations delivering services on Tusla’s behalf.<sup>27</sup> As a proportion of overall Tusla spending, Family Support services comprise 13-14 per cent over the four year period examined in the report (2018-2021).<sup>28</sup> There is evidence that leading family support providers have experienced an increase in demand for their services, both in terms of need and complexity, which has resulted in many families and children being placed on waiting lists.<sup>29</sup> Longer waiting times result in increased complexity of cases, pressure to

21 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (DCYA 2014).

22 Pinkerton et al, *Family Support in Ireland. A paper for the Department of Health & Children* (The Stationery Office 2004), 16.

23 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

24 *ibid.*

25 *ibid.*

26 *ibid.*

27 *ibid.*

28 *ibid.*

29 Just Economics, *Breaking point: Why investment is needed now to ensure the sustainability of quality services for children and families*, (Barnardos 2019).

close cases prematurely and missed opportunities to intervene early.<sup>30</sup> Consultations with parents have indicated that many feel unsupported and that there is a lack of awareness about the supports in their area and that where supports existed it was fragmented.<sup>31</sup>

## Home Visiting Programmes

*First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, recognises the importance of the home environment and parenting supports in ensuring that all children have positive early experiences and get the best start in life.<sup>32</sup> Early intervention and supports to families helps parent-child bonding, infant well-being and positive developmental outcomes.<sup>33</sup> Early childhood home visiting helps children and families by connecting parents with a Home Visitor who guides them through the early stages of raising a family.<sup>34</sup>

There are a number of different evidence-based early childhood home visiting programmes in operation in Ireland including:

- Community Mothers
- Infant Mental Health
- Lifestart
- ParentChild+
- Preparing for Life.<sup>35</sup>

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30 Barnardos, *Children's Budget 2020*, (Barnardos 2019) <<https://bit.ly/36uE9dW>> accessed 4 October 2020.

31 Grainne Hickey and Yvonne Leckey, Irish parents' experiences of support and parenting support services, (DCEDIY 2021).

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

33 Government of Ireland, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services (2022-2027)* 10

34 National College of Ireland 'Home Visiting Alliance' <<http://bit.ly/3N4rHqi>> accessed 1 June 2023.

35 ibid

60,000 babies are born in Ireland each year with 20,000 to first time parents and 10,200 (17 per cent) at risk of poverty or social exclusion.<sup>36</sup> One of the aims of Home Visiting Programmes is to address intergenerational poverty and disadvantage and mitigate child poverty, developmental delays, educational disadvantage, domestic violence, parental isolation, trauma and poor mental health.<sup>37</sup>

Home visiting programmes provide one-to-one parenting support, mentoring and coaching which raises parents' awareness of key aspects of their children's care, development and education and improves parenting skills by modelling and encouraging best practice.<sup>38</sup> Home visiting programmes provide an early opportunity for identifying developmental delays or where more intensive parenting supports are needed.<sup>39</sup> The Home Visiting Alliance estimates that 4,500 children experience home visiting across Ireland each year with 65,000 home visits each year and 170 home visitors employed.<sup>40</sup> 60 per cent of families access a home visiting programme through referrals from statutory agencies with 20 percent referred through community and voluntary organisations.<sup>41</sup>

There have been many calls for review of the home visiting programmes and the introduction of a standardised model of delivery.<sup>42</sup> In October 2022 the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, announced the commencement of a review of home visiting services for families with babies and young children in Ireland.<sup>43</sup> The study will: 'examine the resources, activity levels, geographical coverage and outcomes associated with home visiting programmes in Ireland; consider evidence of the effectiveness and implementation of home visiting programmes in Ireland and across the world; consult with parents to explore the demand, and preferences, for, different types of home visiting services; and consult with other key stakeholders to identify, assess and agree options for a standardised approach in Ireland to home visiting service provision.'<sup>44</sup>

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36 Home Visiting Alliance, Key commonalities in relation to Home Visiting Programmes <[bit.ly/43iZ522](#)> accessed 1 June 2023, 2.

37 *ibid.*

38 *ibid.*

39 *ibid.*

40 *ibid.*

41 *ibid.*

42 Susan Broklesby, *A National review of the Community Mothers Programme* ( KHF and CFI 2019).

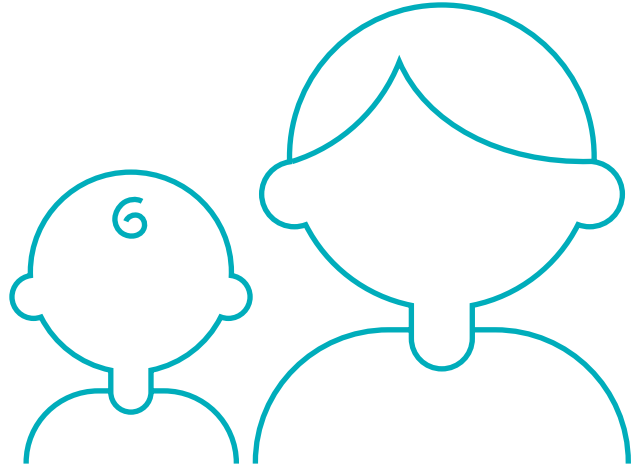
43 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Minister O'Gorman announces the first national study of home visiting services for families with babies and young children (Press Release, 10 October 2022).

44 *ibid.*

## Youth Services

Ireland has one of the highest levels of involvement by young people in youth and student organisations in the European Union, 20 per cent higher than the EU average.<sup>45</sup>

Youth organisations work across many areas including mental health and wellbeing, social and political education, training and skills development, youth justice, equality and school completion - 53 per



cent<sup>46</sup> of an estimated 380,000 young people involved in youth work organisations annually,<sup>47</sup> come from economically or socially disadvantaged communities. Youth organisations play a key role in supporting young people who experience social and economic disadvantage and 80 per cent of organisations are engaged in arts, cultural or sports activities.<sup>48</sup> Based in local communities, youth work services have unique engagements with young people outside of formal education or family structures and thus play a vital role in engaging and supporting all young people to flourish. Youth work in Ireland is delivered through a mixture of universal and targeted interventions. Targeted interventions focus on at-risk young people who are impacted by issues such as family conflict, school engagement, anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol misuse, and more.<sup>49</sup> Universal services involve open-access activities such as youth clubs and cafés, many of which are run by trained adult volunteers. Volunteer youth work services are particularly active in supporting young people in disadvantaged communities, with more than half of all participants coming from these areas (urban and rural).<sup>50</sup> Volunteer-led youth work has been

45 EU Eurobarometer Number 478, March 2019 <<https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/flash/surveyky/2224>> accessed 1 July 2022.

46 Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work by Indecon Economic Consultants (November 2012) 49.

47 DCEDIY, *First Five Annual Implementation Plan 2019* (2019) 82

48 National Youth Council of Ireland, *Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work* (NYCI 2012) 42.

49 National Youth Council of Ireland, 'Targeted vs mainstream Youth Work' <<https://bit.ly/3AgA0ZR>> accessed 30 June 2022.

50 National Youth Council of Ireland, *Pre Budget Submission 2020* (NYCI 2019) <<https://bit.ly/2ROVF3T>> accessed 1 July 2022.

shown to be effective in creating a sense of community connectedness and belonging for young people who engage in it, supporting their wellbeing, resilience, positive relationships and civic engagement.<sup>51</sup>

Universal youth work, along with targeted services for young people who need them most, can improve outcomes for all young people, and in particular for those who are marginalised, vulnerable or at risk of poverty.

Investment in youth work services decreased by 31.8 per cent over an eight-year period, from €73.1m in 2008 to €49.8m in 2014.<sup>52</sup> In the last three Budgets incremental increases have been allocated to youth services and now funding stands just below that of over a decade ago. However, the youth population is growing significantly along with rising inflation for services and increased levels of need due to local and global events. Continued and sustained investment is needed to expand the reach of universal programmes to all young people needing them.

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51 Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) A Rapid Review of the Benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway.

52 NYCI, *Budget 2022 "Progress on Youth Work but Youth Issues ignored again"* (NYCI 2022).



# Recommendations

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## Budget 2024

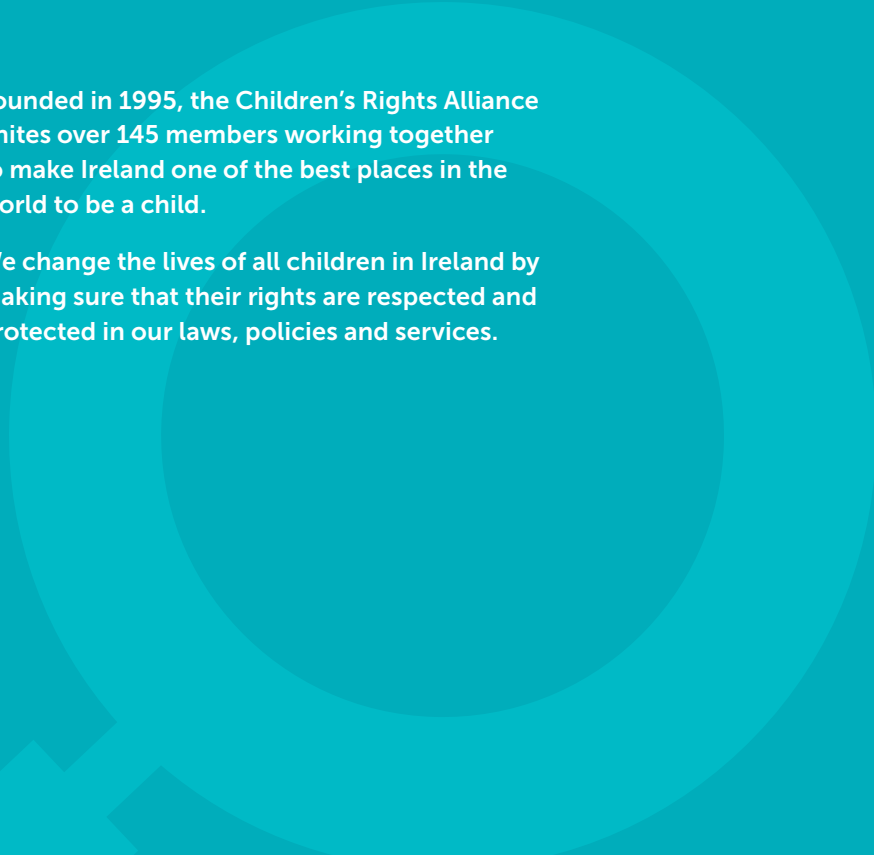
- Increase Tusla’s overall budget by 1 per cent and ringfence this funding for Family Support Services. This funding should be utilised to increase the capacity of services in order to ensure more children and their families can access support [Cost: €9.4m].
- Invest in Universal youth work, along with targeted services for young people who need them most to improve outcomes for all young people, and in particular for those who are marginalised, vulnerable or at risk of poverty by increasing funding by a further 10 per cent and commit to further resourcing in subsequent budgets.
- Finalise the home visiting programme review in 2023 and introduce a phased plan with sufficient funding to achieve universal access to home visiting for all first time parents by 2026. As a first step, parents in identified marginalised groups should be prioritised for access to a home visiting programme.

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## Medium-term

- Commit to a 1 per cent year on year increase in Tusla’s funding and ringfence this for increased capacity for Family Support services in order to continue to reach more children and their families.





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