

CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS

ALLIANCE

Uniting Voices For Children

Child Poverty Monitor 2024



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INTRODUCTION

This is the third edition of the 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: food poverty, income inadequacy, family support/child protection and welfare and educational disadvantage. The European Commission’s recommendation *Investing in Children*, provides a roadmap of how to address child poverty using a three-pillar approach which focuses on adequate resources and affordable quality services and the right to participate. This Recommendation is the lens through which the Child Poverty Monitor is developed.

Long-term exposure to poverty and deprivation impacts on children’s outcomes 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. The longer a child stays in a cycle of poverty, the greater the negative impact on their sense of self, their aspirations, their ability to access opportunities to realise their full potential. Child poverty is not inevitable but a consequence of policy and political decisions. This means that political will and action can end child poverty.

The most recent Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) revealed that there was an increase in the number of children experiencing deprivation in 2023 (260,773) compared to 2022 (229,091). This means that one-in-five children – 260,773¹ – were living in households unable to afford goods and services which are considered the norm for society such as being unable to afford a new pair of shoes for a child or not being able to replace broken furniture.

When examined by age cohort, children have the highest at risk of poverty rate at 14.3 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 10.6 per cent.² The ‘at risk of poverty’ rate describes the proportion of the population who have an income below 60 per cent of the national median income.³ 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 4.8 per cent versus an overall rate of 3.6 per cent.⁴

Some children and young people are more at risk of poverty than others. Households with children headed by one adult have a higher at risk of poverty rate at 19.2 per cent versus those in two adult households (14.2 per cent).⁵ Children living in households headed by a lone parent have a consistent poverty rate of 7.1 per cent compared to 4.5 per cent of two parent families.⁶ The SILC data is based on a household survey which does not provide detail of the rates of poverty or deprivation amongst members of the Traveller or Roma community. The most up to date data is based on research from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency which found, in 2018, 38 per cent of Traveller and Roma families experienced difficulties in making ends meet.⁷ Children living in large households, where someone has a disability have a greater risk of poverty or material deprivation.⁸

However, there are some green shoots of progress. Overall, the at risk of poverty and consistent poverty rates for children decreased in 2023 when compared to 2021 by 0.2 per cent and 1.5 per cent respectively, while the deprivation rate for children increased by 4.1 per cent.⁹

1 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

2 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

3 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

4 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

5 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

6 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

7 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.

8 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 14.

9 OECD, *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework* (OECD 2024).

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage, takes cross-government actions over a sustained period of time. A recent report published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with support from the European Commission and the OECD, examined governance arrangements for tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children.¹⁰ The report assesses recent policy, institutional and legislative developments in Ireland and compares outcomes for children and young people with those in other EU and OECD countries.

In relation to inter-departmental co-ordination the Report recommends, among others, that Ireland consider putting child poverty reduction targets in legislation, evaluate the effectiveness of the Child Poverty and Child Well-being Programme Office 'in driving government co-ordination on cross-cutting policy challenges, including across electoral cycles', setting a 'statutory 'duty to co-operate' for departments and agencies beyond information sharing'.¹¹ In relation to evidence – based policy making, the report recommends that the Government consider prioritising 'of policy objectives on robust evidence on inequalities', strengthening data collection to address gaps in evidence for monitoring child poverty and its impact on children and improving the disaggregation and linkage of data.¹² The Report makes a number of recommendations in relation to reinforcing accountability frameworks including ensuring that Oireachtas Committees 'periodically invite the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to report on the implementation of Young Ireland', 'defining and clarifying roles, responsibilities and mandates across independent oversight institutions', requiring reporting on the outcomes and impacts from all Departments implementing Young Ireland and strengthening financial tracking methodologies.¹³

In December 2022, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD, announced the establishment of a Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office in his Department. The Office follows other successful models in the UK, Scotland and New Zealand and with a similar staff compliment to the latter. While the work of the unit benefits from oversight from different governance structures, ultimately responsibility and accountability for the work of the unit lies with the Cabinet Committee on Children, Education and Disability. One year into their Programme of Work, the Office has established a Cross-Government Network and facilitated the inter-departmental dialogues sorely needed to address the systemic issues driving child poverty and deprivation rates in the wrong direction. The Office has provided much-needed leadership at the highest levels of government, ensuring that child poverty is a key consideration across all departments. It has also linked with the community and voluntary sector widely. To build on this work and support further, ambitious action to end child poverty, the Office should be retained and resourced in the next programme for government.

Child poverty has also recently been identified as one of three spotlight areas in the successor strategy to Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (Policy Framework 2016 –2020) (BOBF), *Young Ireland*, published in November 2023 by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Priority actions in *Young Ireland* include a focus on Play and Recreation, Access to Housing, and Inclusion in Education. The framework includes a spotlight on Child Poverty connecting this with the work of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office at the Department of the Taoiseach. The OCED Report recommended that in implementing *Young Ireland* Government should consider 'incentivising continuous high-level representation and strengthening local-level representation in *Young Ireland* governance structures', enhancing the capacity of policymakers to engage children using child-friendly platforms and material and 'developing a formal results-based Monitoring and Evaluation framework to systematically monitor and track *Young Ireland's* progress and performance'.¹⁴

10 OCED, Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework (OECD 2024).

11 OCED, Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework (OECD 2024).

12 OCED, Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework (OECD 2024).

13 OCED, Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework (OECD 2024).

14 OCED, Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework (OECD 2024).

Turning the tide on child poverty requires a long-term, sustained effort on the part of successive Governments. It is important that the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office 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, as recommended by the OECD, 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.

A Children's Budget – Budget 2025

Budget 2025 will be the last budget of this current government and presents a real opportunity to follow through on existing, effective measures that are tackling child poverty and be more ambitious when it comes to the targeted supports that are needed to lift children and young people out of poverty.

Once again, we face into this year's budget with a prevailing housing crisis with rising rent, housing shortage and inexcusable increases in the numbers of children and families experiencing homelessness. For many families, rent is still 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. The number of children living in emergency accommodation increased from 2,811 in March 2022¹⁵ to 3,472 in March 2023,¹⁶ and to 4,147 in March 2024.¹⁷

In the last three years, the increase in the rate of inflation for basic items has been significant. Cumulatively inflation has increased by over 17 per cent between May 2021 and April 2024.¹⁸ The Government has intervened to address increases in the cost of living as part of Budget 2023 and Budget 2024. This has included the introduction of measures to help families to meet the costs of energy, health, and transport along with providing additional income supports. As part of Budget 2024, lump sum and double payments were announced for beneficiaries of

certain social welfare schemes. This included a double payment of Child Benefit, and a €100 lump sum for those in receipt of an Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC). While these actions provide some supports for low-income families, they do not go far enough. Interim measures will not effectively break the cycle of poverty for children and families on the lowest incomes who have to fight just to keep their heads above water. We need to see targeted investment in Budget 2025, particularly in the IQC where we need to see the rates paid to parents for children under 12 raised by a minimum of €6 and the rate for children over 12 raised by €11.

Budget 2024 delivered a historic investment of €1.1 billion in early years education and care. The realisation of this level of expenditure five years ahead of schedule is indicative of the political will to reform our system of early childhood education and care to ensure all children have the best start in life. Budget 2024 took a significant step in the implementation of a dedicated model of funding to tackle disadvantage in early years settings. The dedicated model, Equal Start, seeks to ensure equal access and participation to children and families living in poverty, to early years services equalling the playing field for thousands of children. Budget 2025 needs to allocate sufficient funding to support the implementation of the new Model. Alongside this we need to see an implementation plan that allows the new model to be agile enough to learn and respond to the unique needs of the children it supports.

The issue of food poverty remains a growing concern for families across the country given this stark increase in the cost for basic essentials. 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. Not only does it support their physical health and development, but children are better able to focus on their school work and engage in activities with their friends as a result of healthier eating. Momentum around hot meals in schools has grown year-on-year, with a landmark commitment by the government to ensure universal provision by 2030. Over 100,000 children and young people are now in receipt of hot school meals.¹⁹

15 Department of Housing, *Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Report May 2022* (DHLGH 2022).

16 Department of Housing, *Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Report March 2023* (DHLGH 2023).

17 Department of Housing, *Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Report March 2023* (DHLGH 2023) and Department of Housing, *Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Report March 2024* (DHLGH 2024).

18 Central Statistics Office, *CPI Inflation Calculator* <<https://bit.ly/49qXtFl>> accessed 3 April 2024.

19 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

Budget 2024 investment will bring the programme to an additional 900 schools, meaning that over 320,000 children will be eligible to receive Hot Schools Meals over the course of the 2023/2024 academic year.²⁰ It is critical that expansion continues and includes a focus on the provision of high-quality, nutritious meals to every child in Ireland. The security the hot school meals brings to children and cannot be pulled away from families when schools close during holiday periods. A collaborative approach with local schools and community networks is needed to build a safety net for children and families, particularly during longer school breaks at Christmas and Summer.

In the area of education, we have seen a renewed focus on the part of Government to really tackle the cost of education. Our Spotlight Solution in Education takes a closer look at the Free School Books Scheme which has now been expanded to Junior Cycle, following the successful implementation across all primary schools. The Scheme which began as a pilot just four years ago, will now reach over three quarters of a million students. With the cost of education higher for older children, it is essential that we see the continued rollout of the Scheme to Senior Cycle in Budget 2025.

Intervening early with tailored supports for children and their families is an important means to address poverty and adversity in childhood. Significant funding provided by Tusla has established a strong community infrastructure of family support.²¹ 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 impact of home visiting programmes that seek to support parents in their children's early years particularly those who are exposed to poverty, disadvantage or other adverse circumstances. For the children and families hardest to reach, who experience serious levels of poverty and deprivation, services and supports have to meet them where they are.

In the area of child protection, Tusla's referrals have doubled in a ten-year period with a steady increase in referrals being observed in the past four calendar years showing a cumulative increase of 46 per cent in referrals since 2019.²² However, despite such a significant increase in referrals, there are continued challenges in the recruitment and retention of social workers meaning that currently 17 per cent or 983 children in care do not have a designated social worker.²³ One-fifth of all children in care do not have a care plan.²⁴ Budget 2025 will need to deliver funding for at least 200 social workers and social care workers and funding for capital so the agency can acquire enough residential facilities. These are the children most at risk in the country. They have to be prioritised in Budget 2025.

In the area of Healthcare, we saw a welcome increase in the number of babies receiving their developmental screening checks from public health nurses from 53.6 per cent in 2021²⁵ to 87 per cent in 2023,²⁶ demonstrating a slow return to pre-pandemic levels of public health nurse visits to families in the first year of a child's life. There has been a welcome focus on the development of a dedicated child health workforce. A dedicated Public Health Nurse service could be a key intervention in breaking the cycle of disadvantage early. The cost of healthcare remains challenging for families living on low incomes. The Medical Card income threshold remains the same and for a family of two adults with two children under 16 is €342.50 per week.²⁷ These have not been revised since 2005 meaning that they do not take account of either wage or price inflation since then. We are once again calling for Budget 2025 to revise the income thresholds for the Medical Card to ensure that all families with children who are at risk of poverty will have access to a full Medical Card. At a minimum, these should be set above the poverty thresholds.

20 *ibid.*

21 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

22 See Tusla Annual Reports, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020 and 2022.

23 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (Tusla 2024).

24 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (Tusla 2024).

25 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2021* (HSE 2021) 25.

26 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April – June 2023* (HSE 2023) 40.

27 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

There is 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. In the last three years, there has been a tangible shift in policy development and budget investment towards delivering universal measures that address child poverty by ensuring equal access to essentials for every child, including the provision of free school books and hot school meals. However, it takes time for long-term solutions to deliver a tangible impact on the level of child poverty we see today. We know that it is not right or just that in our society, almost 175,000 children and young people are at risk of poverty and 58,500 spend each day of their childhood under the weight of consistent poverty. We are at a critical juncture now to turn the tide on child poverty. Government must now dial up action on more effective, targeted measures and supports that will lift children out of that grinding cycle of poverty. We are calling on Government to make the right choice now by making Budget 2025 a Children's Budget.

Spotlight

CHILD POVERTY AND WELL-BEING PROGRAMME OFFICE

Introduction

The recently published report by the OECD, *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework* found that national policy co-ordination structures in Ireland have improved collaboration on policies relating to children and young people.²⁸ However, challenges exist with overlapping mandates, limited action-orientated focus and resource-intensiveness. It recommended greater alignment of goals among departments and agencies. The Government's Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office was identified as a means to tackle siloed approaches and improve accountability.

The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office – Department of the Taoiseach

The concept of a unit dedicated to address child poverty 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.

While investment in children and young people improved at a national level, we have seen an increase in the number of children experiencing deprivation in 2023 (260,773) compared to 2022 (229,091). This means that one-in-five children were living in households unable to afford goods and services which are considered the norm for society such as being unable to afford a new pair of shoes for a child or not being able to replace broken furniture.²⁹ When examined by age cohort, children are more likely to be living in consistent poverty³⁰ or to be at risk of poverty.³¹

The National Advisory Council for Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (National Policy Framework 2016 -2020) called on government to establish a dedicated child poverty unit to bring attention to the issue and drive cross-governmental action.³²

In December 2022, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar realised this need for Government to prioritise measures to address child poverty and established a Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office at the Department of the Taoiseach. The team is comprised of six officials, drawing on experience across a number of departments.

28 OECD, *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland, Towards a New Governance Framework* (OECD 2024).

29 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

30 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 4.8 per cent versus an overall rate of 3.6 per cent.

31 In 2023, the at risk of poverty rate for children was 14.3 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 10.6 per cent. 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.

32 National Advisory Council for Children and Young People, *Paper on Addressing Child Poverty* (NACCYP 2021).

Now a year into their work plan, the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office is uniquely placed to drive cross-governmental work to address the multi-faceted nature of poverty, harness the power of cross-departmental work to develop integrated solutions and create the foundations for fresh, ambitious thinking on the systemic issues that are the real drivers of child poverty. The Office will publish an annual report on the progress to date, later this year.

How it works

The Office's Programme of Work focuses on six priority areas:

1. Income support and joblessness
2. Early learning and childcare
3. Reducing the cost of education
4. Family homelessness
5. Consolidating and integration public health, family & parental support, and wellbeing services
6. Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty.³³

In its first year, the Office established and facilitate a Cross-Government Network on Child Poverty and Child Wellbeing that aims to support policy makers and service providers to leverage the expert knowledge and experience from different public sectors to identify challenges on service delivery and develop solutions.

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office also plays a pivotal role in ensuring child poverty is central to the national budget negotiations. In 2023, the Office held bilateral engagements with government departments in the lead up Budget Day and following the announcement of Budget 2024, produced an analysis of new and additional spending and how effectively it prioritises addressing child poverty. The report, *Breaking the Cycle* is available [here](#).

The Office has built a presence both at government level and across civil society in the last year. The Office can connect and foster cross-departmental dialogues but in doing so, also ensures child poverty is a central consideration. This is also reflected in the critical junctures of policy and budget development, government strategy launches, civil society forums and the Office's own national annual Child Poverty Summit.

33 Department of an Taoiseach, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2024 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (2023).

What do we need to see next?

The focus on a multi-layered response to the multi-faceted nature of child poverty is welcome. The Office has the ability to hold government departments accountable to take ownership of child poverty and take measures that will address child poverty and its impact on children and young people. The Office will hold a high-level Child Poverty Summit to bring together thought-leaders in Ireland and abroad for a constructive dialogue on the issues and solutions needed, that will inform their programme of work.

The team will also engage in bilateral discussions with government departments in advance of the budget negotiations to ensure a focus on measures that address the core drivers of poverty.

Positioning the Office in the Department of the Taoiseach has placed a heightened focus on the issue of child poverty however, sustaining this presence and cross-governmental work is crucial if Government are serious about driving the child poverty rates down. In the UK, the absence of a dedicated unit is evident in the alarming child poverty figures emerging each year. The Child Poverty Unit set up in 1999 by Labour, was removed with the Conservative's *Welfare Reform Act (2016)*. Since then, child poverty has increased rapidly with a staggering 4.3 million or a third of all children now growing up in poverty.³⁴

Ireland should learn from this. Turning the tide on our child poverty rates will require cross-party support to retain the Office in the next Programme for Government, with sufficient resourcing and staffing to deliver an ambitious work plan.

34 Child Poverty Action Group, *Poverty: Facts and Figures < Poverty: facts and figures | CPAG >* accessed 22 May 2024.



Adequate Income



ADEQUATE INCOME

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.¹ Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that while parents and guardians have the primary responsibility to provide for the child's material needs, the State also has the responsibility to assist them to alleviate poverty where needed.² Ireland was last examined by the Committee in January 2023.³ 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.⁴ The Committee also called for children seeking asylum to have 'prompt' access to social protection.⁵ Ensuring that social welfare payments are adequate is further emphasised in the Concluding Observations of Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which calls on the State to index these supports to the cost of living.⁶

Ensuring that children and their families have access to adequate resources is a central pillar of *Investing in Children*. The Recommendation states that adequate benefits, including specific income supports for families and children, and access to schemes providing minimum income, are of primary importance.⁷ 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.⁸ Eligibility for support should be sensitive to the adequate redistribution of resources across income groups.⁹ The facilitation of access to benefits should be a user-friendly process and outreach services should be provided.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office.¹² The plan identifies six areas that have the potential to make an impact on child poverty.¹³ One of the priority areas identified is income support and joblessness.¹⁴ The plan recognises that national and international evidence indicates that changes to the social welfare system can have a positive impact on child poverty.¹⁵ The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office recognises the importance of not only targeting initiatives towards those outside of the labour market but also supporting those who are working and in receipt of a low income.¹⁶ The key areas of focus include ensuring that the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC) and Working Family Payment are cognisant of

- 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 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 27.
- 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 34.
- 5 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 40.
- 6 UNCESCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 35.
- 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 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 3-4.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).
- 13 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023).
- 14 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 15 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.
- 16 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of the Taoiseach 2023), 13-14.

increases in the cost of living.¹⁷ There is also a focus on promoting labour market inclusion policies for those families further from the labour market, and supporting the income and employment situation of families headed by a lone parent.¹⁸

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 latest statistics available relate to 2023.¹⁹

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.²⁰ When examined by age cohort, children have the highest at risk of poverty rate at 14.3 per cent, higher than the rate amongst the general population at 10.6 per cent.²¹ Households with children headed by one adult have a higher at risk of poverty rate at 19.2 per cent versus those in two adult households (14.2 per cent).²²

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 17.3 per cent of the population experience deprivation the rate was highest, when examined by age, amongst children (21.4 per cent), and when examined by household type, one parent families (41.4 per cent).²³

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 4.8 per cent versus an overall rate of 3.6 per cent.²⁴ Children living in households headed by a lone parent have a consistent poverty rate of

7.1 per cent compared to 4.5 per cent of two parent families.²⁵

SILC 2023 Child Poverty Statistics			
	At risk of Poverty	Deprivation	Consistent Poverty
State	10.6	17.3	3.6
0-17 age group	14.3	21.4	4.8
1 adult, with children under 18 years	19.2	41.4	7.1
2 adults, with 1-3 children under 18 years	14.2	17.7	4.5

Source: CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2023

In the latest SILC publication, the CSO uses the results of Census of Population 2022 in order to review and update the previously published poverty data since 2020.²⁶ Using the latest Census population data ensures the SILC outputs are accurate and reflective of the population as a whole.²⁷

Using the up-to-date rates contained in the latest SILC publication, there are a number of notable trends across all three measures of child poverty over the period 2021 to 2023. Overall, the at risk of poverty and consistent poverty rates for children decreased in 2023 when compared to 2021 while the deprivation rate for children increased. The at risk of poverty rate for children marginally increased from 14.5 per cent in 2021 to 14.7 per cent in 2022. However, the rate has fallen to 14.3 per cent in 2023.²⁸ The consistent poverty rates for these three years show a similar trend. The rate increased from 6.3 per cent in 2021 to 7.0 per cent in 2022 and fell back to 4.8 per cent in 2023.²⁹ Conversely, the deprivation rate for children

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

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

19 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

20 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

21 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

22 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

23 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

24 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

25 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

26 Central Statistics Office, 'Information Note: Census Revisions - SILC 2020 to 2022', <https://bit.ly/3W3ETjR> accessed 18 April 2024.

27 Central Statistics Office, 'Information Note: Census Revisions - SILC 2020 to 2022', <https://bit.ly/3W3ETjR> accessed 18 April 2024.

28 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

29 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

has increased over the three-year period from 17.3 per cent (2021) to 18.8 per cent (2022) to 21.4 per cent in 2023.³⁰

Further insight about the inadequacy of a household's income to meet all expenditure costs is provided in the *SILC: Enforced Deprivation 2023* report.

In 2023, 47.8 per cent of all households reported some level of difficulty (from great to some) in making ends meet, with 6.4 per cent reporting great difficulty³¹. Two adult households with children experienced a higher overall rate of difficulty making ends meet than the general population but a lower rate of great difficulty (51.7 per cent and 5.8 per cent respectively).³² However, one parent families reported much higher rates across all levels of difficulty. Almost three-quarters of all one parent households (72.1 per cent) reported some level of difficulty making ends meet, with 17.9 per cent reporting great difficulty.³³

The SILC data is based on a household survey which does not provide detail of the rates of poverty or deprivation amongst members of the Traveller or Roma community. The most up to date data is based on research from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency which found, in 2018, 38 per cent of Traveller and Roma families experienced difficulties in making ends meet.³⁴

The inability of a mother to work due to disability or illness has been identified as a strong predictor of economic vulnerability; a measure of poverty that combines low income, deprivation, and an inability to make ends meet.³⁵ When poverty rates are examined by principal economic status, those unable to work due to long-standing health problems have the highest at risk of poverty, deprivation, and consistent poverty rates – 27.3 per cent; 44.7 per cent, and 16.5 per cent respectively.³⁶ Analysis of the 2020, 2021, and

2022 SILC data undertaken by researchers at the ESRI shows that children living in large households, where someone has a disability have a greater risk of poverty or material deprivation.³⁷

The *Growing Up in Ireland* research has found higher incidences of long-standing illness, conditions, or disease among children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including lower income households and amongst those with lower parental educational attainment.³⁸ 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.³⁹ In 2022, higher rates of poverty were reported for individuals with self-reported chronic illness over the age of 16 years of age.⁴⁰

Consumer Price Index Trends

The CSO has published data examining how overall inflation impacts households with different patterns of consumption of goods and services.⁴¹ By using data from both the Household Budget Survey and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) estimates of inflation can be broken down by different characteristics such as household income, and household composition.⁴² For example, for households on the lowest income, the increased cost of energy and food were the largest contributors to their estimated rate of inflation.⁴³ For households on the highest income, Mortgage Interest Payment, and expenditure on restaurants and hotels were their biggest contributors.⁴⁴

A year-on-year analysis of inflation indicates that households with the highest incomes had a higher rate of inflation, up to 6.9 per cent compared to some households on a lower income at 6.0 per cent.⁴⁵ However, overall, since September 2018 to September 2023 households in the lowest income decile

30 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

31 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023* (CSO 2024).

32 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023* (CSO 2024).

33 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023* (CSO 2024).

34 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.

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

36 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

37 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 14.

38 Eoin McNamara et al., *Growing Up in Ireland: The lives of 9-year-olds of cohort '08*, (ESRI, TCD and DCEDIY 2021).

39 John Cullinan, 'The Economic Costs of Disability for Families' (Frontline Magazine 2015)

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

41 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

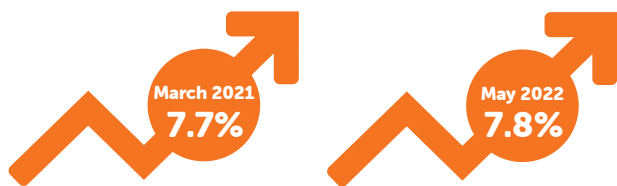
42 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

43 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

44 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

45 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

experienced price increases of 20 per cent compared to overall rates of 19.1 per cent and 18.7 per cent for those in the highest income decile.⁴⁶ When examined by household type, those comprising of one parent families had a higher rate at 20.3 per cent, second only to single adult households.⁴⁷ Therefore, while the rate of inflation appears to be falling, when considered cumulatively there has been a profound impact on low-income families in the last few years.



March 2024 overall increase 17.2%

In the last two editions of the Child Poverty Monitor, the annual increase in the Consumer Price Index was recorded as 7.7 per cent in the 12 months between March 2022 and 2023⁴⁸ and 7.8 per cent between May 2021 and 2022.⁴⁹ The latest data from the CSO indicates that the annual rate of increase has fallen to just 2.9 per cent (between March 2023 and March 2024).⁵⁰ However, over the entire period (May 2021 to March 2024) overall inflation has increased by 17.2 per cent.⁵¹

Introduction of measures in response to rising inflation

The Government has intervened to address increases in the cost of living. These measures were announced in February⁵² and May 2022,⁵³ as part of Budget 2023,⁵⁴ and Budget 2024.⁵⁵ This has included the introduction of measures to help households and families to meet the costs of energy,⁵⁶ health,⁵⁷ and transport⁵⁸ along with providing additional income supports.⁵⁹ As part of Budget 2024, lump sum and double payments were announced for beneficiaries of certain social welfare schemes. This included a double payment of Child Benefit, and a €100 lump sum for those in receipt of an Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC).⁶⁰

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 adjustments to the drug payment scheme are unlikely to benefit low-income families who will have access to the medical card. Targeting supports as opposed to universal interventions has been found to be a more effective means of tackling issues like energy and fuel poverty.⁶¹ While the lump sum and additional payments will no doubt help to alleviate the impact of increases in prices as demonstrated above by CSO's analysis in SILC 2023, if families did not have an adequate income to begin with, the impact that these measures can have will be limited.

46 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

47 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

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

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

50 Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index March 2024* (CSO 2024).

51 Central Statistics Office, *CPI Inflation Calculator* <<https://bit.ly/49qXtFI>> accessed 3 April 2024.

52 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.

53 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.

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

55 Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform and Department of Finance, 'Your guide to Budget 2024', <https://bit.ly/3PLAJsY> accessed 3 April 2024.

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

57 A reduction in the drug payment threshold to €80 per month.

58 A 20 per cent reduction in public transport fees until the end of 2024 and the expansion of the 50 per cent travel fare for young people to aged 19 to 25.

59 A double payment to all social welfare recipients in both October and December 2023 (Christmas Bonus) as well as a double payment of Child Benefit in Budget 2023 and 2024. A €100 once off payment to recipients of an Increase for a Qualified Child(ren) on their social welfare payment in November 2023. A lump sum payment of €500 in Budget 2023 and €400 in Budget 2024 to all recipients of the Working Family Payment.

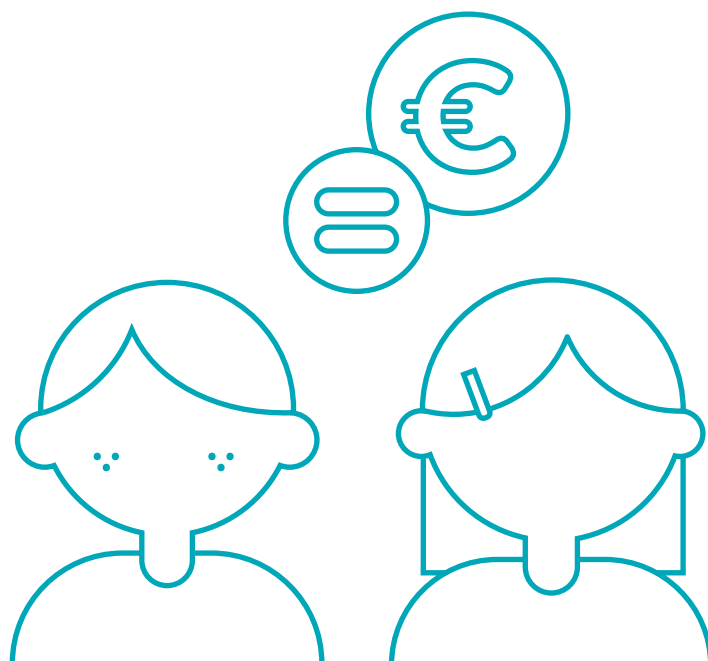
60 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces payment dates for Budget 2024 cost of living lump sum supports', Press Release, 17 October 2023.

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

A Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)⁶² is a measure which establishes the minimum needed to live and participate in Irish society, and is a standard of living which no one should be expected to live below.⁶³ Through its work, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre not only establishes the cost of this standard of living, but also how adequate social welfare payments and the national minimum wage rate are in terms of meeting this cost.

Analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre indicates that these additional payments did not go far enough and, furthermore, the current weekly rate of social welfare is inadequate. In its post-Budget 2024 analysis, the Vincentian MESL Research Centre highlighted that the cost of a MESL increased by 18.9 per cent between March 2020 and March 2023.⁶⁴ It projected that by the end of 2024 this will have increased by a cumulative 27.9 per cent.⁶⁵ Given this, the Research Centre outlines that despite Budget 2024 introducing increases in core social protection rates, this has effectively resulted in a cut due to rising prices. This is demonstrated by an analysis of child-related social welfare payments which projects that these payments would meet just 81 per cent of MESL costs for primary school age children and 59 per cent of costs for secondary school age children in 2024.⁶⁶ They also forecast that a two-parent household will only be able to meet 85 per cent of the cost of a MESL in 2024, while a one parent family will meet just 81 per cent.⁶⁷ This demonstrates that there is much to be done in terms of increasing the income adequacy of weekly social welfare rates. 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.⁶⁸

The trends captured by SILC provide some insights into the impact that increases in the cost of living and measures introduced to alleviate it are having on poverty. In SILC 2022, all three poverty rates had increased compared to 2021. Reporting on SILC 2022, the CSO noted that while income increased from 2020 to 2021,⁶⁹ this was eroded when inflation was taken into consideration.⁷⁰ In SILC 2023, the CSO examined the impact that cost of living measures had on households.⁷¹ This analysis looked at what poverty rates would be if these measures are excluded. Based on this, the at risk of poverty rate for children would have been 16 per cent (compared to 14.3 per cent when cost of living measures are included), an increase on the rate of 14.7 per cent recorded for 2022.⁷²



62 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.

63 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, 'What is minimum essential budget standards research?' <www.budgeting.ie> accessed 23 June 2022.

64 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2024*, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023).

65 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2024*, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023).

66 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2024*, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023), 5.

67 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, *MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2024*, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023), 5.

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

69 The income reference period for SILC which is the preceding year to data collection – e.g. SILC 2022 refers to income earned in 2021.

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

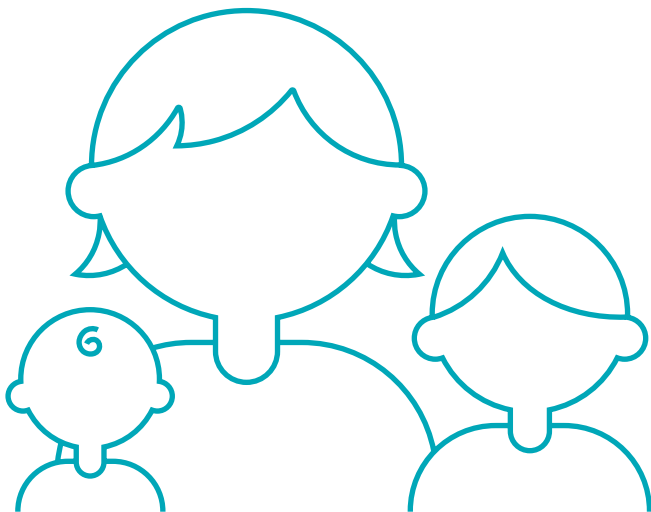
71 The focus on the 2022 measures relates to the income reference period for SILC which is the preceding year to data collection.

72 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

Targeting child income supports to reduce poverty

In the run up to Budget 2024, researchers at the ESRI published a report examining different options to reduce child poverty through income supports.⁷³ The research examined four separate proposals and the impact that they would have on the at risk of poverty rate for children.⁷⁴

The researchers modelled a number of different scenarios to reduce the at risk of poverty rate for children through income supports. The first and second options looked separately at raising existing child specific income supports. Achieving a similar outcome of reducing the at risk of poverty rate by 1 per cent required investing an additional €535 million in Child Benefit or €334 million in the Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC) paid to all social welfare recipients with dependent children. The focusing of investment on the IQC represents a more targeted approach than the Child Benefit proposal as beneficiaries are at the lower end of the income distribution. In the Child Benefit proposal much of the spending would go towards parents on higher incomes.⁷⁵



In order to address the potential disincentives to work that increases to the IQC may present, the researchers also looked at increasing the Work Family Payment. To achieve the reduction in the at risk of poverty rate for children, spending would need to increase by just €187 million, substantially lower than the two previous proposals. However, this proposal will not benefit children in households on the lowest incomes. Therefore, they suggest that a combined approach with, for example, option 2, which may help with reaching those on the lowest incomes. However, this could still exclude some children living in households which fall between both the WFP and IQC; for example, they may be ineligible for WFP and receive little from IQC as they are in receipt of a means tested payment impacted by employment.⁷⁶ A final option considers a recommendation from the Commission on Taxation and Welfare to introduce a second-tier child income support. A simplified version of this proposed reform calculates that the at risk of poverty rate for children would reduce by 3.8 percentage points, or 40,000 children, at a cost of €691 million per year. The distributional impact of this proposal indicates that those on the lowest incomes would benefit the most.⁷⁷

While the introduction of a second-tier child benefit payment achieves a greater impact in terms of reducing the at risk of poverty rate for children, the introduction of this measure would require reform of existing social welfare payments. The researchers caution that the introduction of such a proposal needs 'careful consideration and analysis' to minimise the unintended interactions with other taxation and social welfare measures.⁷⁸ For example, there is a need to consider how this new payment would interact with existing entitlements to secondary benefits and whether it could act as a work disincentive.

In terms of targeting increased income supports towards families with children on the lowest incomes, analysis from the Parliamentary Budget Office indicates that raising the IQC is more impactful.⁷⁹

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

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

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

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

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

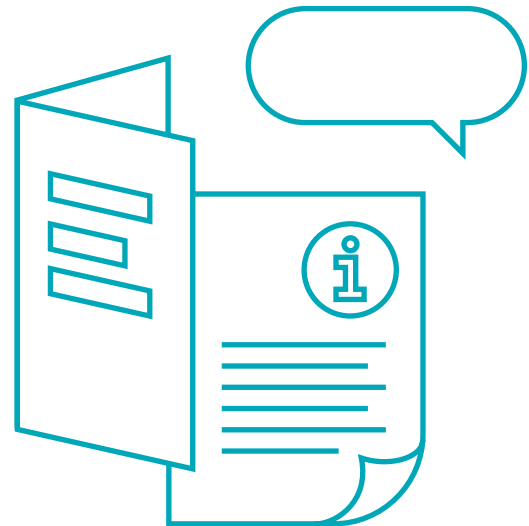
78 Roantree, B. and Doorley, K. *Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report* (ESRI 2023), 25.

79 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Child Benefit Increases and Alternative Policy Options: Costs and Distributional Impact', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 5 April 2024.

Increasing the IQC by €37.50 per week delivers a greater change for those on the lowest income, at 4.4 per cent, versus a €38 monthly increase in child benefit.⁸⁰ Both measures would have roughly the same net impact on the exchequer (€537 million and €535 million respectively), but the former targets these resources towards those most in need.⁸¹

Investing in Children calls for income supports to differentiate between children's needs.⁸² Adequate social welfare rates that address the changing needs of a child are vital to ensuring their basic needs are met. The MESL research has consistently identified older children as having additional and distinct needs in comparison to younger children.⁸³ In 2023, the minimum needs of children aged 12 and over cost an average of €149 per week which is approximately 60 per cent more expensive than the minimum needs of younger children. Additional costs relating to food, clothing, personal care, social inclusion, and second level education account for much of the difference.⁸⁴ In 2023, social welfare income could only cover just over 60 per cent of these costs.⁸⁵

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).⁸⁶ In Budget 2019, and over the course of the three subsequent Budgets, targeted increases were provided meaning that the rate for children over 12 is now €8 higher than that for children under 12.⁸⁷ 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 children over 12, the last two budgets delivered flat rate increases of €2 and €4 respectively for all children covered under the IQC.⁸⁸ The current rates are now €46 for children under 12 and €54 for children over 12.⁸⁹ The flat rate increase for IQCs is disappointing, however, one positive announcement in Budget 2024 was the extension of Child Benefit to 18-year-olds in full-time education from September 2024.⁹⁰ As noted above, there has been a widening gap of income inadequacy for households with older children; income supports met 65 per cent of MESL need in 2022, but following the Budget they are projected to meet just 59 per cent of MESL need in 2024. The corresponding figures for younger children were 89 per cent and 81 per cent respectively. This analysis coupled with the compounded effect of increases in CPI (see previous section) means that substantial increases to the IQC payment is needed in Budget 2025 for both rates of the payment.

80 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Child Benefit Increases and Alternative Policy Options: Costs and Distributional Impact', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 5 April 2024.

81 Parliamentary Budget Office, 'Child Benefit Increases and Alternative Policy Options: Costs and Distributional Impact', <<https://bit.ly/4auc84A>> accessed 5 April 2024.

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

83 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2023 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2023), 21.

84 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2023 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2023).

85 MESL Research Centre, *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2023 update report* (MESL Research Centre 2023), 21.

86 See for example Barnardos, *Children's Budget 2019*, (Barnardos 2018); One Family, *Invest in Services and Targeted Income Supports Budget 2019* (One Family 2019); Society of St Vincent de Paul, *Pre Budget Submission 2019: Paving a Pathway out of Poverty*, (SVP 2018).

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

88 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces Social Protection Budget worth €2.2 billion', Press Release, 27 September 2022; Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces record Social Protection Budget worth €2.3 billion', Press Release, 10 October 2023.

89 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces record Social Protection Budget worth €2.3 billion', Press Release, 10 October 2023.

90 Department of Social Protection, 'Minister Humphreys announces record Social Protection Budget worth €2.3 billion', Press Release, 10 October 2023.

Further research⁹¹ by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) has considered the costs associated with caring for a child with a disability.⁹² This research found that households with an adolescent child with a profound intellectual disability have additional weekly costs of €243.95.⁹³ Social welfare rates for such households should be reflective of the additional costs of disability.

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. Commitment number 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'.⁹⁴ This task was due to be completed by the third quarter of 2020, however, the mid-term review of the *Roadmap* reports that at the end of 2022 this action was in progress with a timeline for completion in 2023.⁹⁵

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 March 2024, almost one in every four applicants for international protection was a child, with 6,755 children being accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service.⁹⁶ Of these, 4,604 children are living in emergency accommodation centres, often with families not having a full floor to ceiling partition between them and others, and poor, if any, cooking facilities.⁹⁷

Children living in Direct Provision centres are at a high risk of consistent poverty but they are not counted in the official poverty statistics. They currently receive a weekly payment of €29.80, the Daily Expense Allowance (DEA).⁹⁸ Parents report the DEA is not sufficient to cover basic needs like food and healthcare, school supplies and books, clothing and footwear needs, extracurricular activities or hobbies, and technology and communication needs.⁹⁹ They also report that a lack of financial means has prevented their children from joining social and recreational activities.¹⁰⁰

Children and young people in Direct Provision themselves have also 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.¹⁰¹ Historically, the rate of the 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.¹⁰² The DEA rate has remained unchanged since 2019 despite increases being applied the IQC and a separate rate being established for children under and over 12.¹⁰³

The current payment for children and young people in Direct Provision falls short of what is needed to meet the MESL for children and young people as set out in the Vincentian MESL Research Centre data. The Research Centre adapts the MESL budgets for families living in Direct Provision.¹⁰⁴ This was achieved by reviewing documentation related to what is provided for families in Direct Provision along with consultation with an Expert Group.¹⁰⁵

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

92 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.

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

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

95 Department of Social Protection, *Roadmap for Social Inclusion Mid-term Review*, (DSP 2023).

96 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – March 2024* (DCEDIY March 2024) < <https://bit.ly/41RYqUa> > < <https://bit.ly/3JbVxpR> > accessed 10 April 2024.

97 Information received by Children's Rights Alliance members November 2023.

98 Citizen's Information, *Direct Provision System* <<http://bit.ly/3S3dydD>> accessed 10 April 2024.

99 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) 46.

100 Ibid 49.

101 Ombudsman for Children, *Direct Provision Children's views and experiences of living in Direct Provision* (OCO 2020) 50.

102 Citizen's Information, *Budget 2013* <<https://bit.ly/3VP9Oyj>> accessed 10 April 2024.

103 Citizen's Information, *Budgets* <<https://bit.ly/3LNBjdj>> accessed 10 April 2024.

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

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

This informed adjustments to individual aspects of the MESL budget.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ For a one parent family with two children (one in secondary and one in primary school) a MESL is €117.50, and this rises to €140.37 for a two parent family.¹⁰⁸

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 to End Direct Provision* committed to the introduction of a monthly International Protection Child Payment which would be provided at the same rate as Child Benefit¹⁰⁹ as they move into phase two accommodation.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

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.¹¹² 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.

Minister Roderic O’Gorman T.D. secured €4.7 million in Budget 2024 for a new Child Payment for children in Direct Provision.¹¹³ This was also recommitted to by Government in the *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* which was published following a review of the implementation approach for the *White Paper*.¹¹⁴

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 Working Family Payment (WFP) that have a negative impact on lone parents.

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

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

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

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

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

111 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.

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

113 Department of the Taoiseach, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2024 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (November 2023) 7.

114 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024) 2.

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.¹¹⁵ Each of these reports paints a similar picture of children growing up in the grip of poverty. Post-Budget 2024 analysis from the ESRI highlights that while overall lone parents will see an increase in their disposable income of just above 3.5 per cent, this falls to just over 1 per cent when temporary measures are excluded.¹¹⁶ Analysis from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre shows that even with the extra cost of living payments and social welfare increases, the social welfare income only meets 81 per cent of the cost of the MESL budget.¹¹⁷

The 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 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. 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. Recipients of One Parent Family payment or Jobseekers Transition payment have benefited from an increase in the income disregard, fuel allowance, and the qualified child increase. 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 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 Job Seekers Transition to Working Family Payment.

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

116 Doorley, K. et al., ESRI *Post-Budget Briefing Budget 2024: Distributional impact analysis* (ESRI 2023)

117 Vincentian MESL Research Centre, Budget 2024 MESL Impact Briefing, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2023).

Recommendations

Budget 2025

- Raise the Qualified Child Increase by a minimum of €6 for under 12s and €11 for over 12s.
- Expand the Fuel Allowance to families in receipt of the Working Family Payment.
- Introduce the International Protection Child Payment.

Medium-term

- Extend Jobseekers Transition Payment to parents in work, education, or training until their youngest child reaches the end of second level education.

Long-term

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



Food Poverty



FOOD POVERTY

The 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.¹ 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.² 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.³

Following its review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), it is recommended that Ireland 'adopt a comprehensive national strategy for the protection and promotion of the right to adequate food'.⁴ The Concluding Observations from ICESCR noted that this strategy should be created in consultation with the relevant stakeholders, and should effectively combat food insecurity, all forms of malnutrition, including obesity, and ill health linked to an unhealthy diet.⁵

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 children with 'access to balanced diets'.⁶ 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'.⁷

In July 2023, the Department of the Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office.⁸ While the Programme Plan does not name food poverty as one of its six priority focus areas, it recognises the extra challenge that children who are experiencing food poverty have with regard to engaging fully in education.⁹ The Programme Office places a particular focus on expanding the provision of free school meals, particularly for those children at greatest risk of food poverty as a way to address this challenge, as well as other actions to alleviate other education costs under this priority.¹⁰

Children who grow up experiencing food poverty often experience a long-term impact.¹¹ A survey of just over 1,100 people commissioned by Barnardos found that three out of ten respondents had witnessed first-hand children experiencing food poverty (n=324). Of this number, 74 per cent noted a negative impact on the child's physical development and 70 per cent noticed the negative impact on the child's social and emotional development.¹² Children's education and their ability to maintain relationships is also affected.¹³

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

2 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.

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

4 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 43.

5 *ibid.*

6 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013) 8.

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

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

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

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

11 UNICEF Innocenti, *Global Office of Research and Foresight, Innocenti Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth* (UNICEF Innocenti 2023) 21.

12 Barnardos, 'Child Food Poverty 2022' (Barnardos 2022) <www.barnardos.ie/news/2022/february/child-food-poverty/> accessed 12 April 2024.

13 *ibid.*

Food Poverty is understood to affect children's physical health as well, with one study referring to obesity as a form of malnutrition.¹⁴ The eating habits of those living in food poverty can lead to obesity, such as skipping meals, eating high-calorie foods, and eating when food is available rather than when they are hungry.¹⁵ Growing Up in Ireland data found that children in lower socio-economic groups experience higher overweight and obesity rates than their advantaged peers.¹⁶

In November 2023, a survey was carried out on 465 parents and guardians commissioned by Barnardos. The survey found that 41 per cent of the parents surveyed, said they skipped a meal or reduced their portion in order to feed their children.¹⁷ The survey found 12 per cent of parents surveyed said that they were always worried about providing sufficient food, and 33 per cent said they sometimes worry.¹⁸

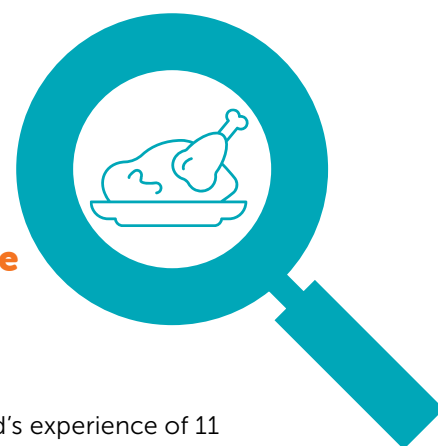
Access to adequate income and in-kind supports to tackle food poverty

Food poverty can be defined as the inability to have an adequate or nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility.¹⁹ Food poverty is multidimensional; encompassing a lack of access to a nutritionally adequate diet and how this impacts health and social participation.²⁰

Table 1: SILC 2023 Statistics

	Percentage of individuals in consistent poverty	Percentage of individuals not in consistent poverty
Unable to afford a roast once a week	23.7	3.5
Unable to afford meat, chicken, or fish every other day	11.6	1.2

4.2% of children were living in households, that were unable to afford a roast once a week in 2023



SILC measures a household's experience of 11 indicators of deprivation, two of which relate to food. In relation to the food-related deprivation items, 4.2 per cent of children were living in households, the same rate as the entire population, that were unable to afford a roast once a week in 2023.²¹ This increased to 7.5 per cent in families headed by a lone parent.²² Furthermore, 1.6 per cent of children were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day,²³ and this rose to 4.6 per cent of one parent households.²⁴

14 D Carvajal-Aldaz, G Cucalon, and C Ordonez, 'Food Insecurity as a Risk Factor for Obesity: A Review' (Frontiers in Nutrition 2022) <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnut.2022.1012734/full> accessed 2 May 2024.

15 K Tariq, 'Why Food Deprivation in Childhood is Linked to Obesity' (The Conversation, 2023) < <https://theconversation.com/why-food-deprivation-in-childhood-is-linked-to-obesity-193183> > accessed 2 April 2024.

16 R Layte and C McCrory, *Growing up in Ireland Overweight and obesity among 9-year-olds*. (DCYA 2011).

17 Barnardos, *Child Food Poverty 2022* (Barnardos 2022) <www.barnardos.ie/news/2022/february/child-food-poverty/> accessed 12 April 2024.

18 *ibid.*

19 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2018?* (Safe Food 2019), 1.

20 Safe Food, *What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2018?* (Safe Food 2019), 1.

21 Central Statistics Office, 'SIA131 Type of Deprivation Item Experienced' (CSO 2023) <https://data.cso.ie> accessed 12 April 2024.

22 Central Statistics Office, 'SIA135 Type of Deprivation Item Experienced' (CSO 2023) <https://data.cso.ie> accessed 12 April 2024.

23 Central Statistics Office, 'Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023 - Table 2.1 Food related deprivation items by demographic characteristics and year (% of individuals)' (CSO 2024)

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/deprivationitems/> accessed 16 April 2024.

24 Central Statistics Office, 'SIA135 Type of Deprivation Item Experienced' (CSO 2023) <https://data.cso.ie> accessed 12 April 2024.

For individuals not in consistent poverty but living in enforced deprivation, 11.6 per cent were unable to afford a roast once a week, and 1.2 per cent were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day.²⁵ In comparison, 23.7 per cent of individuals living in consistent poverty were unable to afford a roast once a week, and 3.5 per cent were unable to afford a meal with chicken or fish every second day.²⁶ This demonstrates that individuals living in consistent poverty are more likely to experience food deprivation than an individual not experiencing poverty.

A healthy diet is out-of-reach for families with inadequate disposable incomes with food costs rising as children grow older.²⁷ The proportion of income spent on a healthy diet is higher in Ireland for those in receipt of social welfare versus those in employment.²⁸ Overall, low-income households need to spend between 13 and 35 per cent of their net income to afford a minimum healthy food basket.²⁹ Food costs make up the largest component of a household's budget for families with children and the rise in inflation over the course of the last number of years has only exacerbated this (see further analysis in the section on Income Adequacy).³⁰

Low-income households can often only afford cheap, concentrated energy form foods full of fat, salt and sugar rather than healthier, more expensive foods such as wholegrains, fish, vegetables and fruit. Rural households are particularly at risk of food poverty with higher costs of accessing a healthy diet.³¹ The latest research on the gap in costs between rural and urban shows that in 2023, 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 €162 compared to €150 in an urban area.³²

Weekly cost of a healthy food basket in a rural area was €162 compared to €150 in an urban area



The Effects of Inflation on individual food items

The sustained increases in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) are showing some signs of slowing down.³³ However, as noted in the income adequacy section of this report, the increase in the prices of individual items can have a disproportionate impact on certain households.³⁴ Between January 2023 and January 2024, the cost of food increased by 4.6 per cent in Ireland.³⁵ In terms of individual items, the price of breakfast cereals increased by 2.2 per cent, and the price of yoghurt increased by 2.6 per cent.³⁶ However, some individual items' price hikes were much higher.

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) research found that food costs for a child between the ages of zero and two has increased by nearly 9 per cent over a six month period to September 2023.³⁷ Over the period 2021 to 2023, the four most popular brands of baby formula saw an increase in price from between 17.8 per cent and 32.8 per cent.³⁸ Between January 2023 and January 2024, baby food, including formula, increased by a further 6 per cent.³⁹ The cumulative impact overtime is particularly challenging for families living on a low income. Currently, it costs approximately between €780 and €910 to feed one baby with formula for one year.⁴⁰

25 Central Statistics Office, 'SIA80 Type of Deprivation Item Experienced' (CSO 2023) <https://data.cso.ie> accessed 12 April 2024.

26 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO 2024).

27 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.

28 Safefood, 'Cost of a healthy food basket in Ireland?' (Safefood 2023) v.

29 *ibid.*

30 *ibid.*

31 Safefood, 'What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2020?' (Safefood 2021).

32 Safefood, 'Cost of a healthy food basket in Ireland?' (Safefood 2023) v.

33 Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index February 2024* (CSO 2024).

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

35 The Central Statistics Office (CSO), *Consumer Price Index January 2024* (CSO 2024).

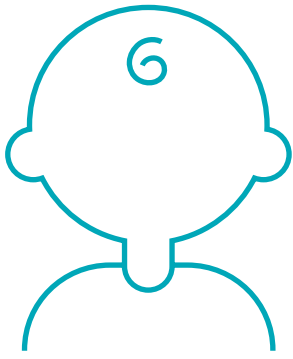
36 *ibid.*

37 Vincentian MESL Research Centre MESL, *MESL Impact Briefing – Budget 2024*, (Vincentian MESL Research Centre 2024) 10.

38 E Coyne, 'Dunnes Stores joins Tesco in cutting costs of leading baby formula brands from today' (Irish Independent 2024) <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/dunnes-stores-joins-tesco-in-cutting-costs-of-leading-baby-formula-brands-from-today/a1938478541.html#:~:text=Tesco%20Ireland%20has%20become%20the,new%20price%20of%20%E2%82%AC9.99> accessed 12 April 2024.

39 Anthony Dawson, *Consumer Price Index – Detailed Sub-Indices (2024)* CSO <<https://data.cso.ie/>> accessed 27 March 2024.

40 L O'Sullivan, A, Kennedy, S Hopkins, and C Patton, 'Why are baby formula prices so high and how can this be tackled?' (RTÉ via TUD 2024) <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2024/0206/1430621-cost-baby-formula-prices-ireland/> accessed 16 April 2024.



Food costs for a child between the ages of 0-2 has increased by nearly 9% over a six month period in 2023

It costs approximately between €780 and €910 to feed one baby with formula for one year



Addressing Food Poverty through School Meals

Schools are an excellent setting to reach children, teachers, families, and the surrounding community.⁴¹ They provide a social environment where children can access and enjoy food without financial constraints.⁴²

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) funds the School Meals Programme. The programme provides funding towards the provision of food through the allocation of a per pupil rate.⁴³ This includes a cold meal option for breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as a hot meal option.⁴⁴ The objective of the scheme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to enable them to take full advantage of the education provided to them.⁴⁵

In September 2019, the DSP launched a hot school meals pilot which involved 37 primary schools benefitting 6,744 students for the 2019/2020 academic year.⁴⁶ The *Programme for Government* has committed to 'continue to review and expand the rollout of the Hot School Meals initiative'.⁴⁷ Since then, the government has done significant work in expanding the provision of hot school meals with annual increases in budget allocations in Budget 2022 and 2023. Budget 2024 committed to expanding the Hot School Meals Programme to non-DEIS primary schools starting from April 2024 with an increase of €42.5 million in funding.⁴⁸

In the 2022/2023 academic year, over 100,000 pupils were eligible to receive hot school meals.⁴⁹ A further expansion of Hot School Meals was initiated in 2023 and 900 primary schools responded positively to a call for expressions of interest.⁵⁰ These schools will be able to participate in the initiative from April 2024.⁵¹ This means that over 320,000 children will be eligible to receive Hot Schools Meals over the course of the 2023/2024 academic year.⁵²

2023: 100,000 pupils eligible for Hot School Meals



2024: 320,000 pupils eligible for Hot School Meals

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

42 *ibid.*

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

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

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

46 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.

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

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

49 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

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

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

52 *ibid.*

In 2023, Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys, announced that she has committed to providing a free hot school meal to every school-going child by 2030.⁵³ This means the Department of Social Protection still has a further five years to expand the programme to all secondary school students, an achievable goal in the context of the thus far successful expansion.

The publication of the *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* in March 2023 examined the effectiveness of the current implementation, and impacts of the programme.⁵⁴ Its recommendations included a list of immediate, short to medium-, and long-term actions for the programme's continuous improvement. One recommendation called for 'the immediate expansion of the provision of the Hot School Meals Option to all DEIS primary schools for the academic year 2023/2024';⁵⁵ and this has already been achieved.

As of January 2023, there was an increase in the rates of funding for school meals for the first time since 2003. The rate for breakfasts increased by 15 cent, cold lunches by 30 cent, dinners by 60 cent, and hot school meals by 30 cent.⁵⁶ This is an average increase of 17 per cent. While these increases are welcome in the context of inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, they may not be enough. In 2022, school meal suppliers warned that the system was at 'breaking point'; since the last time the prices were increased, inflation for the cost of food has increased by at least 33 per cent.⁵⁷ A 17 per cent increase in rates is not enough to cover this change.

First 5, the whole of government strategy to improve children's early years, commits to addressing food poverty through measures such as piloting a meals programme in Early Learning and Care (ELC) Settings

and an evaluation after one year.⁵⁸ In November 2022, a pilot scheme to provide meals in early learning and childcare settings was announced by the Minister for Children, Equality, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman.⁵⁹ The pilot scheme focused on areas of concentrated disadvantage and those participating had the support of a dietician to ensure meals are nutritious.⁶⁰ The results of an evaluation of the pilot, which will include consultation with children, will help to inform the development of a DEIS type model for early learning and childcare settings.⁶¹ The *First 5 Annual Implementation Report* published in 2023⁶² reported that there is a delay in the complete roll out of this commitment.⁶³ However, the new Implementation Report 2023-2025 has committed to funding meals for children in ELC services and targeting this funding at services in disadvantaged communities.⁶⁴

Cross-Government Approach to addressing Food Poverty

In May 2021, the cross-government Food Poverty Working Group was established by Minister of State with responsibility for social inclusion, Joe O'Brien T.D.⁶⁵ The group comprises of representatives from across a number of government departments, and representatives from the community and voluntary sector, including the Children's Rights Alliance, Society of St Vincent de Paul, and Crosscare.⁶⁶ The Working Group has progressed a number of actions in 2023 as part of its work.

A mapping exercise was carried out to establish what government initiatives currently exist to address food poverty. This resulted in the publication of a report in July 2022 highlighting the various schemes, initiatives and programmes delivered across government

53 Emma O'Kelly, 'Every schoolchild to receive free daily hot meal from 2030' RTÉ (Dublin, 30 March 2023).

54 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 1.

55 Ibid 120.

56 Department of Social Protection, 'School Meals Scheme', <https://bit.ly/3ULOviw> accessed 2 May 2024.

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

58 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Annual Implementation Report 2021/2022* (2023) 92.

59 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', Press Release, 22 November 2022.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

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

63 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', Press Release, 22 November 2022.

64 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023) 50.

65 Department of Social Protection 'Minister O'Brien Announces New Working Group on Food Poverty' (Department of Social Protection 2021) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4f450-minister-obrien-announces-new-working-group-onfood-poverty/>> accessed 19 March 2024.

66 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

departments to address food poverty.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

In 2022, the Department of Social Protection commissioned case study research on the prevalence and drivers of food poverty.⁶⁹ The research will examine two case study areas; one of a rural area, and another of an urban area.⁷⁰ Although 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).⁷¹ The findings will help to inform the work of the Food Poverty Working Group and will include recommendations to assist individuals and families experiencing food poverty.⁷² The research is expected to be published in 2024.⁷³

A mid-term review of the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* was published in 2023 and reasserts the Governments' commitment to develop a programme of work to explore the drivers of food poverty and to identify mitigating actions.⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵ This approach takes a more holistic view by

examining the issues in the household that may be contributing to food poverty and how these may be addressed and provides an important step towards addressing the need for long-term sustainable solutions to food poverty. In co-operation with civil society, the model places case workers on-site at food banks where they can sit down with those engaging with these services and go through all aspects of their lives where they may need support.⁷⁶ Crucially, a casework approach to food poverty helps families regain independence.⁷⁷ The pilot case worker model is now operational in Cork, Dublin, and Limerick since September 2023 and it will run over the course of 18 months.⁷⁸ An evaluation will be produced once the pilot reaches completion in March 2025.⁷⁹

Tackling the Gaps in School Meal Provision During Holidays

The use of the phrase 'Holiday Hunger' first appeared in the UK in 1909.⁸⁰ The phenomenon refers to a situation whereby 'economically disadvantaged households with school-aged children experience food insecurity during the school holidays'.⁸¹ Many stakeholders are concerned about the gap in provision of meals outside of school term, particularly with regard to exam time and holiday periods and how this is compounded by other factors.⁸² Although it is not a new phenomenon, thousands of children in Ireland are still at risk of Holiday Hunger.⁸³ This lack of school meal provision in holiday periods means that many children go hungry.⁸⁴

67 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <<https://bit.ly/3OgXILM>> accessed 24 January 2024.

68 Department of Social Protection, 'Food poverty Government programmes, schemes and supports' (DSP 2022) <https://bit.ly/3TUOiqh> accessed 12 April 2024.

69 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

70 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

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

72 *ibid.*

73 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

74 Department of Social Protection, *Mid-term Review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 –2025* (DSP 2023).

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

76 United Nations, 'Experts of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Praise Ireland for Increasing Official Development Assistance, Ask about the Scarcity of Housing and Due Diligence Requirements for Businesses' (UN Media Centre 2024) <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2024/02/experts-committee-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-praise-ireland-increasing>> accessed 15 April 2024.

77 Y Flemming, 'Making the case for food poverty casework' <https://bit.ly/3vNLAM0> accessed 15 April 2024.

78 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023.

79 *ibid.*

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

81 *ibid.* 11.

82 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 110.

83 T Ward 'Food poverty over the Christmas period' (Irish Times 2023) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/2022/12/14/food-poverty-over-the-christmas-period/>> accessed 6 March 2024.

84 Food Cycle, 'What is Holiday Hunger?' (Food Cycle 2022) <<https://foodcycle.org.uk/what-is-holiday-hunger/>> accessed 6 March 2024.

In March 2023, a report on the Evaluation of the School Meals Programme was published.⁸⁵ Amongst the key findings highlighted by the evaluation is the issue of holiday hunger. The report notes that this phenomenon is compounded by external factors such as the cost of living and other challenges that disadvantaged families face in Irish society.⁸⁶ In considering the role that schools could play in addressing this issue, the evaluation notes that logistical issues such as provision of alarm codes and keys to access the school building have already needed to be overcome in the delivery of school meals.⁸⁷ Therefore, schools could form part of the options to address this issue. However, the report notes that the issue of Holiday Hunger is an issue that requires a 'broader Government response' that any decision on how to address holiday hunger would have to 'align with the Working Group on Food Poverty'⁸⁸ and amongst the report's short term to medium term improvements to be delivered by 2025, there is a call to 'extend a modified version of the School Meals Programme to beyond term time to address holiday hunger'.⁸⁹ It is welcome that the School Meals Programme *Evaluation* recommends expanding this initiative to holiday period. However, there may also be other existing mechanisms operating in the community, particularly during holiday periods, that may ensure that those most impacted by holiday hunger are reached.

Programmes to address holiday hunger have been developed in Wales and in Massachusetts in the United States that provide some learnings for Ireland. The Playworks Holiday Project is a Holiday Hunger initiative by the Welsh Government. It aims to increase access to play opportunities and healthy food for children during the school holidays.⁹⁰ Although specifically a Holiday Hunger initiative, the incorporation of access to play tackles the social

isolation element of food poverty; 'playing can shield children from the negative aspects of poverty, helping them to develop their inner resources and build resilience'.⁹¹ The project will be carried out by local authorities, and participants' access to the project will be free or no more than £1. The provision of food is for all participants in order to 'avoid any stigmatisation'.⁹² In Massachusetts the Summer Food Service Programme (SFSP) is one of two programmes in the national summer nutrition programmes which work to provide free meals and snacks to children who would otherwise be without.⁹³ SFSP is available in 'areas in which 50 per cent or more of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals'.⁹⁴ The sites are reimbursed for meal costs, including operating and administration costs.⁹⁵ The use of civil society organisations to work distributing the meals is potentially replicable in Ireland and is an alternative to using schools and school staff.

While a scheme to tackle holiday hunger has not been developed to date in Ireland, the pilot caseworker approach currently being rolled out by the Department of Social Protection demonstrates the adoption of an innovative approach to tackling food poverty. The implementation of this approach involved the development of a Request for Tender document to seek applications from organisations to provide a case worker support service in four geographic areas across Ireland.⁹⁶ Following an evaluation of the responses to the tender, the pilot programme commenced in three areas in September 2023.⁹⁷ The programme will be implemented over a period of 18 months. As part of the rollout of the pilot the Department of Social Protection receives quarterly data reports as mechanism of monitoring the programme's rollout.⁹⁸ An evaluation of the pilot will be used to inform future policy initiatives in this area.⁹⁹

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

86 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 4.

87 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 4.

88 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 113.

89 *ibid* 7.

90 Welsh Government, *Playworks Holiday Project 2024-2025* (Welsh Government 2023) 3 <<https://www.gov.wales/playworks-holiday-project-2024-2025-guidance-local-authorities>> accessed 12 March 2024.

91 *ibid* 2.

92 *ibid* 4.

93 B Turpin, *Child Nutrition Programs: Massachusetts and Beyond* (Project Bread 2022) 18 <https://bit.ly/4bbPMFe> accessed 10 May 2024.

94 *ibid* 19.

95 *ibid* 20.

96 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023

97 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Social Protection 19 December 2023

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Adopting a similar approach to this, a pilot holiday hunger programme could be developed and overseen by the Food Poverty Working Group. Oversight from this group could help to encourage innovative responses that use existing community infrastructure including but not limited to schools. For example, in Wales the Playworks Holiday Project not only addresses holiday hunger but also provides children with the opportunity to take part in play.¹⁰⁰ This groups can facilitate a wider government perspective which may help to identify the most impactful way of addressing holiday hunger could be identified.¹⁰¹

Building on the cross-government approach adopted by the Food Poverty Working Group and drawing from international best practises, Ireland can develop solutions to tackle Holiday Hunger, and reduce the nutritional, social, and financial impacts of food poverty over the school holidays.

Food poverty for children living in Direct Provision

Investing in Children calls on states to pay particular focus to children who may be at increased risk due to multiple disadvantages including those from an ethnic minority or who are migrants.¹⁰² Children in living in Direct Provision are particularly at risk of food poverty and there are specific actions needed to address the issue impacting them. 6,755 children are currently being accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS).¹⁰³ Of these 4,604 children are living in emergency accommodation centres.¹⁰⁴ Overall standards, including in relation to the provision of food, vary both in permanent and emergency accommodation centres and between them. One of the most pressing issues is children accessing nutritious food. Centres either offer a canteen service, preparing meals for residents, or a

kitchen where residents can prepare their own meals with their own ingredients, which they either get with food vouchers or food bought by the centre management.¹⁰⁵ Parents report in both types of centres the nutritional needs of their families are not met.¹⁰⁶ In the canteen service, parents report unsuitable food for children and babies, instances of undercooked food and concerns about diarrhoea and children being underweight.¹⁰⁷

Where parents live at centres with access to a kitchen and can cook for their children problems include overcrowded kitchens, for example one stove for 80 residents and inadequate storage facilities, for example two/three fridges for a whole centre. This means residents are forced to cook meals daily, since there is no place to store cooked meals, and to shop for groceries every day or almost every day since there is nowhere to store ingredients, leading to additional transportation expenses.¹⁰⁸

The 2019 *National Standards* for accommodation offered to people in the protection process (The National Standards) aim to standardise the quality of care in all accommodation centres irrespective of location. The *National Standards* require centres to provide food preparation and dining facilities that meet the needs of residents and support family life and to meet the catering needs and autonomy of residents which includes access to a varied diet that respects their cultural, religious, dietary, nutritional and medical requirements.¹⁰⁹ They apply only to IPAS centres and not to emergency centres. Emergency centres are subject to the *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons and Family Type Accommodation*.¹¹⁰ The guidelines include basic standards on food preparation and storage.¹¹¹

100 Welsh Government, *Playworks Holiday Project 2024-2025* (Welsh Government 2023) 3 <<https://www.gov.wales/playworks-holiday-project-2024-2025-guidance-local-authorities>> accessed 12 March 2024.

101 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 122.

102 European Commission 'Recommendation on Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' (20 February 2013) C (2013) 8.

103 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – March 2024* (DCEDIY March 2024) <<https://bit.ly/41RYqUa>> <<https://bit.ly/3JbVxpR>> accessed 10 April 2024.

104 *ibid.*

105 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (IRC 2023) 34.

106 *ibid* 33.

107 *ibid* 34.

108 *ibid* 34-35.

109 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (DOJE 2019) 42.

110 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons & Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised June 2023 and Updated October 2023).

111 *ibid* 10.

HIQA were granted the authority to carry out inspections of IPAS accommodation centres in December 2023.¹¹² They were not given the authority to inspect emergency centres. While emergency centres accommodate the majority of children in the system, they are not subject to the *National Standards* and are not inspected. Implementing the *National Standards* and having regular HIQA inspections have the ability to improve quality, challenge underperformance and provide oversight and will help to ensure that there is uniformity in service provision.¹¹³ They are essential to improving access to nutritional food to children, allowing parents seeking international protection to cook for them and ensuring children seeking international protection do not experience food poverty. An adaptation of the *National Standards* for emergency accommodation should be put in place.

112 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 S.I. No. 649 of 2023.

113 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 S.I. No. 649 of 2023.

Recommendations

Budget 2025

- Develop and fund a pilot initiative for the expansion of school meals during holiday time by leveraging existing community infrastructure, and relationships between schools and summer camps. [Estimated Cost: €1 million]
- Realise the commitment made in response to the publication of the evaluation of the school meals programme to fund all DEIS secondary schools to provide a hot school meal by 2025.
- Invest in additional resources to ensure that all Special Schools can provide a hot school meal in 2025.

Medium-term

- Building on the learning from the case worker model approach to tackling food poverty, scale up investment in alternative approaches to tackling food poverty which takes a more holistic approach to solving this issue
- Put in place standars for emergeny accommodation and enable HIQA to inspect Temporary Emergency Accommodation Centres as a matter of urgency.

Long-term

- Develop a national action plan to tackle food poverty with a view to associated plans being put in place at local level.

Spotlight

SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMME

Introduction

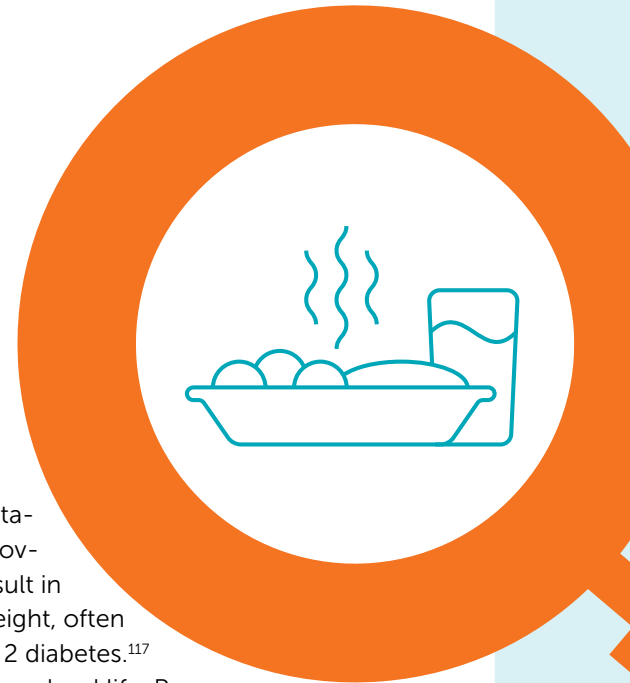
Food poverty is defined as the inability to have an adequate or nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility.¹¹⁴ Food poverty is multidimensional and encompasses a lack of access to a nutritionally adequate diet and how this impacts a person's health and social participation.¹¹⁵

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. Rural households are particularly at risk of food poverty with higher costs of accessing a healthy diet.¹¹⁶ This can result in an inadequate intake of nutrients and higher levels of excess weight, often leading to health complications such as heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.¹¹⁷

Being hungry can also affect a child's ability to participate fully in school life. Poor nutrition in children is linked to reduced development, cognitive function, delayed school enrolment, impaired concentration, increased illness, absenteeism and early school drop-out.¹¹⁸

Hot School Meals Programme

In September 2019, the Department of Social Protection launched a Hot School Meals pilot initiative, as part of the wider School Meals Programme.¹¹⁹ For some children, having access to a hot nutritious meal during the school day is important as this may be the only hot meal they have in the day. In the pilot year over 6,500 children received a hot school meal.¹²⁰ Since then, additional investment in hot school meals over multiple Budget cycles has significantly expanded the reach of this initiative.



114 Safe Food, 'What is the Cost of a Healthy Food Basket in 2018?' (Safe Food 2019).

115 *ibid.*

116 Safefood, 'What is the cost of a healthy food basket in 2020?' (Safefood 2021).

117 Safe Food, 'Why We Need to Talk about Food Poverty' (Safe Food 2021) <https://www.safefood.net/blog/food-poverty> accessed 14 May 2024.

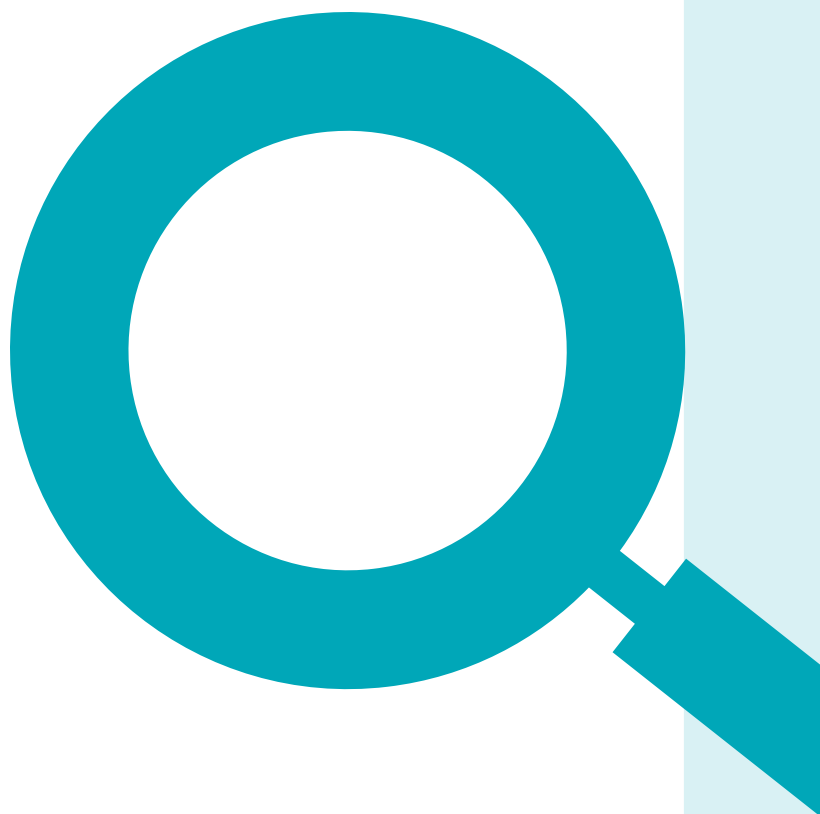
118 Alessandro Rhyll Demaio, Francesco Branca, Decade of action on nutrition: our window to act on the double burden of malnutrition, *BMJ Glob Health* 2017 3.

119 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.

120 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.

In 2022, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* was published, which found that the scheme has alleviated food poverty, and improved education and health outcomes for children who may be experiencing food poverty.¹²¹ The *Evaluation* found that providing children with meals in school was 'making a significant difference to families' as it saves both time and money.¹²² As part of the School Meals Programme children are able to bring leftover or spare meals home. This goes towards alleviating food poverty, particularly for families who would be unable to cook a hot meal due to living situations or other reasons.¹²³ The *Evaluation* shows strong evidence for improved academic outcomes, for example in test scores, increased attendance, including improved punctuality, and an improvement in student behaviour.¹²⁴

In 2023, Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys T.D., announced that she has committed to providing a free hot school meal to every school-going child by 2030.¹²⁵ Currently almost 150,000 children and young people receive a hot school meal every day in school.¹²⁶ Hot school meals are mostly provided at lunchtime and the meal can vary depending on the school supplier.¹²⁷



121 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 118.

122 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 118.

123 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 118.

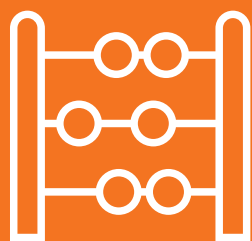
124 RSM Ireland, *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme* (DSP 2022) 118.

125 Emma O'Kelly, 'Every schoolchild to receive free daily hot meal from 2030' RTÉ (Dublin, 30 March 2023).

126 Heather Humphreys TD, Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, *School Meals Programme*, Written Answers 30 April 2024 [19340/24] <https://bit.ly/3UKtEuE>.

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

Early Childhood Education and Care



EARLY YEARS

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 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'.¹ In its Concluding Observations on Ireland's last examination under the UNCRC in 2023, the Committee called for increased access to affordable childcare for parents engaged in the labour market, and especially those experiencing disadvantage.² The Committee also recommended that the Irish government increase the level of funding allocated to childcare and move towards a publicly funded model of childcare.³ The Concluding Observations on Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), published in March 2024, reinforces the Committee's call for increased public funding in this area.⁴

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'.⁵ The recommendation calls on Member States to reduce inequality by investing in early childhood education and care.⁶ This can be achieved by providing access to high-quality services which are affordable and responsive to the needs of families.⁷ Specific incentives should be provided to ensure

children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in early childhood education and care in a way that doesn't stigmatise or segregate.⁸

In July 2023, the Department of An Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office.⁹ One of the six priority issues for the office is on early learning and childcare.¹⁰ The work plan recognises not only the benefit of early learning and care to children living in poverty, but also its ability to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.¹¹ The Programme Office aims to bring particular focus to targeted provision of places to children experiencing socioeconomic deprivation and the development of the new Equal Participation Model.¹²

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.¹³ Historically, Ireland's comparative expenditure on ECEC has lagged behind other countries. Data from the Organisation on Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that up until a few years ago, Ireland's public spending in this area was in the second lowest place in Europe.¹⁴ In 2019, the Government pledged to continue increasing investment in ECEC in order to bring Ireland in line with OECD averages.¹⁵ Budget 2023 made a significant step forward in this regard

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

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

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

4 UNCESCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 37.

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

6 *ibid.*

7 *Ibid* 778.

8 *Ibid* 778.

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

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

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

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

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

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

15 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.

by investing €1 billion in early years in line with commitments made in *First 5*, which has been realised five years ahead of schedule.¹⁶ Budget 2024 continued to maintain and build on this momentum with €1.1 billion being allocated for the sector.¹⁷

The most comprehensive data on the early years sector is captured by the Annual Early Years Sector Profile, which is developed and published by Pobal on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).¹⁸ In December 2023, the Department launched a new website to replace the previous printed copy report.¹⁹ This new website will provide a more innovative way of displaying the annual survey data and will greatly benefit evidence-informed policy development.²⁰ As this website remains under development, the latest available data on average childcare fees at a national and county level relates to the years 2020/2021. It shows that average weekly fees in Ireland were €186.84 for a full day, €110.92 for part-time, and €74.20 for sessional.²¹ However, there is great geographical disparity within these statistics. Across the country, fees were highest in Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown (at €244.08; €139.10; €84.71 respectively) and the lowest in Carlow (€152.08; €88.36; €71.27 respectively).²²

It is important to view these fee levels in context given that since 2020/2021, there has been considerable investment in early years including in subsidies for parents/guardians. According to comparative analysis by the OECD, the introduction of childcare subsidies has substantially reduced costs for low income and one parent families.²³ However, some middle-income families still have high childcare costs.²⁴

The OECD is clear that if ECEC is not sufficiently subsidised, fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds will participate in it.²⁵ 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.²⁶ At present, the State provides subsidies directly to all providers of childcare services to reduce the financial cost for parents and carers availing of services at market prices.²⁷

Public funding (including funding to subsidise childcare) 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.²⁸ As part of the implementation of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021 – 2028, the Department of Children Equality Disability Integration and Youth has published draft regulations for childminders.²⁹ It is anticipated that following the introduction of these regulations, childminders will be able to register themselves and avail of the benefits and supports offered to other early learning and childcare providers. This will include being able to make subsidies available to parents of the children they are minding.³⁰ The progression of the childminding regulations will provide more options for parents wishing to avail of childcare subsidies as well as ensuring improved quality of provision.

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has been in operation since November 2019 and is the primary scheme aimed at supporting parents with childcare costs.³¹

16 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).

17 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Budget 2024: Overview and FAQ for Early Learning and Childcare Providers', (DCEDIY 2023).

18 Pobal, 'The 2022/2023 Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey has opened' <<https://bit.ly/3JppOI9>> accessed 19 April 2024.

19 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 7 February 2024 [5136/24].

20 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 7 February 2024 [5136/24].

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

22 *ibid.*

23 OECD, *Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2021* (OECD 2022), 17.

24 OECD, *Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2021* (OECD 2022), 13.

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

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

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

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

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

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

31 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.

Under the NCS, parents earning the least income receive the highest subsidy rate³² in line with the principle of progressive universalism.³³ Investment in the NCS in the last two Budgets has focused on the universal aspect of the scheme and improving costs for all parents. From January 2023, families received a minimum universal subsidy of €1.40 per hour, an increase of €0.90 on the previous rate of €0.50 per hour.³⁴ A further increase to €2.14 per hour per child will be introduced from September 2024.³⁵ Uptake of the NCS continues to grow very significantly, with the numbers availing of the scheme having grown from almost 100,000 to over 140,000 during 2023.³⁶

Support for families on low-incomes

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.³⁷

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.³⁸ 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 the population.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ An enhanced hours subsidy provides up to 45 hours of childcare per week where both parents are engaged in work or study, are transitioning out of work or study, or are unavailable to care for the child.⁴¹ While the Expert Group on the Funding Model considered the requirement to be in work or study to be 'reasonable', they also recognised the valid concerns of the impact of the 'limitation on children from disadvantaged families'.⁴² Providing access to affordable childcare is the single most important measure in addressing child poverty based on the evidence that providing quality employment alongside quality childcare is what works the best.⁴³

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, though 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.⁴⁴ The original design of the scheme, proposed that the base income threshold would be set at a rate that would ensure that all families living on incomes below the poverty line would receive the maximum subsidy rate.⁴⁵ In the year of the launch of the National Childcare Scheme this rate was €26,000

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- 32 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).
- 33 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 6 November 2020.
- 34 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.
- 35 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 15 January 2024.
- 36 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 15 January 2024.
- 37 Daly, M. *Fighting Child Poverty: The Child Guarantee* (European Parliament 2019), 5
- 38 Social Justice Ireland 'Substantial portion of workers cannot achieve a socially acceptable standard of living', <https://bit.ly/2X8w78p> accessed 13 October 2021.
- 39 John Bennet, *ECEC for children from disadvantaged backgrounds: findings from a European literature review and two case studies* (European Commission 2013).
- 40 Government of Ireland, *National Childcare Scheme Policy Guidelines* <<https://bit.ly/2H91t6i>> accessed 30 June 2022.
- 41 Government of Ireland, *National Childcare Scheme Policy Guidelines* <<https://bit.ly/2H91t6i>> accessed 30 June 2022.
- 42 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.
- 43 Daly, M. *Fighting Child Poverty: The Child Guarantee* (European Parliament 2019), 5
- 44 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.
- 45 Doorley, K. *Post-Budget Engagement: Economic and Social Research Institute*, Committee on Budgetary Oversight (Houses of the Oireachtas 18 October 2023).

for a household containing two adults and one child.⁴⁶ However, the latest data shows that this has risen to €33,000.⁴⁷ The effective freeze on the income thresholds to access higher subsidy rates has been noted by the ESRI as having a negative impact on households with lower incomes, those of which may experience wage inflation and receive less support for childcare costs.⁴⁸ For instance, the national minimum wage rate has risen from €9.80 per hour in 2019 to €12.70 in 2024.⁴⁹ The base income threshold should be reviewed to ensure that all families below the current poverty line receive the maximum subsidy rate.

The OECD is clear that if ECEC is not sufficiently subsidised, fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in it.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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 also has a Sponsor Referral where special arrangements are made for vulnerable children and families. The Sponsor Referral, which comes from a Sponsor Body (e.g. Tusla or the HSE), addresses instances where childcare is needed on child welfare, child protection, family support, or other specified grounds. The decision is based on the particular need of the child in line with their defined criteria.⁵² The hourly rates for referrals is the same across all Sponsor bodies, ranging from €5.87 for a child under 12 months to €4.31 for school-aged children.⁵³

Budget 2024 increased the hourly rate for children older than one year, which is set to become €5.30 from September 2024. There were 5,139 children benefitting from an NCS sponsorship claim year-to-date in March 2024.⁵⁴

	Current Rate	Updated Rate from September 2024
<12 months	€5.87	€5.87
Pre-ECCE	€5.00	€5.30
ECCE/ECCE-eligible/Early Start	€4.54	€5.30
School-age	€4.31	€5.30

Focus Ireland has raised concerns about the adequacy of the sponsorship rate and how this interacts with the current demand for childcare places.⁵⁵ Of central concern is the challenge to accessing Sponsored places for families experiencing homelessness.⁵⁶ In some instances the sponsorship subsidy falls below the actual childcare fee being charged by a childcare provider.⁵⁷ This is due to the Sponsorship rate being based on the maximum possible NCS subsidy rate plus 15 per cent⁵⁸ as opposed to the actual fee being charged. As the rules of the Sponsorship scheme prohibit providers seeking a 'co-payment',⁵⁹ they must accept a lower fee income and given the current demand for childcare places there is no financial or other incentive for them to accept children on the Sponsorship Scheme.⁶⁰ Access to quality childcare is critical for children living in homeless accommodation as it not only benefits children's wellbeing and development but also supports parents to remain in or to access employment which is critical should they want to exit homelessness.⁶¹

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

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

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

49 National Childcare Scheme, 'NCS FAQ: Sponsor Referrals', <https://bit.ly/3JiwT6Y> accessed 10 April 2024.

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

51 UNCR, 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.

53 National Childcare Scheme, 'NCS FAQ: Sponsor Referrals', <https://bit.ly/3JiwT6Y> accessed 10 April 2024.

54 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 20 March 2024 [12869/24].

55 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

56 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

57 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

58 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 26 September 2023[41483/23].

59 National Childcare Scheme, 'NCS FAQ: Sponsor Referrals', <https://bit.ly/3JiwT6Y> accessed 10 April 2024.

60 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

61 Focus Ireland, *Issues with Childcare Provision for Children in Emergency Accommodation* [unpublished document].

In response to these issues, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth indicated that his Department were examining these in the context of Budget 2024.⁶² The changes to the rates introduced as a result of this review will come in to effect from this September and should help to alleviate some of the pressures observed by those working directly with families supported through NCS sponsorship. Once this measure has been implemented, engagement between the Department and stakeholders could explore whether this has been effective in addressing the concerns raised.

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, to completing the necessary paperwork as well as a lack of flexibility with regard to hours of provision. The latest First 5 Implementation Plan contains an action to implement the Equal Participation Model and also to maximise participation and inclusion for all families with a particular focus on lower participating groups such as Travellers and Roma.⁶³ 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.

The Department is currently conducting a review of the ECCE programme and, as part of this review includes harder to reach groups, Traveller and Roma families will be consulted.⁶⁴ This is to understand why the uptake is lower amongst these groups and to identify barriers which can be addressed through

policy.⁶⁵ The report was due for completion at the end of 2023.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.

A new model to tackle disadvantage

Article 2 of UNCRC clearly requires that no child should experience discrimination in early childhood and that all children should be able to access the vital services that contribute to their survival and development, in line with Article 6.⁷⁰ It is acknowledged that potential discrimination is a particular concern in cases 'where health, education, welfare and other services are not universally available and are provided through a combination of State, private and charitable organisations'.⁷¹ High quality early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children, but it can be of particular value to more disadvantaged children by helping to redress inter-familial inequalities.⁷²

62 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman TD, Dail Debates, Written Answers, Childcare Services, 26 September 2023[41483/23].

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

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

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

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

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

68 Letter to Minister Katherine Zappone, October 2019.

69 *ibid.*

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

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

72 A Pearce et al, 'Pathways to inequalities in child health' (2019) *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 104:998– 1003

A review of international evidence from programmes across five countries shows that investing in early years is one of the most effective methods to break the cycle of poverty.⁷³ It shows that investing in specific programmes targeted at those living in poverty, along with wraparound supports, has proven to have positive impacts on children’s educational attainment; long term employment opportunities; physical health; an increase in lifetime earnings; a reduction in crime and number of lifetime arrests; improved mental health; and improved socioemotional skills.⁷⁴

First 5 committed to develop a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) type model for early childhood education and care.⁷⁵ The Report of the Expert Group on the Funding Model addresses this commitment by recommending the introduction of a new funding stream to tackle socioeconomic disadvantage.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷

Work on the development of a targeted model of early years progressed throughout 2023. This new strand of funding, called the Equal Participation Model (EPM), will provide a mix of universal and targeted supports through services accessed by children and families experiencing disadvantage.⁷⁸

The design of the EPM is at an advanced stage and it is anticipated that targeted services will be identified by using existing data, such as the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, along with other data sources.⁷⁹ Traveller and Roma children are key cohorts in this model. Since September 2023, an ethnic identifier has been introduced for applications to the National Childcare and ECCE schemes.⁸⁰ An allocation of €4.5 million for the initial implementation of the EPM was secured in Budget 2024,⁸¹ which amounts to €13.5 million in a full year. It is anticipated that the EPM policy document will be published early in 2024.⁸² The latest *First 5 Implementation Plan* includes a target to increase the participation rates of Traveller and Roma children so that they are ‘more closely aligned to the national average’.⁸³ The participation rates for Traveller and Roma children is 76 per cent and 70 per cent respectively, compared to an overall participation of 96 per cent.⁸⁴

There is a general recognition that it will take time to put in place this new funding stream, as it will be based on developing a model formed from additional data that will identify early years settings with ‘high concentrations of disadvantaged children’.⁸⁵ 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 supports to address disadvantage are being introduced, a significant number of the most disadvantaged children would not be accessing services’.⁸⁶ This has included providing increased support under the NCS subsidised hours by removing the practice of deducting hours spent in education (including pre-school) from Spring 2022.⁸⁷

73 Conor Cashman, Margaret Buckley and Grainne Mulcahy, *Briefing Document on Early Interventions and Public Childcare Approaches*, (Children’s Rights Alliance and UCC 2023).

74 *ibid.*

75 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.

76 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.

77 *ibid.*

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

79 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 15 January 2024.

80 *ibid.*

81 An allocation of €4.5 million for the initial implementation of the Equal Participation (DEIS type) Model of ear

82 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 15 January 2024.

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

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

85 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.

86 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.

87 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)

The Expert Group also recommended that settings in receipt of targeted funding should be required to develop and publish 'an annual 'tackling disadvantage plan' and that the DCEDIY should develop a 'short set of national indicators outlining the benefits that it expects to achieve from this additional funding'.⁸⁸ 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'.⁸⁹ 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.

88 Ibid, 95-6 and 131.

89 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 2025

- Building on the significant investment of €1.1 billion in early years in 2024, Budget 2025 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.
- Funding for the National Childcare Scheme should focus on the income assessed subsidies and sponsorship rates in order to unlock the potential of early childhood education and care to break the cycle of poverty. This could include adjusting the income thresholds to enable more families to access higher subsidies.
- Exclude Child Benefit and child maintenance as reckonable income for the purposes of the National Childcare Scheme.
- 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 2025 to support the implementation of the new Equal Participation Model. This should include a focus on wraparound services, provision of food and parental support.

Medium-term

- Building on progress to date through the Core Funding and JLC process commit to making early years workers public sector workers. In parallel to moving to this commitment ensure that all stakeholders, DCEDIY, employers and unions, continue to engage with and in the JLC process to ensure that improvements to the pay and conditions of workers are prioritised and adequate resources ringfenced for this purpose.
- 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.

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.



Education



EDUCATION

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) every child has a right to education¹. 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 society². 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.³ 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',⁴ equal access to quality education for Roma and Traveller children and collection of disaggregated data on education, including information on ethnicity and on the use of reduced timetables.⁵ The Committee also raised concerns about the discriminatory effect of the Leaving Certificate and 'alternative methods of certification on children in disadvantaged'.⁶

These concerns were reinforced in the concluding observations of Ireland's recent review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Of note was the persistence of significant inequalities in educational attainment, particularly for children belonging to ethnic minorities and those from low-income families, both of which have the effect of limiting social mobility.⁷

Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty, and break down cycles of disadvantage.⁸ In Ireland, a person's socioeconomic background remains a strong predictor in terms of their experience and achievement within the current education system. A person is almost three times more likely to experience higher education if their parents have a higher education than someone whose parents have not completed primary-level education.⁹ Living on a low income can prevent children and young people from participating fully in education.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

These statistics should be considered in the context of how the education system can be transformative, but also how it reproduces intergenerational inequality and poverty.¹³ There is little evidence to suggest that different social classes view the importance of education differently, as it is seen by all classes as one of the key factors to social mobility and success.¹⁴ Parents' high aspirations for their children are apparent in research carried out as part of the *Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study¹⁵ and in a study looking at parental involvement at post-primary level.¹⁶ Middle-class parents have been found to have a greater familiarity with the education

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- 1 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 28.
 - 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.
 - 4 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, paras 4 and 37.
 - 5 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, paras 4 and 37.
 - 6 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 36.
 - 7 UNICEF, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 52
 - 8 Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* (DEASP 2020) 48.
 - 9 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.
 - 10 Joint Committee on Education and Skills *Report on education inequality and disadvantage and barriers to education* (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019).
 - 11 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022).
 - 12 Sarah Curristan, Bertrand Maitre and Helen Russell, *Intergenerational Poverty in Ireland*, (ESRI 2022).
 - 13 European Commission, *INCLUDE-ED Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education, Project 6/WP22: Case analysis of local projects working towards social cohesion, Priority 7: Citizen and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society* (European Commission 2011)
 - 14 Reay, D., *Rethinking social class: Qualitative perspectives on gender and social class*. (Sociology, Vol. 32 (2) 1998 259-275)
 - 15 Williams, J., Green, S., Doyle, E., Harris, E., Layte, R., McCoy, S., McCrory, C., Murray, A., Nixon, E., O'Dowd, T., O'Moore, M., Quail, A., Smyth, E. and Thornton, M. *Growing Up in Ireland – National Longitudinal Study of Children: The Lives of 9 Year Olds, Report 1*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. (2009)
 - 16 Byrne, D. and Smyth, E. *Behind the Scenes: A Study of Parental Involvement in Post Primary Education* (Liffey Press 2011)

system and can therefore navigate and support their child through the schooling system using their insider knowledge and networks.¹⁷ Considering the continued disproportionate representation of various socioeconomic¹⁸ and other social groups¹⁹ at third-level, the cultural and social resources available to families require attention alongside the positive financial measures that have been part of policy on this issue for a number of years now.

This section focuses on the specific aspects of the EU Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children* that relate 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’.²⁰ The Recommendation further emphasises that the State take measures to address barriers, including financial, which hinder children attending school by providing targeted educational aid.²¹ The introduction and implementation of policies to reduce early school leaving and initiatives for those at risk of early school leaving are also outlined in *Investing in Children*, as well as the need for responses to social diversity and the deployment of role models to support integration of children from ethnic minorities into schools.

Targeting resources towards those experiencing disadvantage

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme

What is DEIS?

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.²²

A new DEIS Plan was published in 2017.²³ 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 the greatest risk of educational disadvantage.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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 2022/23 school year, there were 3,233 Primary Schools and 677 Post Primary schools in the State, of which 967 primary and 235 post-primary were categorised as DEIS.²⁶ In that academic year, there was an increase in the number of DEIS schools by 284 primary and 38 post-primary schools.²⁷ This was the single largest expansion of the DEIS programme since its inception, making the Department’s overall allocation for the DEIS programme €180 million.²⁸

The DEIS programme has previously been recognised as having a positive effect on tackling educational disadvantage for the majority of young people.²⁹ As part of a review currently being undertaken, and the development of DEIS to ensure that it remains effective in its approach, the Department of Education

17 Laureau A., *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*. (Rowman & Littlefield 2000)

18 McCoy, S., Byrne, D., O’Connell, P.J., Kelly, E. and Doherty, C. *Hidden Disadvantage? A Study of the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group* (Higher Education Authority 2010)

19 Higher Education Authority & Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028*, (2022) European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels).

20 2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).

21 Ibid

22 Department of Education and Science, *DEIS: (Delivering Equality Of Opportunity In Schools) An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion: Summary* (Department of Education and Science 2005).

23 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).

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

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

26 Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 11 December 2023.

27 Department of Education, ‘Extension of DEIS to further schools’ <<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a3c9e-extension-of-deis-to-further-schools/>> accessed 3 May 2024.

28 Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, Parliamentary Questions, Written Answers, 17 Jan 2024 [1702/24] [1768/24].

29 Department of Education, *Review of Class Size in DEIS Urban Band 1 Primary Schools* (DE 2022) 6.

has invited the OECD Strength through Diversity: Education for Inclusive Societies Project to review the current policy approach for the allocation of resources. This review is currently ongoing and is expected to be completed in Quarter 2 of 2024. It will assess the current resource allocation model for DEIS, review international examples, and will inform a policy approach for an equitable distribution of supplementary resources to support students at risk of educational disadvantage attending all schools, both DEIS and non-DEIS.³⁰ This could possibly address the issue raised in research published in 2015, indicating that a large proportion (up to 50 per cent) of disadvantaged students attend non-DEIS schools.³¹ Further to the National Census in April 2022, the updated HP Deprivation index has also now been generated by Pobal,³² which, along with other data, will inform future resource allocation to address education inequality.

DEIS Supports

The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation, and retention.³³ The work of the Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) is governed by this Act and comprises of the Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and two school support services, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP).³⁴ The purpose of these services is to work collaboratively with schools, families, and other services to ensure children and young people can achieve the best educational outcomes³⁵ 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 and 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. Under the Department's Social Inclusion measures, funding of €5 million was provided in 2024 for additional Educational Welfare Officers posts.³⁶ There was also €2 million made available for increasing services in school retention and completion programmes and supports targeted at the most educationally disadvantaged children.³⁷

The latest performance data captured by TESS indicates that the number of EWOs currently in post does not meet the growing demand for these supports. In the first seven months of the current school year, 5,050 referrals had been screened by senior educational welfare services.³⁸ This was a 20 per cent increase on the first seven months of the 2022-23 school year.³⁹ Furthermore, in March there were 3,429 referrals waiting for educational welfare services, an increase of 6 per cent on the previous month and the fifth monthly increase in a row.⁴⁰ TESS also reports an overall increase in the number of new individual children they are working with compared to the previous year.⁴¹ It is critical that Budget 2025 targets increased investment in the number of EWOs.⁴²

The 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.⁴³ The primary way this intervention is delivered is through home visits⁴⁴ and the provision of courses and classes that enable parents to support a pupil's learning.⁴⁵

30 Department of Education, *Minister Foley announces OECD review to inform Ireland's resource allocation policy to address educational disadvantage* <<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/06711-minister-foley-announces-oecd-review-to-inform-irelands-resource-allocation-policy/>> accessed 3 May 2024

31 Emer Smyth, Selina McCoy and Gillian Kingston, *Learning from the evaluation of DEIS* (ESRI 2015) 79.

32 Pobal, *HP Deprivation Index 2022*, <<https://bit.ly/3wssKdV>> accessed 3 May 2024.

33 TUSLA, 'Tusla Education Support Services', <<https://bit.ly/3wssOKH>> accessed 4 May 2024.

34 TUSLA, 'Tusla Education Support Services', <<https://bit.ly/3wssOKH>> accessed 4 May 2024.

35 TUSLA, 'Tusla Education Support Services', <<https://bit.ly/3wssOKH>> accessed 4 May 2024.

36 Department of Education, 'Main Features of Budget 2024', Department of Education October 2023, 7

37 *ibid*

38 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (TUSLA 2024) 15.

39 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (TUSLA 2024) 15.

40 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (TUSLA 2024) 15.

41 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (TUSLA 2024) 15.

42 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (TUSLA 2024) 15.

43 TUSLA, 'HSCL-Home School Community Liaison', <https://bit.ly/43p4JjI> accessed 4 May 2024.

44 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.

45 TUSLA, 'HSCL-Home School Community Liaison', <https://bit.ly/43p4JjI> accessed 4 May 2024.

All DEIS urban primary schools and all DEIS post-primary schools are included in the HSCL scheme.⁴⁶ In recognition of the lower levels of representation of progression across 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.⁴⁷ In October 2022, €400,000 was allocated to the Department of Education under the 2022 Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan for the funding of 10 new HSCL coordinator posts in 14 non-DEIS post primary schools to support Traveller and Roma families.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ These HSCL coordinators will have access to funding to implement and run initiatives to encourage attendance, retention, and progression for Traveller and Roma pupils.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ In the absence of parents' direct experience or 'legacy knowledge' of secondary school, the research suggests that parents found it difficult to support their children in the transition between primary and secondary schools.⁵²

Continued investment in these supports could ensure more children can reach their full potential in education. 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.

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.⁵³ The individual pupil supports needed are identified through a review carried out by the City Connects Coordinator who then consults with the child's parents/guardians.⁵⁴ A personalised plan outlines key activities and services needed to enable the child to thrive.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

Schools located in communities experiencing persistent inter-generational poverty and with students experiencing trauma and adverse childhood experiences, should be considered for an enhanced DEIS (or DEIS+) type model of provision.⁵⁷ DEIS+ would involve a suite of programmes that would further support individuals in those schools and potentially their families, depending on the level and nature of need involved. Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) working in and around schools are a feature of many European school systems and key to addressing complex needs of children and their families.⁵⁸

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- 46 The HSCL currently serves 687 DEIS schools and caters to approximately 207,000 children and young people. The scheme is delivered by 528 full-time HSCL Coordinators who are teachers in these schools and are assigned to HSCL duties either in individual schools or clusters of schools.
- 47 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Statistical Spotlight #4, Young Travellers in Ireland* (DCYA 2020)32.
- 48 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.
- 49 Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 29 March 2023 [15552/23].
- 50 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.
- 51 Maria Quinlan, *Out of the Shadows Traveller and Roma Education: Voices from the Communities* (Government of Ireland 2021), 14.
- 52 Maria Quinlan, *Out of the Shadows Traveller and Roma Education: Voices from the Communities* (Government of Ireland 2021), 14.
- 53 Dublin North East Inner City, *City Connects*, <https://bit.ly/3M6NAok> accessed 8 May 2023.
- 54 Dublin North East Inner City, *City Connects*, <https://bit.ly/3M6NAok> accessed 8 May 2023.
- 55 Dublin North East Inner City, *City Connects*, <https://bit.ly/3M6NAok> accessed 8 May 2023.
- 56 Dublin North East Inner City, *City Connects*, <https://bit.ly/3M6NAok> accessed 8 May 2023.
- 57 Paul Downes, *Current Directions in Addressing the Postpandemic Impact on Young People in Schools Experiencing Poverty and Socio-Economic Exclusion: International and National Perspectives*, JMB (Joint Managerial Body), DEIS Schools Seminar 2023, 23rd March 2023 <<https://bit.ly/4dtaiCT>> accessed on 3 May 2024.
- 58 Nunan, S. & Downes, P., *Introduction to Joint Conference*, INTO (Irish National Teachers Organisation) and Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College: *Review of DEIS: Poverty and Social Inclusion in Education, December 5th, 2015*, <<https://bit.ly/3Wm4J2X>> accessed on 3 May 2024

Addressing the financial barriers to education

School Books

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'.⁵⁹ In June 2021, building on the *Investing in Children Recommendation*,⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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.⁶²



Reducing the cost of education is one of the six priority areas in the initial programme plan for the Department of and Taoiseach Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office.⁶³ The Programme Office will provide a particular focus on alleviating the costs of education for secondary school students, such as those associated with school books and other materials, and addressing the pressure put on parents to make voluntary contributions.⁶⁴ The Office acknowledges the important developments on budget measures in this regard and identifies a role for it in monitoring the implementation of these commitments and helping to identify next steps.⁶⁵

In 2023, parents of children in fourth class in primary school spent an average of €320 on back-to-school costs. The positive impact of the introduction of free books at primary school can be seen here, with a reduction of €124 on the previous year.⁶⁶ At post-primary level, school books represent the biggest outlay for parents of first and fifth year students, costing €226 and €206 respectively and accounting for a similar proportion of overall costs as those parents with a 4th class child.⁶⁷ The announcement of free school books up to Junior Cycle in 2024 will alleviate this substantial cost for parents for the first three years of post-primary education. Consideration should now be given to further expand the free books scheme to include all students up to the end of senior cycle.

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

60 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.

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

62 *ibid* 26.

63 Department of the Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Initial Programme Plan July 2023-December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office) 5.

64 Department of the Taoiseach, *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Well-Being*, Initial Programme Plan July 2023-December 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office) 15.

65 *ibid* 15

66 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

67 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

Costs for parents 2023	4th Class	1st Year	5th Year
Uniforms	€122	€226	€208
Books	€0	€232	€234
Digital books/	€-	€131	€97
Digital Tools	€47	€173	€104
Classroom resources*	€56	€71	€72
Voluntary	€96	€139	€148
Total	€320	€972	€863
* Average amount of those asked to pay classroom resources, digital subscriptions and voluntary contributions			
Source: Barnardos, Back to School Survey 2023, (Barnardos 2023), 7.			

The cost-of-living crisis has put increased pressure on families preparing their children to return to school.⁶⁸ Every year parents across the country face substantial costs to get their children ready to go back to school. Overall results show parents continue to be concerned about meeting back to school costs. Half of primary and two-thirds of secondary school parents stated they are worried about meeting costs this year.⁶⁹

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'.⁷⁰ In Budget 2023, funding for free school books for all primary schools eliminated school book costs for the families of all children in primary schools.⁷¹ It benefitted approximately 558,000 students in 3,230 schools, including 130 special education schools.⁷²

The extension of free books to Junior Cycle demonstrated a continued commitment from Government to tackle child poverty and involved a

historic investment of over €68 million announced in Budget 2024. This will benefit more than 212,000 students across 670 post-primary schools across the country and will allow for the provision of free school books in addition to core classroom resources such as journals, copybooks, dictionaries, and calculators.⁷³ Calls for support to the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) were down by 20 per cent in the first year of the scheme at primary school level, demonstrating the immediate and tangible difference it made to families across the country.⁷⁴ The average back to school cost for a first-year student in post-primary was a significant €972 in 2024, with €232 needed to cover the cost of schoolbooks alone.⁷⁵ Consideration should now be given to the final extension of the initiative to senior cycle. With books alone costing an average of €234 for a fifth-year student,⁷⁶ this would be an effective financial measure across primary and post-primary schooling.

As part of the cost-of-living measures in Budget 2024, state examination entry fees will be waived again in 2024 at an estimated annual cost of €11m. This will benefit the families of some 130,000 pupils sitting state exams in post primary in 2024 and be of particular benefit to those children living in or at risk of poverty.⁷⁷

Voluntary Contributions

Parents are finding themselves under considerable financial pressure to meet costs and have expressed frustration and exasperation with being compelled to pay high uniform costs, large sums for digital tools, and increased voluntary contribution fees, which are not really 'voluntary'.⁷⁸ SVP commissioned a report in 2023 to explore concerns that there may be deficits between the grants provided to secondary schools and their day-to-day operating costs, leading to a reliance on voluntary contributions and charges to

68 One third of primary school (35 per cent) and half of secondary school parents said cost of living increases have made it much more difficult to meet costs, with a further two-fifths of parents (41 per cent) saying it had made it slightly more difficult. Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

69 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

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

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

72 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.

73 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces details of a new scheme to eliminate the cost of schoolbooks for families of Junior Cycle students', Press Release 5 March 2024.

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

75 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

76 ibid

77 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

78 Barnardos, 'Back to School Survey 2023' (02 August 2023) <<https://www.barnardos.ie/barnardos-back-to-school-survey-2023/>> accessed 03 May 2024

fund vital school resources and activities.⁷⁹ Responses to the parent survey in the SVP research clearly showed that these contributions are not generally communicated as being optional, that they place a significant amount of stress on some families, and that many of the respondents made sacrifices in other areas in order to pay the voluntary contribution asked by the school.⁸⁰

In its analysis of child poverty measures introduced in Budget 2024, the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office recognises the stress caused to parents having to pay voluntary contributions.⁸¹ It outlines that this was partly addressed by the Budget 2024 measures which provided an increase in the basic capitation rates bringing them to €200 per student in primary schools and to €345 in post-primary schools. This represents a permanent increase in funding to schools of €21 million, a 9 per cent increase in the previous year.⁸² An additional €60 million is included as part of the cost-of-living measures.⁸³ While the increase in the capitation grant and the cost-of-living supports for schools are to be welcomed, these must be sustained in line with actual school running costs year-on-year in order that the burden of these does not fall to parents through requests for “voluntary contributions”.

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 potential⁸⁴’. 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’.⁸⁵

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 lower socioeconomic groups.⁸⁶ Both national and international studies show that there are common challenges and experiences for early school leavers, such as experiencing behavioural problems, ongoing social, emotional or health issues, special educational needs, living in poverty, ill-health, trauma, struggles to participate, and progress within the education system.⁸⁷

Over half of early school leavers will continue their education in facilities such as a voluntary education settings or Youthreach, where they can receive necessary support and continue a more participant-centred form of education.⁸⁸ Alternative education has developed in many jurisdictions as a response to state-provided mainstream education.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

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

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

81 Department of the Taoiseach, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2024 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being* (Department of the Taoiseach November 2023) 12

82 *ibid*

83 *ibid*

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

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

86 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.

87 *ibid*.

88 *ibid* 5.

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

90 *ibid*.

In Ireland, young people who leave school before the age of 16 have limited⁹¹ state-funded opportunities for continuing their education. Except for Youthreach, a state-provided programme which offers young people (15-21) who are no longer engaged in mainstream education a viable progression route on to further education, training, and/or employment, the area of alternative education is not explicitly defined and mentioned in the Irish education system.⁹² While Youthreach effectively supports some learners in their progression in education and training, it is not available or the appropriate option for all young people who leave school early.⁹³

The Department of Education published its Review of Out-of-School Educational Provision.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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 education pathways.⁹⁶

An implementation group has been established to oversee the fulfilment of the recommendations of the Review. The group, in working to provide advice and agreement on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the review, engaged

widely with organisations and stakeholders, including young people with lived experience of the complexity of the issues involved. Members of the Group visited all the Youth Encounter Projects⁹⁷ and a number of alternative providers around the country. As part of their work, the group also engaged in extensive stakeholder consultations.⁹⁸ The Department commissioned a consultation with children and young people with 52 young people in total.⁹⁹

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 16 and are supported to reach a Leaving Certificate qualification. 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'.¹⁰⁰ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's guidance in relation to addressing early school leaving states 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'.¹⁰¹

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- 91 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.
- 92 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.
- 93 ESRI, *Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme* (ESRI Research Series 82, 2019)
- 94 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision, Version 2 – October 2022*.
- 95 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision, Version 2 – October 2022*, 10.
- 96 Social Inclusion Unit Department of Education, *Review of Out-of-School Education Provision, Version 2 – October 2022*, 10.
- 97 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. <<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/743aab-high-support-special-schools-youth-encounter-projects-yep-and-childr/>> accessed 03 May 2024
- 98 Various organisations made presentations to the Implementation Group, including the ESRI, INSPIRE, iScoil, TESS, NEPS and the Department of Justice. The implementation group also engaged with other parties including the National Youth Council of Ireland and the National Co-ordinator for Children and Young People's Services Committees.
- 99 Department of Education, *Briefing note on the Implementation of the Recommendations From the Review of out of School Education Provision* (n.d.).
- 100 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 29(1)(a).
- 101 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 20 on the Rights of the Child During Adolescence' (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/20 para 77.

Some alternative education providers are oversubscribed with one, iScoil, stating that despite its growth in student places in the 2022/23 academic year, it still had to turn down 75 suitable referrals.¹⁰² As part of the work of the Implementation Group, there is a need to ensure that all children can access an alternative education placement where it is in their best interests, and there needs to be a focus on ensuring that waiting lists are not long and people do not have to be turned away. 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.

Responses to social diversity

Traveller and Roma Children

Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides that all children have the right to quality education, to enable children to maximise their ability and participate fully in their society.¹⁰³ Indigenous children, which includes Traveller children, are particularly at risk of experiencing serious discrimination in accessing their rights, including in education, contrary to Article 2 of the UNCRC. Therefore, the Committee has found that children from minority backgrounds require special measures to ensure they can fully enjoy their rights.¹⁰⁴ Education is a key enabler of economic, social, and cultural rights, and strengthens access to civil and political rights.¹⁰⁵ The Committee recommended that Ireland amend school admissions legislation, introduce measures that target improving educational outcomes for Roma and Traveller children, and develop the National Traveller Education Strategy.¹⁰⁶

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.¹⁰⁷ As mentioned previously, while the overall attainment level of Irish Travellers increased between 2011 and 2016 and with more Travellers completing secondary school than before, research published in 2020 indicates that many still do not.¹⁰⁸ Comprehensive data on Roma children and young people is lacking, but recent analysis highlights that the number of Roma children attending mainstream and special primary school classes has increased across the 2016 to 2018 period.¹⁰⁹ Given the absence of accurate population numbers, the proportion of Roma children attending primary or secondary school is not available.



102 iScoil, *Annual Report and Financial Statements 31 August 2023* (2023) 5.

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

104 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 11 Indigenous children and their rights under the Convention' (2009) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/11 para 5.

105 UNCRC 'General Comment No. 11 Indigenous children and their rights under the Convention' (2009) UN Doc CRC/C/GC/11 para 57.

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

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

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

109 *ibid* 44.

A 2019 review of the position of Traveller history and culture in the school curriculum undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment concluded that '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.¹¹⁰ In a DCEDIY commissioned study, Traveller parents shared that they were often faced with the challenge of balancing their commitment and desire for their children to acquire a second level education with the continued negative impact on their children's mental health that the participation in school created.¹¹¹ Roma parents also had strong ambitions for their children's participation in school. However, practical barriers related to language, a lack of financial resources, and transport challenged participation.¹¹²

In the context of the Department of Education inviting the *OECD Strength through Diversity: Education for Inclusive Societies Project* to review the current policy approach for the allocation of resources under DEIS, it is worth considering how Travellers and Roma are currently located within the DEIS programme. With the extension of the DEIS programme in March 2022, the percentage of Traveller students in DEIS schools has increased to approximately 65 per cent.¹¹³ Pavee Point has expressed concern regarding how Traveller ethnicity is conceptualised in the new DEIS allocation.¹¹⁴ It is concerned that this classification based on living conditions will be misread as equating to identity. According to Pavee Point, this link to disadvantage and additional education needs, as well as the distorting effect of this on perceptions of Traveller identity, needs to be addressed in the ethnicity questions on primary and post-primary school enrolment forms, in which Traveller ethnicity

is the only ethnicity expressly linked to accessing financial and other supports in the school system.¹¹⁵

A key commitment under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) is that access, participation, and outcomes for Travellers and Roma in education should be improved to achieve outcomes equal to those for the majority population.¹¹⁶ NTRIS includes specific education actions to improve outcomes for children at primary and post primary level including, for example, actions on Traveller culture and history, bullying research, and school admissions.¹¹⁷ On foot of these, a number of actions have been undertaken or commenced to better understand and address the barriers that Traveller and Roma children face in education, including a pilot project aimed at improving Traveller and Roma attendance, participation, and retention in education.¹¹⁸ This 'STAR' pilot began in September 2019 with three sites.¹¹⁹ The project has been extended to June 2024.¹²⁰ The Department of Education has stated that the pilot project has cost circa €1.1 million per year.¹²¹

Each pilot area is being provided with an additional Educational Welfare Officer, funded by the Department of Education via Tusla Education Support Services (TESS), an additional Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator funded by the Department of Education, and two additional Traveller and Roma education workers funded by the DCEDIY.¹²² As well as supporting educational participation and engagement, the aim of the pilot is to increase engagement with parents, schools, and the community, and 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.¹²³

110 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Traveller culture and history in the curriculum: a curriculum audit* (NCCA 2019) 68.

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

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

114 Dr Máirin Kenny, *Travellers and Roma in Education and Training Overview of Provision and Engagement* (Pavee Point and Rethink Ireland 2024) 8.

115 *ibid.*

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

117 *ibid.*

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

119 The first three sites were in Galway, Wexford, and Dublin a fourth site in Cork joined in 2020. The specific areas the pilot covers are Tuam, Bunclody/Enniscorthy, Finglas/Ballymun/Coolock, and Cork. Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 20 January 2021.

120 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 13 December 2023.

121 *ibid.*

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

123 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.

With all sites operational, the pilot is currently available in over 55 schools with approximately 1,400 Traveller and Roma students enrolled.¹²⁴

In the *Programme for Government*, the Government committed to undertake an evaluation of the pilot projects aimed at retaining Traveller and Roma children in education.¹²⁵ The evaluation commenced in May 2023.¹²⁶ A Research Advisory Group with Traveller and Roma representation was established to support the evaluation, with the group's feedback on the design and implementation of the evaluation being taken into account.¹²⁷ The evaluation team is currently progressing fieldwork across the four STAR pilot sites, which includes qualitative data collection through focus groups, surveys, and interviews with children and young people, parents of those in the project, and with STAR teams.¹²⁸

It is positive to see that the independent evaluation of the pilot projects has been progressing. The Department of Education have confirmed that the research is due to conclude in April 2024.¹²⁹ The pilot was a key outcome of the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021* and could have a significant impact on children and young people from marginalised communities. While the pilot supports have been extended to June 2024,¹³⁰ it is crucial that the independent evaluation is completed and published without any further delay and that the learnings from the pilot project can be implemented and extended to more regions and be considered in the development of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.

The consultation phase for the development of a Traveller and Roma Education Strategy began in July 2023.¹³¹ Phase one of the consultation consisted of an initial online survey open to members of the public.¹³² This public consultation ran until October with 424 responses.¹³³ A targeted consultation phase has now

commenced which involves three main strands: Traveller and Roma families and communities, children and young people, and the education system.¹³⁴ As part of this, the Department of Education has worked with Hub na nÓg on consulting with Traveller and Roma young people.¹³⁵ The Department has identified, as part of the work of the Oireachtas Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, that it is working in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in the context of the NTRIS and in developing the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.¹³⁶ It is expected that the Department will have a draft Education Strategy for the three Ministers involved by the end of Quarter 2 of 2024.¹³⁷

Responding to the Education needs of Children and Young People arriving from Ukraine

The UNCRC requires States to assist all children seeking refugee status or who are considered refugees and ensure that they can access the full range of convention rights, including the right to education.¹³⁸ The Committee on the Rights of the Child latest report on Ireland in 2023 recommended that children seeking asylum should have access to social services, including education.¹³⁹ The Reception Conditions Directive which applies to Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection (BOTP) from Ukraine states that a recipient who is a minor shall have access to primary and post-primary education in the same way an Irish minor does. It also states they shall be provided with support services and language supports to facilitate their access to education.¹⁴⁰

124 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 13 December 2023.

125 Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government, Our Shared Future* (Government Publications 2020) 77.

126 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 13 December 2023.

127 *ibid.*

128 *ibid.*

129 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 6 February 2024.

130 *ibid.*

131 *ibid.*

132 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 6 February 2024.

133 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 13 December 2023.

134 *ibid.*

135 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Education on 6 February 2024.

136 Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community (2023) debate - Thursday, 11 Apr 2024 (oireachtas.ie)

137 *ibid.*

138 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/ RES/44/25 (20 November 1989) Art 22.

139 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 40.

140 European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, SI 230/2018 reg 17.

In April 2024, there were 18,268 enrolments of Ukraine BOTP's in school: 11,348 primary enrolments and 6,920 secondary enrolments.¹⁴¹ Regional Education and Language Teams (REALTs) were established by the Department of Education in 2022 to support the needs of children arriving in Ireland from Ukraine. REALTs works to provide access to education for school-aged children and young people and to provide support both to their families and to the schools in which they are enrolled.¹⁴² REALTs also advise and support the Department in developing new capacity where required, and in co-ordinating the provision of education services to schools and families.¹⁴³ The remit of REALTs was extended in November 2022 and includes support for both non-Ukrainian arrivals in the International Protection system and children under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).¹⁴⁴

The Department of Education provides supports to schools for students with English as an additional language (EAL).¹⁴⁵ Every school has a defined special education teaching (SET) allocation to support teaching and learning, based on the school's educational profile. This SET allocation is used by schools to provide additional support for children and young people who have identified special educational needs (SEN), and for EAL.¹⁴⁶ There are challenges within this allocation model, however, with EAL being coupled with Special Education Teaching allocation. The greater recognition of special educational needs and increased diagnosis and prevalence rates in the education system means that EAL support is inadequate to meet the need under SET allocation.¹⁴⁷ It is also important not to conflate EAL with special educational needs, as this can lead to misconceptions

regarding the abilities, potential and appropriate supports for children and young people learning EAL.¹⁴⁸

There are however outstanding issues impeding adequate access to education. In the same report the Inspectorate stated that 68 per cent of schools had only 50-74% attendance, with that figure rising to 85 per cent at primary school level.¹⁴⁹ The Inspectorate found these figures unsatisfactory.¹⁵⁰ Attendance levels can be poor when Ukrainian students are trying to engage with the Ukraine education curriculum online as well as attend school in Ireland.¹⁵¹ There is also an issue where children and families are moved to a new accommodation centre far away from the school they are attending at short notice. It can take time for another school place to be found and sometimes students drop out of school.¹⁵²

Of current concern is the change in government policy introduced in March 2024, whereby anyone fleeing the war in Ukraine who registers for temporary protection and is looking for State-provided accommodation in Ireland will be accommodated for a maximum of 90 days in designated accommodation centres.¹⁵³ While parents are free to register their children in schools during this period. REALT teams have been instructed not to support their placement during this time. 90 days outside the education system is a long period of time for children and young people who have already had a disrupted education. This policy is not in the best interests and does not support their right to access education.

141 Department of Education press release, *Department of Education confirms 18,268 Ukrainian pupils currently enrolled in Irish schools* <bit.ly/3w1tk8D> accessed 16 April 2024.

142 Department of Education, *Educational Provision for Children from Ukraine, International Protection Applicants and Children with Recognised Status* (DoE 2023) 3.

143 Department of Education, *Educational Provision for Children from Ukraine, International Protection Applicants and Children with Recognised Status* (DoE 2023) 3.

144 Department of Education, Letter to School Principals 15 December 2022 <bit.ly/43WYFQe> accessed 16 April 2024.

145 Department of Education, *Educational Provision for Children from Ukraine, International Protection Applicants and Children with Recognised Status* (DoE 2023) 4.

146 Ibid 4.

147 Department of Education Inspectorate, *Meeting Additional Language Needs: Whole-school and Classroom Approaches for Inclusive Language Learning* (DoE 2024) 3.

148 Department of Education Inspectorate, *Meeting Additional Language Needs: Whole-school and Classroom Approaches for Inclusive Language Learning* (DoE 2024) 3.

149 Ibid 22.

150 Ibid 28.

151 Ibid 23 and Department of Education, *Supporting children and young people from Ukraine, enrolled in post primary schools, who wish to engage online with the Ukrainian curriculum* (DoE 2023) 3.

152 The Children's Rights Alliance have heard this from our members and information received from organisations working directly with Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection.

153 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Changes to accommodation for people fleeing war in Ukraine* <bit.ly/4d07vR8> accessed 17 April 2024.

Recommendations

Budget 2025

- Extend free school books scheme to senior cycle in secondary school. This could be introduced on a phased basis with specific targets for DEIS and non-DEIS schools.
- Develop an enhanced suite of supports, an enhanced DEIS programme (or DEIS-Plus), for schools situated in areas experiencing intergenerational persistent poverty including multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) and counsellors providing direct one-to-one therapeutic supports.
- The Department of Education needs to publish a timeline for the conclusion of the evaluation of the STAR project as a matter of priority.
- Publish the findings from the public consultation on a Traveller and Roma Education Strategy and develop the Strategy without delay.
- Expand the Home School Community Liaison programme to non-DEIS schools on a phased basis. This could include appointing a HSCL Coordinator to a cluster of non-DEIS schools in order to maximise the impact this work can have in a community.
- Increase the number of Educational Welfare Officers by 30 WTE adequately resource the services of TESS and to promote an early intervention approach to tackling educational disadvantage.
- Increase school capitation rates to align with school running costs year on year to ensure schools are no longer reliant on contributions from parents to meet day-to-day running costs

Medium-term

- DCEDIY, Department of Education, the Realts and city/county childcare committees should take action to raise awareness among Ukrainian parents, and among international protection applicants with young children, of the ECCE programme.
- Schools where there is poor attendance by children and young people from Ukraine should introduce targeted supports to improve attendance rates.
- 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.
- The Government should consider growing and expanding funding for out-of-school education provision to ensure a child-centred approach to education by providing alternatives best suited to the individual child up to completion of second level education.

Spotlight

FREE SCHOOL BOOKS SCHEME

Introduction

Access to education can help break the cycle of poverty for children and young people as it can open the door to a world of opportunities for physical, emotional, mental and social development and nurture a child's aspirations or self-concept. However, the cost of education in Ireland can be a significant barrier for many children, particularly those in or at risk of poverty and deprivation. A survey by Barnardos in 2022 found that parents of children in 4th class in primary school were spending an average of €424 on back-to-school costs, with books (at €124) making up almost a third of the total cost of education.¹⁵⁴ Looking at the cost of back-to-school for older children, at post-primary level school books represented the biggest pressure point for parents of 1st and 5th year students, and in 2023 cost €232 and €234 respectively.¹⁵⁵

Free School Books Scheme

In Budget 2020, the Government took its first step towards realising this goal, with the introduction of a Free School Books pilot scheme for €1 million.¹⁵⁶ The pilot was to be administered by 102 primary schools in 2020-2021 school year. In the last two Budgets the Government has built on the success of this pilot.

In Budget 2023, free school books were introduced for all children in the free primary school system.¹⁵⁷ The scheme, which provides funding directly to recognised primary and special schools, eliminates school book costs for the families of all children attending these schools. Through this funding, schools purchase books and other resources for their classrooms.¹⁵⁸



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

155 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).

156 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).

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

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

The impact of the first year of the scheme at primary level was immediate, with St Vincent DePaul Ireland reporting a 20% drop in calls for support at the start of the academic year in 2022.¹⁵⁹

In Budget 2024, Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD secured a further €68 million to expand the scheme to Junior Cycle students at second level.¹⁶⁰ To see the scheme expanded to post-primary is an important action in addressing child poverty. As children grow and progress through the education system, costs increase significantly. For first-year students in post-primary, the most recent Barnardos Back to School Survey found the average back to school cost increases to a staggering €972 per student, with €232 needed to cover the cost of school books alone.¹⁶¹ When you consider the reality of life for families relying on very low-incomes, struggling to provide the basic essentials, this cost can very easily push them below the poverty line. The provision of free school books is a massive weight off their shoulders.

What do we need to see next?

We know that the Free School Books Scheme is an effective measure to tackle child poverty. The momentum behind the scheme and the sustained commitment made by Government has seen the scheme grow from a pilot to a guarantee that benefits over three quarters of a million students. It is essential that Government delivers the final phase of this milestone initiative by expanding the scheme to Senior Cycle in Budget 2025.



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

160 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces details of a new scheme to eliminate the cost of schoolbooks for families of Junior Cycle students', Press Release 5 March 2024.

161 Barnardos, 'Back to School 2023' (Barnardos 2023).



Health



ACCESS TO QUALITY HEALTH SERVICES

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ In March 2024, the Concluding Observations of Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) drew attention to the disparities in access to health care services for different socio-economic groups and called on Ireland to take further action by expanding the scope and coverage, and improving the quality, of *Sláintecare* services.⁵

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'.⁶ It recommends Member States should tackle barriers to healthcare for families and children in poverty such as those related to cost and

information.⁷ Prevention strategies for early childhood should be inclusive of needs around nutrition, health and social measures.⁸ Children with disabilities or mental health difficulties should be given special attention along with undocumented children, teen parents and families with substance abuse issues.⁹

In July 2023, the Department of An Taoiseach published the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office work plan.¹⁰ It includes a focus on consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services. The latter includes supporting the commitment contained in *First 5 - A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*¹¹ to develop a dedicated child health workforce.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Given these findings it is critical that Irish health policy provides for specific targeted interventions to support children who experience disadvantage.

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

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 29.

4 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 30.

5 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 45.

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

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

This section focuses on primary health care services – such as access to free GP care and the public health nurse service and the promotion of breastfeeding. Given the financial barriers to accessing private healthcare and therapy services for children living in poverty, it examines the availability of public health services for children with a disability and those needing mental health supports.

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.¹⁶

In 2017, the expansion of primary care services, including the introduction of universal free GP care was recommended under *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.¹⁷ Funding was allocated in Budget 2022, and recommitted in Budget 2023,¹⁸ to cover the first of three phases of expansion.¹⁹ This initial phase focuses on providing free GP care to all children under 8 years of age. From 11 August 2023, the GP visit card was introduced for six and seven year olds.²⁰ The timing for subsequent phases of expansion, to eight and nine year olds and ten to twelve year olds is yet to be announced.

While the commitment to provide universal GP care for all children on a phased basis is welcome, a full Medical Card is essential for those in low-income households. This ensures access to more extensive

primary care services such as optical and aural services, prescriptions, and out-patient health services and medical appliances.²¹ Medical Card holders may also be exempt from paying school transport charges and exam fees.²²

As the full Medical Card is a targeted support, recipients generally must satisfy a means test.²³ 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.²⁴ However, those on low incomes from a combination of work and social welfare may not meet the criteria for qualification. This is due to the inadequacy of the income thresholds 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 €342.50²⁵ per week while the poverty line for this household in 2023 was calculated by Social Justice Ireland to have been €738.98.²⁶ 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.²⁷ Given the substantial costs incurred by families of children in hospital²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

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

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

19 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).

20 Department of Health, 'Minister for Health encourages families to register for free GP care for children aged 6 and 7' (Press Release, 11 August 2023).

21 Citizens Information 'Medical Cards' <<https://bit.ly/3ivgLAe>> accessed 2 May 2024.

22 *ibid.*

23 *ibid.*

24 *ibid.*

25 *ibid.*

26 Social Justice Ireland, *Poverty Focus 2023* (Social Justice Ireland 2023).

27 Citizens Information, 'Services for medical card and GP visit card holders', <https://bit.ly/4bmbPIV> accessed 3 May 2024.

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

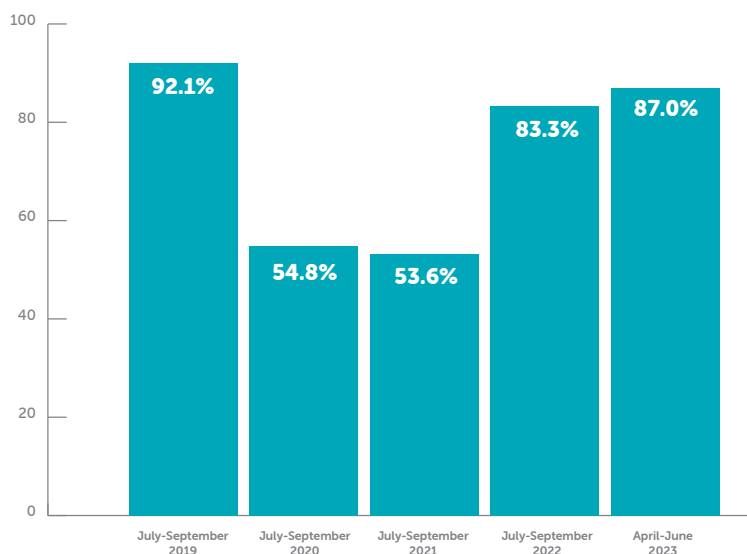
29 Department of Health, 'Minister for Health announces abolition of public in-patient charges for children under 16' (Press Release 21 September 2022).

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.³⁰ *Investing in Children* calls for investment in prevention for children's early years which includes health and social measures.³¹ Public health nurses play a critical role in advising and supporting parents and referring families to other interventions.³² They are a consistent point of contact for parents and children in the first 3 years of a child's life³³ 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, recruitment challenges and the implications of a generalist model of public health nursing.³⁴ The number of Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) posts have yet to return to their pre-pandemic levels. The latest figures indicate that there continues to be a fall in the workforce numbers from 1,537 WTE pre-pandemic in December 2019 to 1,494 WTE in September 2023.³⁵ A lower number of public health nurses means that some areas need to put a system in place to prioritise patients with the greatest needs.³⁶ 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.³⁷

Percentage of babies receiving developmental checks



Source: HSE Performance Reports (various years). **Note:** In 2019 and 2020 the figures capture the percentage of babies receiving their developmental checks within 10 months. Figures for 2021, 2022 and 2023 capture the percentage receiving this check within 12 months.

The reduced level of contact with new-born babies and their parents meant that just 54.8 per cent received their developmental screening within 10 months between July and September 2020.³⁸ This had fallen to 53.6 per cent in the same period in 2021.³⁹ Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, the rate was 92 per cent.⁴⁰ In the past two years there are indications that developmental screening checks returned to the level of activity in 2019. The latest available data relates to April to June 2023 when 87 per cent received their developmental assessment within 12 months,⁴¹ an increase on the rate of 83.3 per cent in 2022.⁴² While rates are showing much improvement from 2020 and 2021 they are still below the HSE's target of 95 per cent.⁴³ The community-based nature of this service

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

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

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

33 *ibid.*

34 *ibid.*

35 HSE, *Management Data Report September 2023* < <https://bit.ly/4daSU5M> > accessed 22 April 2024.

36 Niamh Griffin, 'HSE 'prioritise' infant checks amid shortage of public health nurse' *The Irish Examiner* (Cork, 7 November 2022).

37 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).

38 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2020* (HSE 2020) 21.

39 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2021* (HSE 2021) 25.

40 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2019* (HSE 2019) 21.

41 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April – June 2023* (HSE 2023) 40.

42 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile July – September 2022* (HSE 2022) 22.

43 Health Service Executive, *Performance Profile April – June 2023* (HSE 2023) 40.

meant that any interactions with the service during the pandemic varied based on where families live.⁴⁴ There is continued evidence of geographic disparity in 2023 with one CHO area reaching the target of 95 per cent (CHO8) while the lowest performing area only achieved 81.6 per cent (CHO7).⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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'.⁴⁸

This commitment is reinforced in the initial work plan of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office at the Department of An Taoiseach.⁴⁹

Promotion of Breastfeeding

As part of *Investing in Children's* call for prioritisation of prevention measures in early childhood is a focus on nutrition.⁵⁰ 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 provides the best source of nutritious food to the infant while also providing the best defence against malnutrition and diseases.⁵¹

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's *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.⁵² 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 2022,⁵³ and now until the end of 2025.⁵⁴ An evaluation of the plan is currently underway, which will inform future work to promote and support and increase breastfeeding rates.⁵⁵

According to the Irish Maternity Indicator System, in 2022, 63.6 per cent of babies were breastfed following birth.⁵⁶ Exclusive breastfeeding (i.e. without any additional supplementary food or drink) was 37.6 per cent while non-exclusive breastfeeding was 23.2 per cent prior to discharge.⁵⁷ In 2021, over half of infants

44 Sheila Wayman, 'Child development checks in a time of pandemic', *The Irish Times*, 24 March 2021.

45 Health Service Executive, Performance Profile April – June 2023 (HSE 2023) 40.

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

47 *ibid.*

48 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 – 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018) 160.

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

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

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

52 HSE, *Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland – HSE Action Plan 2016-2021* (HSE 2016).

53 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].

54 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Hildegard Naughton TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Promotion 9 April 2024 [1340, 1341, 1342, 1343, 1344, 1345, 1347/ 24].

55 Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and National Drugs Strategy, Hildegard Naughton TD, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Health Promotion 9 April 2024 [1340, 1341, 1342, 1343, 1344, 1345, 1347/ 24].

56 HSE, *Irish Maternity Indicator System National Report 2022* (HSE 2023) 20-21.

57 HSE, *Irish Maternity Indicator System National Report 2022* (HSE 2023) 20-21.

had received infant formula, or were combination fed or fully formula fed by their third day of life.⁵⁸

A report published by the HSE in 2017 found that socioeconomic status is a factor in breastfeeding.⁵⁹ Younger mothers and those in lower socioeconomic groups were less likely to be breastfeeding on discharge from hospital, while older mothers from higher socioeconomic groups were more likely to still be breastfeeding.⁶⁰

The World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative (WBTi) published their first *Assessment Report on Ireland* in November 2023. The report gave Ireland a score of 56 out of 100 based on an assessment of ten different areas. Ireland scored highest in national policy, governance, and funding, but received a score of zero in the area of infant and young child feeding during emergencies.⁶¹ The report notes that Ireland does not routinely collect data on many areas such as: initiation of breastfeeding (within 1 hour); exclusive breastfeeding under 6 months; median duration of breastfeeding; bottle-feeding (0-12 months); and complementary feeding (6-8 months).⁶² The report makes multiple recommendations including improved communication and awareness strategies, improved education for healthcare professionals and support for expectant mothers, and an infant and young child feeding in emergencies preparedness plan.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ Special

attention should be given to children with a disability according to *Investing in Children*.⁶⁵

The lack of availability of services for children with a disability was the top finding from a survey of over 1,000 parents conducted by Inclusion Ireland in 2022.⁶⁶ Included in the issues highlighted by families participating in the survey was communication from the HSE indicating that a required service would not be delivered for two years.⁶⁷ In a separate conducted by Inclusion Ireland in 2023, family members of disabled children in 2023 said that access to services remained one of three top priorities.⁶⁸

Over a decade ago the process of re-configuring the delivery of disability services began. The final Disability Network Team was reconfigured in December 2021.⁶⁹ While the reconfiguration of services is complete, parents report difficulties with staff turnover and gaps in terms of professionals on the team.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ The Census found that despite an allocation of 2,102.62 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) staff members, there were 1,395.30 roles filled resulting in 707.32 vacancies.⁷² Of the posts filled 1,183.01 were therapy or clinical roles.⁷³ Across the nine CHO areas the vacancy rate varied from a high of 43 per cent to a low of 19 per cent.⁷⁴ A large proportion of the vacancies were in various stages of recruitment (560.62), on the day the Census was taken.⁷⁵ Given these challenges with staffing it is not surprising that over 18,000 children were waiting for an initial contact from a CDNT with over 50 per

58 World Breastfeeding Trends initiative (WBTi), *Assessment Report for Ireland 2023* (WBTi 2023) 14.

59 HSE, *Breastfeeding on the island of Ireland*, (HSE 2017) 4.

60 HSE, *Breastfeeding on the island of Ireland*, (HSE 2017) 4.

61 World Breastfeeding Trends initiative (WBTi), *Assessment Report for Ireland 2023* (WBTi 2023)94.

62 *ibid* 95.

63 *ibid* 10.

64 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art 23.

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

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

67 *ibid*.

68 Inclusion Ireland, *Budget Submission 2024*, (Inclusion Ireland 2023) 4.

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

70 *ibid*.

71 Children's Disability Network Team, 'Children's Disability Network Teams Staff Census and Workforce Review' (HSE 2022).

72 Children's Disability Network Team, 'Children's Disability Network Teams Staff Census and Workforce Review' (HSE 2022) 3.

73 Children's Disability Network Team, 'Children's Disability Network Teams Staff Census and Workforce Review' (HSE 2022).

74 Children's Disability Network Team, 'Children's Disability Network Teams Staff Census and Workforce Review' (HSE 2022) 8.

75 Children's Disability Network Team, 'Children's Disability Network Teams Staff Census and Workforce Review' (HSE 2022) 32.

cent waiting for this contact for over 12 months in December 2022.⁷⁶ In July 2023 the situation had partially improved with almost 15,000 waiting on an initial contact but 63 per cent of these were waiting for over 12 months.⁷⁷

According to data from the HSE, in July 2023 there were almost 17,000 children on the waiting lists for speech and language therapy, with over 2,700 waiting for over a year.⁷⁸ There was over 16,827 children waiting on psychological therapy, and 15,477 waiting on occupational therapy.⁷⁹ Of those children waiting for psychology services, over 6,500 are waiting greater than a year.⁸⁰ Over 6,000 children were waiting over a year for occupational therapy.⁸¹

Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) working in and around schools are a feature of many European school systems and key to addressing complex needs of children and their families.⁸² The composition of the MDTs may vary depending on the location and context of the school and the services available in its community. At its core, however, an MDT comprises of Social Care Practitioners, Specialist Counsellors/Therapists, and Speech and Language Therapists. Family Outreach Workers, Occupational Therapists, and Nurses could also be considered depending on the context and needs presenting.

In October 2023, the HSE published a *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People*.⁸³ The roadmap sets out 60 actions across five key areas including dedicated and specific actions on workforce focused on retention, development and recruitment.⁸⁴

This includes setting up governance structures to monitor and report on progress on the roadmap; specific actions to improve access to CDNT services; engagement with professionals in education and support in special schools and actions related to communications with children and their families. Progress on the achievement will be published each quarter on the HSE's website.⁸⁵

Improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children — Ensure that all children can make full use of their universal right to health care.

Mental health

Investing in Children calls for improved responsiveness of health systems for disadvantaged children and ensure all children have a right to healthcare with particular attention to those children mental health difficulties.⁸⁶ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affords every child the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.⁸⁷ 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'.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ The Committee urged the Irish State to increase its

76 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 17 February 2023 [5784/23], <https://bit.ly/4aWmH0i> accessed 3 May 2024.

77 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 14 September 2023 [5784/23] <https://bit.ly/3UL3kkb> accessed 3 May 2024.

78 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 October 2023 [39498/23] <https://bit.ly/4b1BW0C> accessed 3 May 2024.

79 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 October 2023 [39498/23] <https://bit.ly/4b1BW0C> accessed 3 May 2024.

80 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 October 2023 [39498/23] <https://bit.ly/4b1BW0C> accessed 3 May 2024.

81 Health Service Executive, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, 4 October 2023 [39498/23] <https://bit.ly/4b1BW0C> accessed 3 May 2024.

82 Nunan, S. & Downes, P., *Introduction to Joint Conference*, INTO (Irish National Teachers Organisation) and Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College: *Review of DEIS: Poverty and Social Inclusion in Education, December 5th, 2015*, <<https://bit.ly/3Wm4J2X>> accessed on 3 May 2024

83 HSE *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People* (HSE 2023).

84 HSE *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People* (HSE 2023).

85 HSE *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 -2026 Disability Services for Children and Young People* (HSE 2023) 6.

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

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

88 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.

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

resources in this area as well as ensuring that the number of mental health professionals meet the needs of children.⁹⁰

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,⁹¹ including domestic abuse,⁹² children living in poverty,⁹³ children who have experienced discrimination, including homophobia or transphobia,⁹⁴ and children with chronic physical health conditions.⁹⁵ For many children living in poverty, their restricted resources mean that they cannot access services privately and are reliant on public services. The increased need being placed on an overstretched Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), meant that there were 3,911 children on a waiting list for CAMHS services in July 2023.⁹⁶ Research in the United Kingdom exploring young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services found that all participants expressed in some form an inability to function sufficiently and the emergence of negative beliefs, emotions and thoughts while waiting to access mental health services.⁹⁷ Ensuring that all children under 18 years have equitable and timely access to age-appropriate, quality mental health treatment and services is key to avoiding such negative outcomes.

Ensuring that children and young people have access to emotional support and/or counselling provision on site in their schools, means that children and young people can avail of the supports as part of their regular school day. At post-primary level the Minister for Education has announced her intention for the Department, through NEPS, to tender for an appropriate service to provide mental health supports across schools.⁹⁸ The tender will invite suitable providers to work closely with the Department of Education over a two/three-year period to develop and deliver additional supports to complement existing systems and structures in post-primary schools for wellbeing and mental health.⁹⁹ It is hoped that the contract for this will be awarded and work will commence by July 2024.¹⁰⁰

90 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 32.

91 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.

92 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).

93 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).

94 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).

95 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).

96 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 13 December 2023.

97 Punton G, Dodd AL, McNeill A 'You're on the waiting list': An interpretive phenomenological analysis of young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services in the UK' PLoS ONE 17(3): e0265542 (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0265542>> accessed 02 August 2022.

98 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces funding for wellbeing and mental health supports in post-primary schools', (Press Release 3 April 2024).

99 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces funding for wellbeing and mental health supports in post-primary schools', (Press Release 3 April 2024).

100 Department of Education, 'Minister Foley announces funding for wellbeing and mental health supports in post-primary schools', (Press Release 3 April 2024).

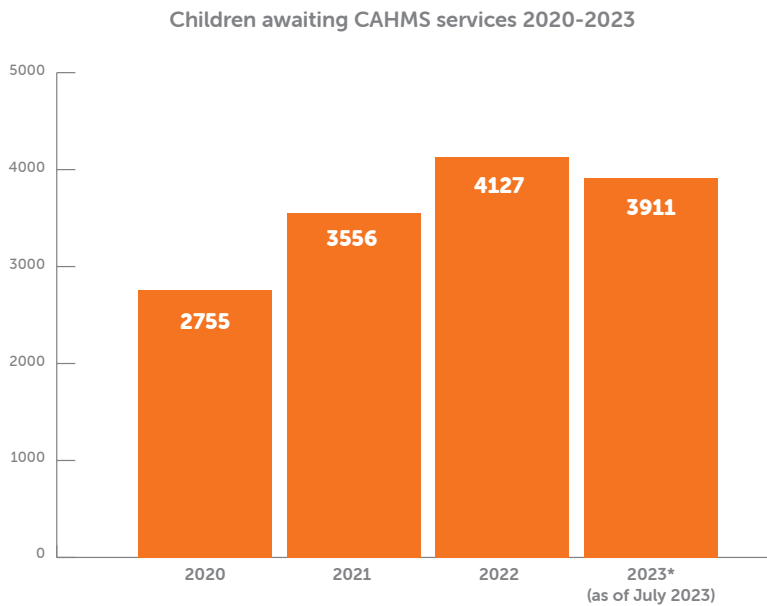


Fig 1. Statistics are taken from HSE reply to Donnchadh O Laoghaire T.D. 16 September 2022 [42660/22] and Communication received by the Children’s Rights Alliance from the Department of Health on 13 December 2023.

The total allocation in Budget 2024 for mental health services is over €1.3 billion which provides an increase of €100 million in funding to enable additional CAMHS staff recruitment.¹⁰¹ One of the challenges in meeting the demand for services is the limited number of newly qualified psychologists that graduate each year due to an inadequate number of post-graduate training places.¹⁰² In the run up to Budget 2024 the Psychological Society of Ireland estimated that a modest investment of €2.52m per year for five years would help increase the workforce by providing funding for an additional 50 trainee psychology posts across existing professional doctoral programmes.¹⁰³ This would help to address the gaps in the psychological workforce. In the interim qualification period these individuals could work under supervision and increase capacity within existing public services. Given the greater risk that children in poverty have of experiencing poor mental health,¹⁰⁴ combined with the financial barriers to accessing services privately, it is critical that investment and actions to build high quality public services are prioritised.

101 Department of Health, ‘Minister for Mental Health and Older People announces further funding increase for mental health and older persons in Budget 2024’ Press Release (12 October 2023) < <https://bitly.ws/3bhkK> > accessed 30 January 2024.

102 Psychological Society of Ireland, *Pre-budget Submission 2024 Fund Ireland’s Children’s Psychological Future* < <https://bit.ly/44aMzTz> > accessed 20 April 2024.

103 Psychological Society of Ireland, *Pre-budget Submission 2024 Fund Ireland’s Children’s Psychological Future* < <https://bit.ly/44aMzTz> > accessed 20 April 2024.

104 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).

Recommendations

Budget 2025

- 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.
- Invest in creating a dedicated public health nurse service for children and develop a strategy for 'home visits' to ensure every child has access to the prevention and early intervention supports they deserve in their own community.

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.
- Prioritise the development of a seven-days CAHMS service nationwide.
- In the medium term realise the commitment to extend the GP Medical Card to under 12s.
- Prioritise the development of a new Breastfeeding Strategy and Action Plan and consider the inclusion of specific actions around robust data collections and the promotion of Breastfeeding amongst groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Long-term Sustainable Solutions

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



Housing and Homelessness



HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

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'.¹ 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'. The Committee called for the phasing out of emergency accommodation and increase the supply of long-term social housing.² In the context of children who are members 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.³ The Concluding Observations on Ireland's review under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, published in March 2024, draws a further spotlight on Ireland's failures in relation to homelessness. The Committee raises concerns about the 'persistence of homelessness' and the lack of measures to protect tenants in poverty, along with the absence of 'culturally appropriate housing for Travellers and Roma'.⁴

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 negative physical, mental, and behavioural health outcomes, with the duration of homelessness compounding and elevating the risk of adverse outcomes.⁵ Children who experience homelessness are also more likely to have developmental and learning delays, and poorer academic attainment.⁶

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).⁷ Socio-emotional difficulties and lower prosocial behaviour is found to be connected to disorderly neighbourhoods.⁸ 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.⁹

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'.¹⁰ Achieving this requires actions which address affordability, quality accommodation, and issues related to 'environmental hazards, overcrowding and energy poverty'.¹¹ 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.¹² Taking each of these aspects of the *Investing in Children* recommendation this section considers the gaps and solutions in Irish housing policy.¹³

- 1 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.
- 2 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 35.
- 3 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 42.
- 4 UNCESCR, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2024) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/4, para 40.
- 5 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.
- 6 Saskia D'Sa et al, 'The psychological impact of childhood homelessness—a literature review' (2020) *Irish Journal of Medical Science*.
- 7 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023).
- 8 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023).
- 9 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, *Housing Adequacy and Child Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood*, (ESRI 2023).
- 10 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.
- 13 European Commission, Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) 8.

Affordability

Housing costs often comprise the largest proportion of expenditure in household budgets.¹⁴ The percentage of income that goes on housing can impact on a household's consumption of other goods and services, and, subsequently, economic growth.¹⁵ Households who have particular challenges with affordability include those renting privately and those on low incomes.¹⁶ Low-income households pay between two-fifths and half of their income on housing versus just one-fifth for the general population.¹⁷

Low income households pay between two-fifths and half of their income on housing.



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.¹⁸

While 10.6 per cent of the population were at risk of poverty in 2023 this jumped to 17.9 per cent after rent and mortgage interest are taken into consideration. For children under 18 years of age, the rate increased from 14.3 per cent to 24.3 per cent respectively, while 44.5 per cent of one-parent families were at risk of poverty after rent and mortgage interest.¹⁹

Table 1: At risk of poverty rate compared with at risk of poverty rate after rent or mortgage interest²⁰

	Population	0-17 years	1 adult with children under 18
At risk of poverty rate	10.6	14.3	19.2
At risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest	17.9	24.3	44.5

Source: CSO, Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2023

14 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.

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 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.

17 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.

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

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

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

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.²¹ Households who are on their local authority's housing list can qualify for help with their rent through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP²²). In November 2023, 36 per cent (20,932) of all households that were identified as needing housing support and on the social housing list included children.²³ This was a decrease of 154 households based on the 2022 figures.²⁴

The provision of HAP has increasingly become a primary means to support low-income households address affordability in the private rental sector.²⁵ In certain other circumstances, such as families who have been victims of domestic violence, Rent Supplement is available as a short-term support.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ This was introduced following the completion of an analytical exercise to examine the level of discretion available to local authorities needed to maintain adequate levels of HAP support.²⁹ While this is a welcome measure, it relates to discretionary practice and the HAP limits have not increased since 2017 despite substantial increases in market rents during this period.³⁰

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. Prior to the introduction of the discretionary increase in, evidence indicated that not all households who would benefit from accessing a higher rate of HAP are actually receiving it.³¹ Furthermore, in September 2022, there were no properties available to rent within the standard HAP limits for any household type and just 35 available within the new discretionary rates.³² In March 2024, the position had marginally improved with 38 properties available within the HAP limits (three of these were within the standard HAP rate).³³ However, overall, there is a major dearth of availability of HAP properties which makes up just 3 per cent of the availability in the private rental market in December 2023.³⁴ Separately, a review of the up to 50 per cent discretion applied to Homeless HAP tenancies in Dublin is being undertaken by the Housing Agency in conjunction with the Department.³⁵

Local authorities may permit a tenant to pay a 'top-up' to their landlord, a payment which is in addition to their differential rent.³⁶ The payment of a 'top-up' is permitted if the local authority deems the payment affordable for the household and as long as they are not spending more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.³⁷ 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.³⁸ Charities working with vulnerable families have highlighted increased risk of poverty and homelessness as a

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

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

23 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2023 – Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2024), 33.

24 The Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2023 – Key Findings* (The Housing Agency 2024), 33.

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

26 Citizens Information 'Rent Supplement' <<https://bit.ly/311PHGv>> accessed 29 June 2022.

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

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

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

30 Daft.ie, The Daft.ie Rental Price Report - An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2023 Q3, 8 <https://bit.ly/3UpPxR8> accessed 29 January 2024.

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

32 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* (Simon Communities 2022).

33 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* – March 2024 (Simon Communities 2024).

34 Simon Communities of Ireland *Locked Out of the Market* – March 2024 (Simon Communities 2024).

35 Communications received from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 12 January 2024.

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

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

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

prominent impact resulting from paying 'top ups' on their rent.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ This exposes families to a greater risk of poverty as further evidenced in the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). Households renting with such forms of social housing support have an at risk of poverty rate of 12 per cent but this rises to 58.6 per cent after rent or mortgage interest.⁴¹ The corresponding figures for those in owner occupied housing are 6.5 per cent and 7.2 per cent respectively.⁴² A study on housing affordability found that in 2021 those supported by subsidies such as HAP had an average rent to income ratio of 15 per cent, but the absence of those supports would raise this to an average of 43 per cent.⁴³

Households renting with such forms of social housing support have an at risk of poverty rate of 12 per cent but this rises to 58.6 per cent after rent or mortgage interest.

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.⁴⁴ Discrimination based on the use of these supports is prohibited under the Equal Status Acts,⁴⁵

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 grounds, versus just 14 decisions on the nine other grounds of discrimination on cases related to the private rental sector over the same period.⁴⁶ This indicates that this is a comparatively highly prevalent issue.⁴⁷ An analysis of 97 cases from this time period shows that in 56 cases, the claim of discrimination was upheld. This is at a rate of 58 per cent.⁴⁸

Ensuring access to quality housing

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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

In general, a large proportion of the housing stock in Ireland was built post 1980.⁵¹ 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.⁵² Analysis of SILC data in 2018 indicates that almost one quarter of homes built before 1940 'had two or more quality problems compared to 5 to 6 per

39 Society of St Vincent de Paul, 'SVP Observations on the Homelessness-related aspects of the Housing Act', (SVP 2023)

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

41 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO, 2024).

42 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023* (CSO, 2024).

43 Wendy Disch and Rachel Slaymaker, 'Housing Affordability: Ireland in a Cross-Country Context', (ESRI 2023).

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

45 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.

46 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), 7.

47 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), 7.

48 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), 15.

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

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

51 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021), 125-126.

52 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021), 127.

cent for those built in 1991'.⁵³ Overcrowding is also experienced by less than six per cent of all households in the general population.⁵⁴

Traveller and Roma Families

Ethnicity has been identified as a strong variable in terms of overcrowding.⁵⁵ For Irish Traveller households overcrowding is a significant issue, with 40 per cent living in overcrowded accommodation.⁵⁶

For Irish Traveller households overcrowding is a significant issue, with 40 per cent living in overcrowded accommodation.

The latest data shows there are over 200,000 children living in homes that have issues with leaks, damp, and rot.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ Approximately 1,700 Traveller families are living in inadequate, unsafe, and impermanent conditions.⁵⁹ 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).⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ In addition, 311 families were living on

unauthorised sites, and 218 of these families have no access to any services at all.⁶²

Further evidence of the poor quality of accommodation Traveller children are exposed to was highlighted by the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), who published an investigation report *No End in Site*.⁶³ 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 had not been removed, and arriving to school with dirty clothes and shoes because the route they took was muddy and full of water.⁶⁴ 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 needs⁶⁵. 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.⁶⁶ The Department granted Stage 2 approval for the redevelopment of this halting site in January 2024 with a budget provision of €17.9 million.⁶⁷

There are further signs of progress, with funding provided for Traveller-specific accommodation fully drawn down by Local Authorities in 2020,⁶⁸ and in subsequent years. The full draw down in funding in 2020 was the first time this occurred since 2014.⁶⁹ Since 2020, the budget allocation has continued

53 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021), 126.

54 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021), 129.

55 Helen Russell, Ivan Privalko, Frances McGinnity & Shannen Enright, *Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland* (ESRI 2021), 128-130.

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

57 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.

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

59 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.

60 *ibid.*

61 *ibid.*

62 *ibid.*

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

64 *ibid.*

65 *ibid.*

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

67 Communication from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 9 February 2024.

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

69 Kitty Holland, 'Almost €15m spent on Traveller housing, the largest annual spend in decades' *The Irish Times*, 23 December 2020.

to rise, and in Budget 2024 €21 million has been allocated to Traveller-specific accommodation.⁷⁰ However, this should be seen in the context of the *Expert Review* which recommends a review to consider restoring funding to levels prior to 2008, when the yearly Traveller accommodation budget was €40 million.⁷¹

Families seeking international protection

There are currently 7,170 children being accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS).⁷² Of these, 5,000 children are living in emergency accommodation centres.⁷³ Overall, standards vary both in permanent and emergency accommodation centres, and between them. Emergency centres are not subject to the National Standards, however, they are subject to the *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons and Family Type Accommodation*,⁷⁴ which was revised to include all those seeking temporary accommodation, not just Ukrainians, in June 2023.⁷⁵ The guidelines contain standards to be followed for the structural condition, sanitation, heating facilities, food preparation and storage, ventilation and lighting, fire safety, and building control regulations to be followed by accommodation providers.⁷⁶

International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) Accommodation Centres	Emergency Accommodation Centres
2,222 children currently living in IPAS centres. ⁷⁷	3,318 children currently living in emergency centres. ⁸¹
The <i>National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process</i> (The National Standards) ⁷⁸ apply.	The <i>National Standards</i> do not apply.
HIQA carries out inspections.	The <i>Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons and Family Type Accommodation</i> ⁸² apply.
IPAS Accommodation Centres are required to provide a Child Safeguarding Statement, ⁷⁹ and Tusla is empowered to carry out compliance checks on the Statement. ⁸⁰	No independent inspections carried out.
	Emergency Accommodation Centres are required to provide a Child Safeguarding Statement, ⁸³ and Tusla is empowered to carry out compliance checks on the Statement. ⁸⁴

70 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Housing budget package of nearly €7 billion announced', Press Release, 10 October 2023.

71 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Irish Traveller Movement on 12 November 2022.

72 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, IPAS Weekly Accommodation Statistics – 28 April 2024 (DCEDIY April 2024) <bit.ly/4a9ibKU>accessed 1 May 2024.

73 Ibid.

74 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons & Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised June 2023 and Updated October 2023).

75 The revised version comes into effect for projects which are commencing design phase after 16th June 2023

76 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons & Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised June 2023 and Updated October 2023).

77 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 8 December 2023.

78 Department of Justice and Equality, National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process (DOJE 2019).

79 Children First Act 2015, Part 2, s10-12.

80 Children First Act 2015, Part 2, s11(5)(b)(ii); Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s2.

81 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 8 December 2023.

82 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons & Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised June 2023 and Updated October 2023).

83 Children First Act 2015, Part 2, s10-12.

84 Children First Act 2015, Part 2, s11(5)(b)(ii); Child and Family Agency Act 2013, s2.

The Irish Refugee Council conducted focus groups and surveyed a total of 259 families and children living in Direct Provision in October 2023.⁸⁵ Participants described conditions of overcrowding in the accommodation, families sharing limited space, and a lack of privacy.⁸⁶ There is limited access to shared facilities such as toilets, showers, and kitchens, particularly during peak hours, and in some accommodation those who were consulted described a single toilet being used by those in as many as 14 rooms, with the shower and toilet in the same room.⁸⁷ This is especially challenging for young children who 'find themselves having to wait for long periods of time to use the toilet, and this leads to accidents'.⁸⁸ One accommodation had a single stovetop for 80 residents.⁸⁹ In such conditions, the right to private and family life cannot be exercised. Inadequate heating (especially in winter), lack of adequate nutrition, and the inaccessibility of buildings with several floors without elevators were also described.⁹⁰ Participants consistently expressed that there was a lack of space for children to play and that when children are off school in the summer months, many faced periods of confinement as some centres did not allow people to leave their rooms.⁹¹

HIQA's power to inspect IPAS accommodation came into operation in January 2024,⁹² but they do not have the authority to inspect emergency accommodation. Likewise, the *National Standards* apply only to IPAS accommodation centres and not emergency centres.⁹³

With their new powers, HIQA recently inspected four IPAS accommodation centres, three of which accommodate children.⁹⁴ The compliance levels in

the reports are mixed. In self-catering centres where kitchens were provided for residents to cook for themselves, they were complying.⁹⁵ Other areas of compliance across all three centres were in relation to the facilitation of the educational development of children by providing transport to schools, pre-schools, and creche facilities. There was, however, inadequate space provided for children to complete homework in one of the centres inspected.⁹⁶

One centre was compliant in providing child-friendly accommodation which respects and promotes family life, but in two other centres it was found that 'space was limited in some of the family rooms which restricted opportunities for children to play and develop',⁹⁷ and there were 'cases of overcrowding and lack of space available for families to sleep in a comfortable and dignified manner'.⁹⁸ In one centre 'the widespread presence of pests in the centre presented risks to the health, wellbeing and dignity of residents including children'.⁹⁹ Safeguarding issues were also identified. In one centre 'not all staff had completed the required training in Children First (2017). Not all staff had the required Garda vetting which is an essential safeguard, resulting in potentially unidentified and unmanaged risks in the service related to safeguarding children'.¹⁰⁰

The Government has committed to ending Direct Provision in the White Paper,¹⁰¹ and the recently published *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* laid out plans to provide accommodation through the use of State land for prefabricated and modular units, conversion of commercial buildings, targeted purchase of medium

85 Irish Refugee Council, *Living in International Protection Accommodation: Exploring the Experiences of Families and Children in Direct Provision* (2023).

86 Ibid 30.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid 34.

90 Ibid 30.

91 Ibid 37.

92 European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, SI 649/2023.

93 Department of Justice and Equality, *National Standards for accommodation offered to people in the protection process* (DOJE 2019).

94 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 23 - 24 January 2024 (2024), HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 24 - 25 January 2024 (2024) and HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 31 January - 01 February 2024 (2024).

95 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 23 - 24 January 2024 (2024) 21 and HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 24 - 25 January 2024 (2024) 19.

96 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 23 - 24 January 2024 (2024) 20.

97 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 31 January - 01 February 2024 (2024) 21.

98 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 23 - 24 January 2024 (2024) 20.

99 Ibid 19.

100 HIQA, Report of an Inspection of an International Protection Accommodation Centre 31 January - 01 February 2024 (2024) 24-25.

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

and larger turnkey properties, design and build of new Reception and Integration Centres, and upgrading of IPAS centres.¹⁰² Importantly, the Plan proposes to build and contract:

- State owned new Reception and Integration Centres and Accommodation for 13,000 people
- In-Community Accommodation for vulnerable persons with community and voluntary organisations, up to 1,000
- Contingency Accommodation, up to 11,000 with commercial providers

This accommodation will all comply with the National Standards which is welcome as the Standards provide an important framework to safeguard the rights of residents.¹⁰³ However, this approach does represent a significant change from the White Paper which recommended the creation of state-owned Reception and Integration Centres at first stage and then relocation of residents to houses in the community at second stage. This new revised Plan is to reduce in-community accommodation for up to 1,000 vulnerable persons. This figure is too low given that the population of people seeking protection includes a significant number of vulnerable persons. Many have fled because of persecution, war conditions and humanitarian crises. Government policy defines vulnerability as: A minor; an unaccompanied minor; a person with a disability; an elderly person; a pregnant woman; a single parent of a minor; a victim of human trafficking; a person with a serious illness; a person with a mental disorder; a person who has been subjected to torture, rape or other form of serious psychological, physical or sexual violence.¹⁰⁴ In light of this consideration, the Government needs to reexamine the targets for in-community accommodation.

The Plan also includes provision for up to 10,000 people in emergency facilities which will not comply with the National Standards. This is of concern given the experience that people seeking protection have had in emergency settings to date.¹⁰⁵ The only way to guarantee the rights of people in state-funded accommodation is to contract services that comply with a rules-based system and where inspections by a public body (HIQA in this instance) takes place.

The €409 million allocation to international protection accommodation in Budget 2024 is welcomed.¹⁰⁶ More investment will be required to implement the new *Strategy* in Budget 2025.

Energy Poverty

The inability to heat one's home is another measure of quality, and is often referred to as energy poverty; a concept which encompasses 'household income, energy costs and the energy efficiency of a home'.¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸ 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 (19 per cent) versus two-parent households (7.6 per cent).¹⁰⁹ Housing tenure is also an important factor, with this measure of deprivation being more common amongst those in the rent, or rent free, sector (15.3 per cent), versus owner occupiers (3.6 per cent).¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹ Children experiencing energy poverty are predominantly living in the social housing and private rented sectors, with

102 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Comprehensive Accommodation Strategy for International Protection Applicants* (DCEDIY 2024).

103 Government of Ireland, *Guidelines for Temporary Accommodation in Existing Buildings – Single Persons & Family Type Accommodation* May 2022 (Revised June 2023 and Updated October 2023).

104 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Vulnerability Assessment Pilot Programme Policy* (2022) <bit.ly/3wjCWW0> accessed 13 February 2024.

105 Ombudsman for Children's Office *Safety & Welfare of Children in Direct Provision* (OCO 2021).

106 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman welcomes substantial investment under Budget 2024' <<https://bit.ly/3daJl>> accessed 11 April 2024.

107 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.

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

109 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023*, (CSO 2024).

110 CSO, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2023*, (CSO 2024).

111 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.

over three-quarters of those impacted living in these tenures.¹¹² Furthermore, energy poverty has been linked to a higher level of poor parental mental health, particularly amongst mothers.¹¹³

In responding to the issue of energy poverty, the government has published an *Energy Poverty Action Plan*.¹¹⁴ The *Plan*, led by the Department of Environment, Climate, and Communications, includes cross-government actions by other Departments, such as the Departments of Housing, and Social Protection, and agencies, such as the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, and the HSE.¹¹⁵ The response focuses on both 'near term' and medium term, with the former focusing on supporting people to address their energy needs over the immediate winter months.¹¹⁶ The *Plan's* actions recognise the importance of addressing and alleviating the impact of energy costs. This is achieved through the identification of near-term actions, such as targeted and universal income supports. Alongside this, the plan identifies a need to enhance consumer protection and implement medium-term actions that strengthen the safety net for people at risk of energy poverty.¹¹⁷ Alongside this, there is a focus on measures which aim to improve energy efficiency, the initiation of research to capture the extent of energy poverty more accurately, and public information campaigns.¹¹⁸

As noted in the section on adequate income, the inadequacy of social welfare payments to cover rising energy costs must be addressed in order to protect families from energy poverty.¹¹⁹ However, there is limited coverage of energy efficiency schemes for non-owner occupiers.¹²⁰ 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. 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.¹²¹ Targeted interventions for families living in the private rented sector are needed to ensure energy poverty is addressed in a sustainable way.

The rise in energy costs over the five-year period is multiple times higher than overall inflation and is recorded at 90.1 per cent by the CSO.¹²² This continues to be evident in the calls for help from low-income households, with the Society of St Vincent de Paul experiencing/receiving 20,000 contacts to the organisation in 2023 requesting assistance with energy costs.¹²³ In the previous year, the society saw a 20 per cent increase in calls for assistance with energy costs compared to 2021.¹²⁴

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.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ Temporary measures introduced over the past four years have, on two occasions, sought to stem the number of evictions. First, in June 2020, measures introduced in response to the Covid-19

112 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.

113 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.

114 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022).

115 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022), 3

116 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022), 3

117 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022), 3

118 Department of the Environment Climate and Communications, *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, (DECC 2022), 5

119 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.

120 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.

121 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.

122 CSO, *Estimated Inflation by Household Characteristics September 2023* (CSO 2023).

123 Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *Over quarter of a million calls for help to SVP in 2023 creates another record*, Press Release, 15 January 2024.

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

125 UN Habitat "The Right to Adequate Housing" Fact Sheet No. 21/Rev.1 <<https://bit.ly/3NTpzQ0>> accessed 1 May 2024.

126 Residential Tenancies Board 'Grounds to end a tenancy' <https://bit.ly/3NySt74> accessed 1 May 2024.

pandemic saw a significant decrease in the number of children living in emergency accommodation by the end of 2020, and into 2021.¹²⁷ Second, at the end of October 2022, the government introduced legislation that would allow for a temporary ban on 'no fault evictions'. 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 2023.¹²⁸ This moratorium on evictions came to an end on the 7 March 2023.¹²⁹ An examination of the Department of Housing's homeless data highlights that over the six-month period of the ban, family homelessness remained fairly steady and increased by just 2 per cent.¹³⁰ In the six months following the lifting of the moratorium on evictions, the number of families in emergency accommodation rose at a quicker pace of almost 10 per cent.¹³¹

There has been a sustained contraction of the private rental market with considerably fewer properties available to rent. In November 2022, there were just 1,087 homes available nationwide,¹³² in comparison to 4,150 properties available two years previously in November 2020; the highest number since 2011.¹³³ The latest data indicates that while supply remains low, there are some improvements with over 2,200 properties available to rent in the last quarter of 2023.¹³⁴

The quarterly data on exits from emergency accommodation and the numbers prevented from entering such accommodation through the creation of a tenancy, provide important insights on overall trends.¹³⁵ By the end of September 2021, there was a total of 4,043 exits and preventions, of which 72 per cent were to the private rented sector. In 2023, just under one-third of exits from emergency accommodation were to the private rental market.¹³⁶

However, conversely, the proportion of exits to local authority lettings has increased and may show an opening up of this tenure type for exits from homeless accommodation.¹³⁷ This would be a positive development as this tenure is more sustainable with a lower risk of returning to homeless accommodation. The table below illustrates the exacerbation of the issue of supply in the private rental sector in 2023.

Family Households Exiting to Emergency Accommodation to Private Rented HAP and Local Authority lettings				
Private Rental Sector	Q4 2023	Q3 2023	Q2 2023	Q1 2023
	27%	28%	39%	34%
	Q4 2022	Q3 2022	Q2 2022	Q1 2022
	28%	39%	42%	50%
Local Authority lettings	Q4 2023	Q4 2023	Q4 2023	Q4 2023
	46%	44%	32%	36%
	Q4 2022	Q4 2022	Q4 2022	Q4 2022
	39%	40%	34%	27%

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports 2022 and 2023* (DHLGH 2022, 2023).

In the Dublin region, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) recorded six exits from emergency accommodation to HAP tenancies in October 2022, noting that this was the lowest number in five years at least.¹³⁸ By June 2023, the situation had marginally improved when 14 families exited homeless accommodation to HAP tenancies.¹³⁹ At the end of the first half of 2023, the average number of exits to tenancies each month was 30. This was lower to previous years when the monthly average was 33 in 2022, 57 in 2021, 94 in 2020, and 95 in 2019.¹⁴⁰ In

127 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Homelessness Data' <<https://bit.ly/3op7UCh>> accessed 1 May 2024. For a visual representation see Focus Ireland, 'Latest Figures on Homelessness in Ireland (Family)' <<https://bit.ly/36cayoL>> accessed 1 May 2024.

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

129 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.

130 Simon Communities of Ireland Locked Out of the Market Study in September 2023 The Gap between HAP Limits and Market Rents (Simon Communities 2023).

131 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Homelessness Data' <<https://bit.ly/3op7UCh>> accessed 3 January 2024.

132 Daft.ie, *The Daft.ie Rental Price Report* (Daft.ie 2021).

133 Ronan Lyons, 'The Daft.ie Rental Price Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish rental market 2020 Q3' <<https://bit.ly/2YkA86l>> accessed 4 February, 19.

134 Daft.ie, *The Daft.ie Rental Price Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential rental market 2023 Q3* (Daft.ie 2023).

135 The data does not disaggregate what situations this referred to. Threshold provides further details regarding its homeless prevention work on a quarterly basis which may provide further insight into such situations. See for example, Threshold, *Quarterly Impact Report, Q4 2022* (Threshold 2023).

136 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Reports 2023* (DHLGH 2023).

137 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report for Q3 2023* (DHLGH 2023).

138 Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, *Monthly Report to Dublin City Councillors on Homelessness* (DRHE January 2023).

139 Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, *Monthly Report to Dublin City Councillors on Homelessness* (DRHE June 2023).

140 *ibid.*

November 2023, the DRHE noted that fewer exits to tenancies had been the main driver of the increase in homelessness in the Dublin region, rather than an increase in presentations.¹⁴¹

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.¹⁴² The numbers in homeless accommodation increased throughout 2023, with a small seasonal decline evident in December.¹⁴³

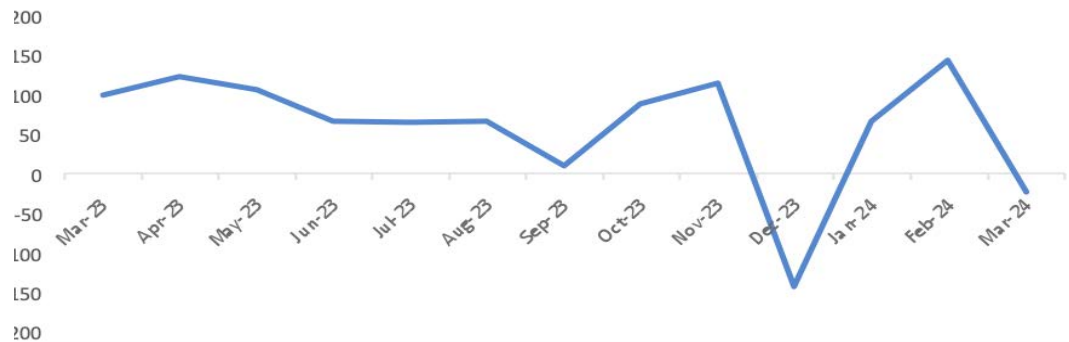
In January 2024, the number of children living in emergency accommodation began to increase again, and the latest figures show that in March 2024 there were 4,147 children living in emergency accommodation.¹⁴⁴ This is an extra 675 children compared to the figures reported in last year's monitor which noted that there were 3,472 children living in emergency accommodation in March 2023.¹⁴⁵ Over the course of the three editions of the Child Poverty Monitor, the number of children living in emergency accommodation has increased by 1,119, with the first edition of the monitor noting that 3,028 children living in Emergency Accommodation in May 2022.¹⁴⁶

The number of young people living in emergency accommodation has also risen. In the first edition of the monitor there were 1,242 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 living in emergency in May 2022,¹⁴⁷ this had increased to 1,456 in March 2023,¹⁴⁸ and to 1,660 in March 2024.¹⁴⁹ This represents an overall increase of 418 young people.

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 2023, 1,624 families were prevented from entering emergency accommodation.¹⁵⁰ Alongside this, 927 families exited from emergency accommodation in 2023.¹⁵¹

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.¹⁵² 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

Monthly increase in number of children in Emergency Accommodation March 2023 – March 2024



141 Dublin Region Homeless Executive, *Monthly Report on Homelessness in the Dublin Region* (DRHE November 2023).

142 *ibid* para 13.

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

144 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report March 2024* (DHLGH 2024).

145 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report March 2023* (DHLGH 2023).

146 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report May 2022* (DHLGH 2022).

147 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report May 2022* (DHLGH 2022).

148 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report March 2023* (DHLGH 2023).

149 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report March 2023* (DHLGH 2023), and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Homeless Report March 2024* (DHLGH 2024).

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

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

152 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).

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 in the statutory assessment undertaken each year to determine the number of households who qualify for social housing. According to the *Social Housing Assessment* there were 58,824 households on the social housing waiting list in November 2023. Of this number, 34.5 per cent of were living with their parents, relatives, and/or friends.¹⁵³

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.¹⁵⁴ While family hubs are an important first response, research with children and parents living in family hubs suggests several problems, including a lack of space and privacy.¹⁵⁵

Families who are placed in this type of accommodated are provided with access to a support team whose main aim is to exit them from homelessness into appropriate accommodation as soon as possible.¹⁵⁶

In 2019, the Ombudsman for Children's Office published a report exploring children's views and experience of living in family hubs.¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸ Organisations working with families experiencing homelessness have identified a need for targeted interventions for children living in emergency accommodation.¹⁵⁹ Notably, two Joint Committees in the Houses of the Oireachtas have also called for increased supports for children living in such circumstances, including the appointment of child support workers.¹⁶⁰ These interventions could provide tailored support to help children and their families deal with the trauma of homelessness and/or the challenges that they faced before becoming homeless, or in some instances both of these contexts.¹⁶¹ Such interventions can help children to address some of the negative impacts of homelessness along with helping to reduce the pressure and stress on parents.¹⁶²

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.¹⁶³ Lone parents have a lower rate of homeownership, and a higher rate of occupancy in both the private rental and local authority sectors.¹⁶⁴ These families are also likely to have more affordability

153 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2023* (Government of Ireland 2024).

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

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

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

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

158 *ibid* 2.

159 Barnardos, Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of homelessness on children (Barnardos 2019) <https://bit.ly/49bKVm1> accessed 29 January 2024; Focus Ireland, 'Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee' <https://bit.ly/42iT85F> accessed 29 January 2024.

160 Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 'Report on the Impact of Homelessness on Children' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019) and Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Family and Child Homelessness' (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019).

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

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

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

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

issues and experience housing deprivation, such as an inability to heat their home.¹⁶⁵

Traveller families face significant barriers to accessing their right to housing and are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness than settled families.¹⁶⁶ The lack of data on ethnicity in homelessness statistics can mean that the extent of Traveller homelessness is invisible.¹⁶⁷ In 2019, the *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review* was published,¹⁶⁸ and a Programme Board has been established to oversee implementation of the report's recommendation.¹⁶⁹ Among the recommendations progressed by the Programme Board is research on the issue of homelessness amongst the Traveller and Roma communities.¹⁷⁰ This work will include consideration of the recommendation to commission research to better understand homelessness in the Traveller population.¹⁷¹ In one recent study by Focus Ireland, Traveller families represented a disproportionate number of homeless families; they made up seven per cent of homeless families while making up less than one per cent of the general population.¹⁷²

Roma also experience significant discrimination in accessing accommodation.¹⁷³ The *Roma Needs Assessment* reported that some families had their water turned off or fuses removed by landlords when their rent was overdue.¹⁷⁴ 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.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, one of the qualifying criteria for the allocation of social housing is employment,¹⁷⁶ but given that the national needs assessments suggest that just 17 per cent of Roma are employed,¹⁷⁷ most Roma will be ineligible for social housing support. In 2021, 41 Roma families, including 111 children were living in homeless accommodation in Dublin, of which almost 40 per cent had no keyworker.¹⁷⁸

Long-term and durable solutions to the homelessness 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.¹⁷⁹ 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.¹⁸⁰

165 *ibid.*

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

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

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

169 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.

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

171 Communication received by the Children's Rights Alliance from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on 13 January 2021.

172 A Long et al, *Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories, and Finding a Home* (Focus Ireland 2019) 24.

173 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

174 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

175 Communication received by the Children Rights Alliance from Pavee Point, 16 October 2020.

176 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.

177 Pavee Point & Department of Justice and Equality, *Roma in Ireland: A National Needs Assessment* (Pavee Point 2018) 75.

178 The National Roma Network, *Roma Accommodation Advocacy Paper*, (The National Roma Network 2022).

179 Niall Pleace *Preventing Homelessness: A Review of the International Evidence* (Simon Communities of Ireland 2019) 7.

180 Amy Clair, 'Housing: an Under-Explored Influence on Children's Well-Being and Becoming' (2019) *Child Indicators Research* 12:609–626.

Recommendations

Budget 2025

- Ensure that every child living in homeless accommodation has a 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.
- Provide additional investment for international protection accommodation, specifically for new own-door accommodation.

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*.¹⁸¹

181 Government of Ireland, *Housing for All A new Housing Plan for Ireland*, (Government of Ireland 2021).



Family Support and Alternative Care



FAMILY SUPPORT AND ALTERNATIVE CARE

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.¹

The European Commission Recommendation *Investing in Children* calls on Member States to provide enhanced family support.² 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'.³

The Council of Europe⁴ has published a recommendation regarding the fulfilment of children's rights in social services planning, delivery and evaluation. It 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'⁵ ...

A key commitment under *First 5 A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* is the development of a national model of parenting support services to shape their further development. 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.⁶ The document recognises that these interventions are part of a wider range of services including family support, health and disabilities services.⁷ 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'.⁸ The document outlines that 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.⁹

In July 2023, the Department of An Taoiseach published the initial work plan for Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office for the period July 2023 to December 2025.¹⁰ The fifth priority in the plan seeks to consolidate and integrate public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services.¹¹

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- 1 UNCRC, 'General Comment No. 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood' (2006) UN Doc CRC/C/G/GC/7/Rev. 1 para 8.
 - 2 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final).
 - 3 European Commission, *Commission Recommendation of 20.2.2013: Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (Brussels, 20.2.2013 C(2013) 778 final) <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1060&langId=en>
 - 4 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.
 - 5 Council of Europe, Council of Europe Recommendation on children's rights and social services friendly to children and families (Council of Europe 2011) 9.
 - 6 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).
 - 7 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).
 - 8 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022), 16.
 - 9 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022).
 - 10 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023).
 - 11 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 16-17.

To achieve this, the Office will add value to existing work on the integration of services including focusing on scaling existing good practice examples, promoting the value of home visiting, supporting the *First 5* ambition to develop a national model of parenting support and the enhancement of family support services provided by statutory and non-statutory organisations.¹²

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 of planning the delivery of services.¹³ While all families may need a basic level of support (Hardiker Level 1), those with more complex needs (Hardiker Levels 2-4) will require more tailored and intensive services.¹⁴ Sufficiently resourced services across the spectrum of need ensure that all children experiencing disadvantage and adversity have the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

The adoption of a progressive universalist approach to service delivery, ensures that all parents will receive some level of support with those needing greater support being able to readily access it.¹⁵ More tailored and intensive supports are needed for children and families experiencing complex issues, for example mental health difficulties.¹⁶

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 resources.¹⁷ Children can be exposed to adversity at both the family and community level.¹⁸ While the presence of poor parental mental health, domestic violence and addiction can occur across the socioeconomic spectrum of families¹⁹ for those experiencing poverty these issues can be particularly prevalent.²⁰ 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.²¹

It is possible to intervene and improve the opportunities for children experiencing poverty-related adversity by providing early childhood interventions to children and to their parents.²² Family Support is an umbrella term which clusters a broad 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 difficulty²³ and was defined in a departmental paper in 2004 as:

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- 12 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 16-17.
- 13 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.
- 14 Pauline Hardiker, Kenneth Exton and Mary Barker, *Policies and Practices in Preventive Child Care* (Aldershot 1991).
- 15 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services*, (DCEDIY 2022) 32.
- 16 Morag Traynor, 'Poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)' (Children 1st, 27 September 2018) <<https://bit.ly/3f4T7LF>> accessed 21 May 2021.
- 17 Morag Traynor, 'Poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)' (Children 1st, 27 September 2018) <<https://bit.ly/3f4T7LF>> accessed 21 May 2021.
- 18 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).
- 19 Morag Traynor, 'Poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)' (Children 1st, 27 September 2018) <<https://bit.ly/3f4T7LF>> accessed 21 May 2021.
- 20 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.
- 21 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.
- 22 Katherine A. Beckmann, 'Mitigating Adverse Childhood Experiences through Investments in Early Childhood Programs', (September – October 2017), *Academic Paediatrics*, 17(7), Supplement, S28–S29.
- 23 Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (DCYA 2014).

“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”.²⁴

However, over time, since this definition was developed, a lack of clarity has emerged as to what public funding is provided for these services, as noted in a spending review published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.²⁵ The review notes the difficulty in isolating costs and activities related to Family Support services from Tusla’s overall budget.²⁶ The report notes that 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 structures²⁷. While the review calls for greater clarity, it calculated that expenditure on Family Support Services rose from €105.5m in 2018 to €125.1m in 2021²⁸ representing an 18.6 per cent increase.²⁹ 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).³⁰

There is a need to examine the level of demand for family support services across Ireland and match dedicated and sustained annual budget increases to meet these needs. Prior to the pandemic there was evidence that leading family support providers 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.³¹ Longer waiting times result in increased complexity of cases, pressure to close cases prematurely and missed opportunities to intervene early.³² Post pandemic the issue of waiting lists and increased demands remains for some providers.³³ Budget 2024 saw a welcome increase in Tusla’s overall funding.³⁴ However, it is notable that rather than increase the capacity and availability of services, the *Budget 2024 Expenditure Report* states that this would allow Tusla to continue to provide existing levels of care and support to children and families.³⁵ Additional funding in Budget 2025 could be ringfenced and utilised to increase the capacity of services to support more children and families.

In 2021, consultations with parents 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.³⁶ The initial work plan for the Child Poverty and Wellbeing

24 Pinkerton et al, *Family Support in Ireland. A paper for the Department of Health & Children* (The Stationery Office 2004), 16.

25 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

26 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

27 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

28 Note this data was calculated through the provision of data from Tusla which isolated the work being undertaken by Section 56 organisations in the area of Family Support and it is not possible to update it based on the current publicly available data.

29 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

30 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Tusla Funded Community and Voluntary Sector Family Support Services – Spending Review 2022*, (DCEDIY 2023), 6.

31 Just Economics, *Breaking point: Why investment is needed now to ensure the sustainability of quality services for children and families*, (Barnardos 2019).

32 Barnardos, *Children’s Budget 2020*, (Barnardos 2019) <<https://bit.ly/36uE9dW>> accessed 4 October 2020.

33 Barnardos, *Annual Report 2022*, (Barnardos 2023), 27.

34 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2024: Expenditure Report*, (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform).

35 Government of Ireland, *Budget 2024: Expenditure Report*, (Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform), 58.

36 Grainne Hickey and Yvonne Leckey, *Irish parents’ experiences of support and parenting support services*, (DCEDIY 2021) 32.

Programme Office will provide a welcome added focus addressing the fragmentation in services. In particular it speaks directly to the lack of awareness of supports in local communities noting that their 'overall objective is to facilitate parents and families to understand the range of services on offer and how to access them'.³⁷ The Office will take a specific focus on those families with a high level of need and consideration of the specific needs of parents who are further from the labour market.³⁸ By amplifying attention to existing commitments to service integration, the office ultimately aims to ensure that services are delivered to the children and families that need them.

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.³⁹ Early intervention and supports to families helps parent-child bonding, infant well-being and positive developmental outcomes.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴²

There have been many calls for review of the home visiting programmes and the introduction of a standardised model of delivery.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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’.⁴⁵ The review is ongoing.⁴⁶

Arising from the recommendations of the *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes*, a Children’s Fund was established by the Government to support children experiencing disadvantage in the present day.⁴⁷ In the first half of 2023 an expert reference panel of eight individuals with experience and knowledge on childhood disadvantage was established and met on five occasions. The purpose of the group was to provide advice on the development of the fund and the options available to disperse the funding to support disadvantaged children.⁴⁸ In June 2023, the Expert Panel concluded its work and proposed funding the work of the Home Visiting Alliance in line with the

37 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023),26.

38 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023),26.

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

40 Government of Ireland, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services (2022-2027)* 10

41 National College of Ireland 'Home Visiting Alliance' < <http://bit.ly/3N4rHqi> > accessed 1 June 2023.

42 ibid

43 Susan Broklesby, *A National review of the Community Mothers Programme* (KHF and CFI 2019).

44 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).

45 ibid.

46 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services (2022-2027) | Implementation Plan Year 3*, <https://bit.ly/3JBhcZ2> accessed 26 April 2024.

47 Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* <https://bit.ly/3w7lvrl> accessed 24 April 2024.

48 Department of Children, Equality, Integration and Youth, 'Children’s Fund', <https://bit.ly/3UvJ8DF> accessed 24 April 2024.

First 5 action to develop a national approach.⁴⁹ The Expert Panel proposed that the fund could provide funding of €150,000 in year one to enable the Home Visiting Alliance to develop common data collection processes.⁵⁰ The Expert Panel also recommended establishing National Programme Support Structures for the five existing home visiting programmes for a two-year period (at a cost of €1.5 million per year) and to fund the rollout of five new sites over a three year period (at a cost of €1 million per year for two years).⁵¹ This amounts to a total of €5.15 million over a three year period.⁵² Over a five-year period there will be €10 million of ring-fenced Tusla funding available to support home visiting between 2024 and 2029.⁵³ In 2024, a national manager and data information officer will be recruited from this funding.⁵⁴ This investment in the initiative will help to ensure that more parents can access support in their children's early years.

Alternative Care

As well as focusing on prevention, *Investing in Children* calls on Member States to deliver alternative care settings that meets the needs of children/young people and ensures that their voice is given due consideration.⁵⁵ Children without parental care also need to access quality services including those related to education and employment along with providing these services in their transition to adulthood.⁵⁶ The recommendation notes that measures should be put in place to ensure that children are prevented from being placed in institutions but in such circumstances where this occurs regular reviews should be undertaken.

In Ireland, children are taken into care under the Childcare Acts 1991 and Tusla (Child and Family Agency) is the state agency with responsibility

‘promote the welfare of children [...] who are not receiving adequate care and protection’ (section 3(1)). Under section 4 of the 1991 Act, Tusla has the duty to take a child into its care ‘where it appears that the child who resides or is found in its areas requires care or protection that they are unlikely to receive unless taken into care’. Once a child has been taken into care, Tusla is obliged to ‘maintain the child in its care so long as his welfare appears [...] to require it and while he remains a child’. Under section 4(4), Tusla must endeavour to reunite a child taken into its care with their parents where this appears to be in the child's best interests. Despite the increase in the population of children and young people in the care system over the last ten years, the numbers of children in the care system has fallen slightly.⁵⁷ Ten years ago the numbers of children in the care system were over 6,000 but the latest data from Tusla states that there are currently 5,760 children in care at the end of March 2024.⁵⁸ Of this number the vast majority of children, 87.5 per cent are in foster care – either general foster care (3,571) or relative foster care (1,471). For the remaining 12.5 per cent, there are 8 per cent in residential care and 4 per cent in ‘other’ care placements.⁵⁹

It is not clear why the numbers of children in the care system are falling, but at the same time, Tusla's referrals have doubled in a ten-year period. Its Annual Report for 2022 documents a 13 per cent increase in the number of referrals for its child protection and welfare services (compared to 2021).⁶⁰ A steady increase in referrals has been observed in the past four calendar years with a cumulative increase of 46 per cent in referrals since 2019.⁶¹ However, despite such a significant increase in referrals, the Whole Time Equivalent Staff complement of Tusla has only increased by 13 per cent due to the lack of social workers.

49 Children's Fund Expert Panel, *Final Expert Panel Proposal June 2023*, <https://bit.ly/3xQmoWh> accessed 24 April 2024.

50 Children's Fund Expert Panel, *Final Expert Panel Proposal June 2023*, <https://bit.ly/3xQmoWh> accessed 24 April 2024.

51 Children's Fund Expert Panel, *Final Expert Panel Proposal June 2023*, <https://bit.ly/3xQmoWh> accessed 24 April 2024.

52 Children's Fund Expert Panel, *Final Expert Panel Proposal June 2023*, <https://bit.ly/3xQmoWh> accessed 24 April 2024.

53 Childcare Services: 21 Mar 2024: Seanad debates (KildareStreet.com)

54 Childcare Services: 21 Mar 2024: Seanad debates (KildareStreet.com)

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

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

57 The fall in the number of children and young people in the care system is against a backdrop in an overall increase in the population of children and young people. The CSO records an increase in the population aged 0 to 19 years from 1.262 million in Census 2011 to 1.349 million in Census 2022.

58 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024*, (Tusla 2024).

59 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024*, (Tusla 2024).

60 Tusla, *Annual Report 2022*, (2023).

61 In the four year period 2015 to 2019 the increase in referrals was 26 per cent (rising from 43,596 referrals in 2015 to 55,136 in 2018). See Tusla Annual Reports, 2015; 2016; 2017 and 2018.

Year	Referrals to Tusla Child Protection and Welfare ⁶²	WTE Staff across Tusla ⁶³
2022	82,855	4,676
2021	73,069	4,579
2020	69,712	4,598
2019	56,561	4,122

The increasing number of referrals to Tusla could be reflective of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research conducted at that time highlighted that school closures and social distancing 'cut off access to key protective factors' for the wellbeing of many vulnerable young people.⁶⁴ The closure of schools meant that many missed out on the support provided by a trusted adult.⁶⁵ For instance, children and young people exposed to increased parental alcohol consumption during periods of lockdown had exacerbated feelings of isolation.⁶⁶ Concerns about children at risk are likely to have been unreported, a fact borne out by the fall off in referrals to Tusla during the initial school closure in March 2020.⁶⁷

There are continued challenges in the recruitment and retention of social workers meaning that currently 17 per cent or 983 children in care do not have a designated social worker.⁶⁸ One-fifth of all children in care do not have a care plan.⁶⁹ Tusla's latest annual report highlights that the recruitment of sufficient foster carers remains a challenge. The report notes that there were 75 fewer foster carers approved when leavers were taken into consideration.⁷⁰ Additional challenges for the agency have put the existing stretched resources under further pressure. There

has been an increase in the numbers of referrals of unaccompanied and separated children. In 2022, this accounted for 597 referrals made to Tusla, of which 261 were from Ukraine; a 500 per cent increase from 2021. There were 195 unaccompanied and separated children in care or accommodation at the end of 2022; a 200 per cent increase from the end of 2021.⁷¹ A total of 1,127 referrals of unaccompanied and separated children were made to Tusla up until 31 December 2023 of which 435 were from Ukraine.⁷² Since the commencement of the war in Ukraine, there have been 474 referrals to Tusla.⁷³ As of 15 December 2023 there are 323 unaccompanied and separated children in care/accommodation.⁷⁴

Tusla's services are inspected by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA).⁷⁵ In 2022, HIQA conducted 54 inspections in children's services and noted that there was improved compliance with national standards and regulations.⁷⁶ The reports also found instances of good practice across all children's services with staff routinely advocating on behalf of children and encouraging them to participate in decision-making about their support and care. HIQA found that children were regularly consulted by social work and social care staff during assessments and in their day-to-day lives. As part of the inspection process, HIQA engaged and consulted with children and young people about their experience in accessing these services. While the children and young people reported that they were generally well cared for, they do also mention areas for improvement including better planning for aftercare, the physical condition in one secure setting and onward placement.⁷⁷

62 Data from Tusla Annual Reports 2019; 2020; 2021 and 2022.

63 Data from Tusla Quarterly Integrated Performance and Activity Report, Q4 2019; Q4 2020; Q4 2021 and Q4 2022.

64 National Educational Psychological Service, *The Wellbeing and Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: Factors for Consideration for the Leaving Certificate Examination in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Advice from the National Educational Psychological Service* (NEPS) (Department of Education and Skills & NEPS 2020)

65 Child Care Law Reporting Project, *Interim care orders for two children following hospitalisation of one for headlice infestation*, (Child Care Law Reporting Project 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3v5gnP6>> accessed 20 May 2021; Shauna Bowers, 'Covid-19 resulted in decrease of child welfare referrals to Tusla' The Irish Times (Dublin 5 August 2020).

66 Hidden Harm and COVID design (alcoholireland.ie)

67 The Child Care Law Reporting Project, *Observations on Concerns for Vulnerable Children Arising from the Covid-19 Pandemic* <<https://bit.ly/3qjBv1J>> accessed 12 February 2021. In one stark example, a child was hospitalised with infections caused by a head lice infestation as the staff did not have any contact with the child when classes went online and were not able to intervene at an early stage like they had in the past. See the Child Care Law Reporting Project, *Case Reports 2020 Volume 2* <<https://www.childlawproject.ie/publications/>> accessed 12 February 2021; Shauna Bowers, 'Covid-19 resulted in decrease of child welfare referrals to Tusla' The Irish Times (Dublin 5 August 2020).

68 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (Tusla 2024).

69 Tusla, *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report March 2024* (Tusla 2024).

70 Tusla, *Annual Report 2022* (Tusla 2023) 9.

71 Information received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 04 April 2024.

72 Ibid.

73 Information received by the Children's Rights Alliance from Tusla on 4 April 2024.

74 Ibid.

75 HIQA, *Monitoring and Regulation of Children's Services in 2022* (HIQA 2023) 9.

76 HIQA, 'HIQA publishes overview of its monitoring and inspecting of Ireland's children's services during 2022' (Press Release 19 July 2023).

77 HIQA, *Monitoring and Regulation of Children's Services in 2022* (HIQA 2023) 41.

HIQA also highlights resourcing as a challenge for Tusla's services in relation to staff vacancies and due to insufficient availability of appropriate alternative care placements for children. This impacted on the timeliness and quality of service provided to some children. The lack of appropriate placements has also been identified by the Child Law Project and noted in a letter by Judge Simms upon his retirement from the Dublin Metropolitan District.⁷⁸ In responding to these issues, HIQA recommends a collaborative national strategic approach to ensure that Tusla is resourced and enabled to ensure that children receive the right support and service at the right time. Central to this is the need for a National Plan on Child Protection and Alternative Care along with the establishment of an interdepartmental committee to drive cross Governmental working.

Investing in Children calls for children in care to have access to quality services related to their health, education, employment, social assistance, security, housing including during their transition to adulthood. In this regard, there have been several key developments. Tusla recently introduced a new therapeutic service programme for children in care to provide assessments and therapy to children in six learning sites. This is a welcome development given the considerable waiting lists for assessments and therapy under the Health Service Executive.

In the field of education, the former Minister for Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, announced in November 2023 that €1.15 million will be made available in supports for care leavers and members of the Traveller and Roma Communities to access third level education.⁷⁹ This included €100,000 allocated to care leavers pursuing apprenticeships and €200,000 for those accessing higher education.⁸⁰ Again, this is a welcome development given that CSO data reveals that care leavers are less likely than the general population of young people. This data shows that 37 per cent of children who left care between the ages of 18-22 were in further education courses just 15 per cent were in higher education courses.⁸¹ In comparison, amongst all children these figures were 11 per cent and 37 per cent respectively indicating that children leaving care were less likely to be attending higher education.⁸² Given this gap it is welcome that the *National Access Plan a Strategic Action Plan for Equity Of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028* names young people with care experience as a priority group requiring supports to increase their participation in higher education.⁸³

78 Child Law Project 'Letter from District Court Judge Dermot Simms of 17 May 2023' available <https://bit.ly/3WDNXfl> accessed 10 May 2024.

79 Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 'Minister Harris announces funding of €1.15 million to support Care Leavers and members of the Traveller and Roma communities' (Press Release 27 November 2023).

80 Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 'Minister Harris announces funding of €1.15 million to support Care Leavers and members of the Traveller and Roma communities' (Press Release 27 November 2023).

81 CSO, *Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018 – 2023* (CSO 2023).

82 CSO, *Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care, 2018 – 2023* (CSO 2023).

83 Government of Ireland, *National Access Plan a Strategic Action Plan for Equity Of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028* (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 2022)

Recommendations

Budget 2025 and Short-term

- 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.
- Increase the staffing allocation of Tusla for up to 200 WTE social workers and social care workers.
- 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.
- Undertake research to identify the drivers for the decrease in the number of children in the care system.
- Establish an inter-departmental committee to drive cross-government action on Child Protection and Alternative Care.
- Expediate engagement and collaborative action with the community and voluntary sector to increase capacity of services.

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.

Spotlight

HOME VISITING ALLIANCE

Introduction

Each year in Ireland approximately 60,000 babies are born, one third of whom were born to first-time mothers.⁸⁴ A substantial number of babies are born each year to families experiencing poverty, homelessness or to a parent experiencing mental health difficulties.⁸⁵ These experiences, which can result in chronic stress and trauma, can have a negative impact on the developing brain.⁸⁶

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.⁸⁷ While Home Visiting Programmes can provide an important support to all parents, they are particularly beneficial to those who are exposed to poverty, disadvantage or other adverse circumstances.⁸⁸

Some of the issues that home visiting seeks to address are child poverty, parental isolation, poor mental health and educational disadvantage.

Home Visiting Alliance

The Home Visiting Alliance was established in 2020. It unites five evidence-based programmes as a national voice for these interventions. These are: Community Mothers, Infant Mental Health, Lifestart, ParentChild+ and Preparing for Life.

The programmes delivered by the Home Visiting Alliance members focus on providing a consistent support for parents during the early days, months and years of a child's life. The programme recognises parents as the expert in the child's life and supports them to tune in to their child's needs and development. It encourages parents in their role as their child's nurturer of development and primary educator.



84 Central Statistics Office, Vital Statistics Yearly Summary 2022 (CSO 2023).

85 Home Visiting Alliance, 'Key commonalities in relation to Home Visiting Programmes' <<https://bit.ly/4bsBGiS>> accessed 22 May 2024.

86 Home Visiting Alliance, 'Home Visiting Alliance Overview' <<https://bit.ly/4bhyMNR>> accessed 22 May 2024.

87 National College of Ireland 'Home Visiting Alliance' <<http://bit.ly/3N4rHqi>> accessed 1 June 2023.

88 *ibid.*

Home Visiting compliments the work of Public Health Nurses (PHN) who provides a continuation of care after a baby is born. The PHN visits a parent within 72 hours of birth, provides information about additional supports around breastfeeding and arranges for a baby's developmental checks.⁸⁹ The PHN can refer a parent to a home visiting programme and they are one of three main ways that families access the programme. The PHN and other statutory agencies, such as Tusla, account for 60 per cent of referrals to home visiting programmes. The remaining 40 per cent come from community and voluntary organisations (20 per cent) and word of mouth from families and friends (20 per cent).

Home Visiting Alliance Impact

- 4,500 children took part in home visiting programmes;
- 65,000 home visits undertaken each year;
- 170 home visitors.

What need to happen next?

Currently the programmes that form part of the Home Visiting Alliance are delivered in various areas across the country including in Cork and Dublin. However, there is a need to invest in scaling up the existing programme delivery in order to ensure that children's rights across the country can access the benefits of this programme.

An integrated approach at national level could ensure greater alignment with national policy. This includes the development of a National Standardised Model as part of the *First 5*.

89 Citizens Information, 'Maternity care and the public health nurse' <<https://bit.ly/3V910qN>> accessed 22 May 2024.



Play, Culture and Participation



PARTICIPATION, PLAY, CULTURE AND RECREATION

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'.¹ Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States to 'assure 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'.² Ireland was last examined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2023. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee called on Ireland to strengthen initiatives that support these rights.³ Such activities should be available for children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, those with disabilities, migrant children, and those seeking asylum.⁴ The Committee recommended to involve children in the development and monitoring of relevant policies related to this.⁵ In terms of participation in decision-making, the Committee called on Ireland to ensure all children can express their views and have them taken into account when decisions affecting them are made, as well as for measures to be strengthened to promote and empower children's participation, particularly those who are in disadvantaged situations.⁶ The Committee also urged the State party to hold a referendum to reduce the voting age to 16 years.⁷

The third pillar of the EU Recommendation *Investing in Children* concentrates on children's right to participate.⁸ 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.⁹ The second aspect of this pillar focuses on children's participation in decision-making.¹⁰

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 school¹¹. The provision of safe spaces in local communities, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, is also critical.¹² The Recommendation states that children should be 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.¹³

The Department of An Taoiseach's initial work plan for the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office identifies participation in culture, arts, and sport as one of six priority areas for children and young people impacted by poverty.¹⁴ The plan acknowledges the importance of play for children's development and well-being and the crucial role of sport and culture as part of this.¹⁵ The outline refers to existing commitments in this area in both the *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027* and the *Sports Ireland Participation Plan 2021-2024*.¹⁶ Specific areas of focus for the Programme Office will be monitoring implementation of existing commitments, exploring the potential of youth work to encourage young people in deprived

1 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art. 31.

2 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (UNCRC) Art. 12.

3 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(a).

4 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(b).

5 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 39(c).

6 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 18.

7 UNCRC, 'Concluding Observations Ireland' (2023) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/5-6, para 18.

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

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) 3-4.

12 *ibid.*

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

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

15 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 18.

16 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 18.

communities to engage in activities of interest to them, development of play and sport facilities in areas experiencing deprivation, and supporting participation in arts and culture for children and young people who have not received such opportunities to date.¹⁷ This will bring welcome added focus to these areas.

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, and parks. 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 should be given to the needs for safe, age-friendly, family-friendly, and equitable access.¹⁸ Recreation and play policies developed in the 2000s identified that 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 with poverty, non-participation in play, and fewer recreational opportunities.¹⁹ 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 concluded that investment in green spaces 'will pay dividends in supporting the mental wellbeing of women and their families'.²⁰

Research utilising data from *Growing Up in Ireland* has identified that the positive impact of access to outdoor spaces at the community level are greater for children with a lower socioeconomic status.²¹ This may be due to the fact that those from a higher

socioeconomic background have the resources to compensate for the lack of publicly available spaces by creating private gardens or accessing extra-curricular activities.²² Contrastingly, children living in temporary accommodation and those living in Direct Provision centres do not have adequate access to safe play and recreation facilities.²³ Additionally, 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 in which 66 Traveller children were living.²⁴ The negative implications of play deprivation may be significant to a child's development, as play impacts their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.²⁵ Play also has a crucial role in creating stronger bonds between parents and their children.²⁶ Targeting public resources towards the development of outdoor spaces should consider these increased benefits for these cohorts of children.

First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 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'.²⁷ It is welcome that a review of existing guidelines has been completed and that the *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* included child-friendly policies.²⁸

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- 17 Government of Ireland, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, (Department of An Taoiseach 2023), 18.
- 18 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)
- 19 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).
- 20 James Laurence, Helen Russell, and Emer Smyth, *What Protected the Wellbeing of Mothers during the Pandemic?* (ESRI 2023).
- 21 Maria Rubio-Cabañez *Stratifying Cities: The Effect of Outdoor Areas on Children's Well-being* <https://bit.ly/3wwzuaY> accessed 10 May 2024, 20.
- 22 Maria Rubio-Cabañez *Stratifying Cities: The Effect of Outdoor Areas on Children's Well-being* <https://bit.ly/3wwzuaY> accessed 10 May 2024, 20.
- 23 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.
- 24 Ombudsman for Children, *No End in Site* (OCO 2021).
- 25 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*.
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 Government of Ireland, *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 - 2028* (Government of Ireland 2018)
- 28 DCEDIY, *First Five Annual Implementation Annual Implementation Report 2021/2022* (DCEDIY 2023).

However, the focus on children in these guidelines was limited when they were published first in 2020²⁹ as well as in the revised publication in 2022.³⁰ Further progress is needed on the development of best practice in the incorporation of child-centred approach to planning.

Austria has a long-established tradition of social housing provision with a high percentage of multi-storey accommodation in urban areas.³¹ Compared, to other European cities and within Austria itself, Vienna has large quantities of social housing³² and the aptly-named 'Vienna Model of Housing' is recognised as a leading example of excellence. Amongst the features of this model are a focus on affordability, urban renewal, and resident participation.³³ Particular attention is also paid to gender-sensitive planning, aspects of which could positively inform Irish planning. In the City of Vienna toolkit *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development (GM Manual)*, one of the basic principles is how planning can address and accommodate the needs relevant to different life phases³⁴. This includes children aged 6 and under, children aged 6 to 12 years, and young people aged 13 to 17 years.³⁵ For instance, the guidelines note that while young children under 6 years of age are closely tied to their parent/guardian/caregiver, open spaces can still be used independently if they remain in sight or earshot.³⁶ Therefore, consideration is given to an acceptable number of storeys in apartment blocks to ensure occupants are within sight or earshot of the street level or open spaces.³⁷ It is notable that the *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* for apartments published by Ireland's Department of Housing caution that 'noise from courtyard play areas can diminish residential amenity,

particularly in smaller schemes, and designers must find solutions which balance all the factors involved' rather than see the opportunities that the integration of play spaces can create for communities.³⁸ The Vienna Model frames the inclusion of open spaces accessible to the home more positively, noting that a lack of such facilities can mean parents will have to put more time into ensuring young children can play outdoors. Furthermore, it outlines that improving the provision and accessibility of surrounding areas, such as safe streets and playgrounds, can increase housing quality.³⁹

Some local councils, such as Laois County Councils, have developed recreation and play strategies that plan for the continued development of sport, recreation, and play.⁴⁰ 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. It is welcome that the latest *First 5* implementation plan commits to establish a new national policy on play. The development of the plan will be led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and a draft policy is expected to be published by 2025.⁴¹

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 increase or encourage participation in these activities later in life.⁴²

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- 29 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* (DHLGH 2020).
- 30 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* (DHLGH 2022).
- 31 Lorcan Sirr (Ed) *Housing in Ireland: Beyond the Markets*. (Institute of Public Administration 2022) 137.
- 32 Lorcan Sirr (Ed) *Housing in Ireland: Beyond the Markets* (Institute of Public Administration 2022) 137.
- 33 City of Vienna, 'The "Vienna Model" For a more equitable society' <https://bit.ly/3JWDxQU> accessed 10 May 2024.
- 34 Astrid Klimmer-Pölleritzer & Andreas Nuss, *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development* (City of Vienna 2013) 20-21
- 35 Astrid Klimmer-Pölleritzer & Andreas Nuss, *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development* (City of Vienna 2013) 20-21u
- 36 Astrid Klimmer-Pölleritzer & Andreas Nuss, *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development* (City of Vienna 2013) 20-21
- 37 Vienna Library
- 38 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments* (DHLGH 2022) 36.
- 39 Astrid Klimmer-Pölleritzer & Andreas Nuss, *Gender mainstreaming in urban planning and urban development* (City of Vienna 2013).
- 40 Laois County Council. 'The Recreation, Play and Sports Strategy 2018-2022' < <https://bit.ly/4bAL6sl>> accessed 10 May 2024.
- 41 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *First 5: Implementation Plan 2023-2025*, (DCEDIY 2023).
- 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.

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.⁴³

Data from *Growing up in Ireland* has previously found that children from low-income families can face barriers, namely financial ones, to participating in activities related to culture.⁴⁴ Taking part in cultural activities like singing, painting, dance, and theatre benefits children academically and in helps them to develop better social skills and more positive relationships.⁴⁵ More recent *Growing Up in Ireland* research published in 2022 continues to confirm a strong social gradient regarding participation in cultural activities, such as how children whose parents are graduates are more likely to participate in said experiences.⁴⁶ Children whose parents are employed in professional or managerial employment also have a higher level of participation. Conversely, those living in rented accommodation and children in migrant families had lower recorded participation levels.⁴⁷ In 2022, the Arts Council carried out research with children and young people about their engagement on arts and creative activities.⁴⁸ The vast majority of respondents noted that they do take part in arts and creative activities in schools,⁴⁹ but 14.8 per cent said the issue of cost was a barrier to participating.⁵⁰ When asked how the Arts Council could help more children and young people to engage, 10.8 per cent said free art classes and supplies would be helpful,⁵¹ 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 better access culture.

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.⁵² It also underpins the Arts Council's *Equality Human Rights and Diversity Strategy and Policy*.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ Strategic Objective 4 seeks to promote creativity in the education system and school curriculum frameworks.⁵⁷

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'.⁵⁸ Children living in poverty may be deprived

43 *ibid* 100-101.

44 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.

45 *ibid*.

46 Emer Smyth, *The Changing World of 9 Year Olds*, (ESRI 2022).

47 Emer Smyth, *The Changing World of 9 Year Olds*, (ESRI 2022).

48 The Arts Council, *Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, (The Arts Council n.d.).

49 The Arts Council, *Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, (The Arts Council n.d.).

50 The Arts Council, *Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, (The Arts Council n.d.).

51 The Arts Council, *Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, (The Arts Council n.d.).

52 Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, *Culture 2025 (DAHRRGA 2016)* <<https://bit.ly/2REfOxv>> accessed 26 May 2021

53 The Arts Council, 'Equality, Human Rights and Diversity' <<https://bit.ly/3wVXEpy>> accessed 1 July 2022.

54 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

55 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

56 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

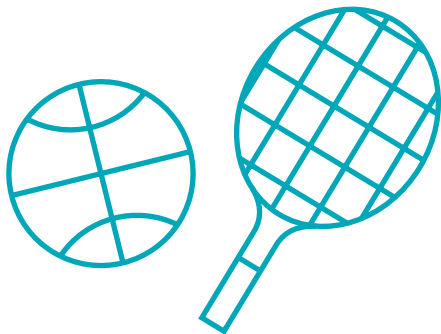
57 Government of Ireland, *Creative Youth Plan – 2023-2027*, (Government of Ireland 2023).

58 Emer Smyth, *Arts and Cultural Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study* (ESRI 2016), xi.

of the benefits of safe and creative playtime and access to age-appropriate extracurricular activities.⁵⁹ It is important to encourage engagement in cultural activities from a young age to influence participation in these activities later in life.⁶⁰

Sports

Children from families in lower socioeconomic groups have similar rates of participation in extra-curricular sport to middle-class children, but they are less likely to participate in activities at sports centres and other locations not linked to their school.⁶¹ Data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey shows that 63 per cent of children in the highest income group attended a sports club or group for one hour or more per week, compared to just 34 per cent of those in the lowest income group.⁶² In the next wave of data collected for this group of children, over three-quarters of those from the highest income group did team sports as opposed to just over half of those in the lowest income group.⁶³



The impact of the costs of participating in sports such as the cost of football boots, clothing and equipment, needs to be examined to determine if it has a negative 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.⁶⁴ Participation in sport decreases once young people enter second level school, and early school leavers are even less likely to participate in sports.⁶⁵ Young people who participate in sport tend to do better in exams, although many young people reduce their participation in sports during exam years.⁶⁶

Participation in Decision Making

The Department of Children published the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024.⁶⁷ The strategy aims to further include Ireland's youth in the creation of policies that directly impact them. It focuses on eight action areas, including "develop[ing] participation structures that are inclusive, accessible and safe" for anyone, especially though who may face barriers to participation.⁶⁸ Based on the previous National Strategy, the Department noted that these barriers can include "lack of housing, lack of services/long waiting lists [and] digital poverty".⁶⁹

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 councils that meet in every local authority area of the country.⁷⁰ A representative from each area is elected to be part of a National Executive that meets once a month for a term of two years.

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- 59 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*.
- 60 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.
- 61 Growing up in Ireland Study Team, *Key Findings: Infant Cohort (at 5 Years). No. 3: Well-Being, Play and Diet Among Five-Yea-Olds* (ESRI and TCD 2015).
- 62 *ibid.*
- 63 Eoin McNamara et al, *Growing up in Ireland: The Lives of 9 Year Olds of Cohort '08* (ESRI DCEDIY TCD 2021).
- 64 Sport Ireland, *Local Sport Partnerships Annual Report 2019* (Sport Ireland 2020) <<https://bit.ly/3bzat0Y>> accessed 19 May 2021.
- 65 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).
- 66 *ibid.*
- 67 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024 (DCEDIY 2024).
- 68 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024 (DCEDIY 2024) 15.
- 69 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024-2028* in April 2024 (DCEDIY 2024) 24.
- 70 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive' <https://bit.ly/3AeSGcK> accessed 29 June 2022.

The Department supports the National Executive of Comhairle na nÓg and ensures they can engage and meet with relevant decision makers, including Ministers.⁷¹ 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 by 50 per cent for young people aged 16 to 25 years.⁷² 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.⁷³ 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 implementation⁷⁴ and members have the opportunity to make recommendations to Government.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ In Ireland, while young people have an awareness of elections and know that they are an important form of representation, there are not enough choices that accurately represent their values and areas of interest.⁷⁷ European elections seem to be the most difficult for young people to understand and,

because of this, young people tend to focus on their own priorities as opposed to EU policies.⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ There is momentum towards extending the right to vote to young people at 16 and 17 years old internationally in countries such as Scotland and Austria.⁸⁰ The newly established Electoral Commission is due to examine and draw conclusions from the Scottish experience of lowering the voting age.⁸¹ The Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023 initiated 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.⁸² As of May 2024, the Bill is at second stage in the Seanad.⁸³

Given that children and young people experience the highest rates of poverty and social exclusion and that 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

71 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive' <https://bit.ly/3AeSGcK> accessed 29 June 2022.

72 Comhairle na nÓg, 'National Executive proposal to Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Minister for Transport' <https://bit.ly/3WBdPZD> accessed 10 May 2024.

73 Department of Transport, 'Budget 2022 to help transform how we travel' (Press Release 12 October 2021).

74 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.

75 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *National Youth Assembly of Ireland*, <https://bit.ly/3KgdC01> accessed 10 May 2024.

76 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.

77 Vladislava Gubalova and Lukas Dravecky (Eds) *Young Minds, Democratic Horizons: Paving the Way for the EU's Promising Future* (GLOBSEC 2023) 6.

78 Vladislava Gubalova and Lukas Dravecky (Eds) *Young Minds, Democratic Horizons: Paving the Way for the EU's Promising Future* (GLOBSEC 2023) 6.

79 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.

80 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.

81 Elaine Loughlin, 'New Electoral Commission to look at reducing voting age', *The Irish Examiner* (Cork, 25 January 2023).

82 Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023

83 Electoral Reform (Amendment) and Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2023

increase in both voter turnout in the long run⁸⁴ and political consciousness and engagement among adolescents.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ There is a need to give children and young people a true voice in our political system by lowering the voting age to 16.

84 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>.

85 "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>.

86 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

Budget 2025

- 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 and draw on international best practice such as the Vienna Model.
- 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, this would cost an estimated €36 million.
- The national investment in arts for children should be proportional to that for adults.

Medium-term

- The Creative Ireland Programme needs to be expanded to include all DEIS schools nationwide.
- The Creative Youth programmes, which focus, on outside-of-school activities needs to prioritise children living in poverty and inequality.

Long-term Sustainable Solutions

- Lower the voting age to 16 for Local and European Elections.

Spotlight

NATIONAL PLAY POLICY

Introduction

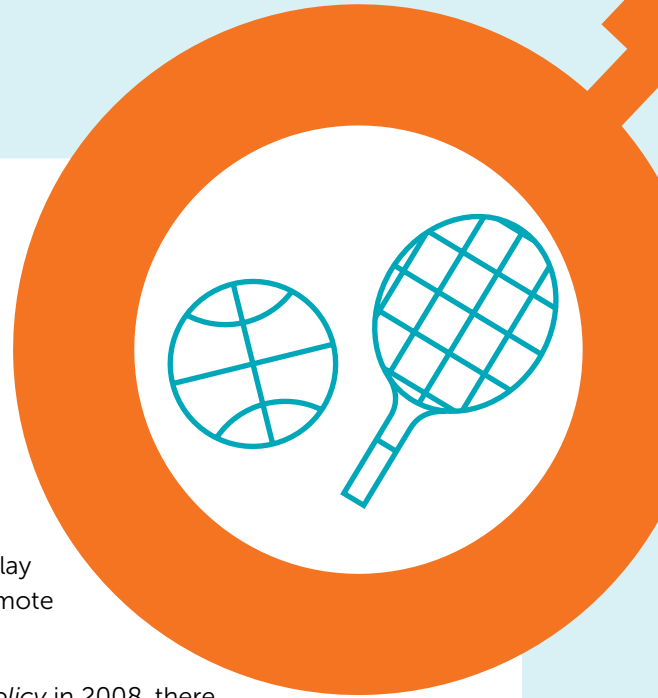
Play is an important part of childhood. Not only does it enable children to engage in creativity and have fun, but it is an important part of their physical and social development, their learning, and their wellbeing. Given the importance of play for childhood, a national policy would help to direct and promote opportunities for all children to engage in play.

Since the expiration of *Ready, Steady, Play: A National Play Policy* in 2008, there has been no overarching national policy steering local and cross government actions to ensure that all children in Ireland can realise their right to play.

Despite the lack of national policy, there has been action on a local level. This includes funding to promote National Play Day, the purpose of which is to promote and raise awareness about opportunities for children and young people to play across Ireland. The Play and Recreation Capital Funding Scheme distributes capital funding to support new and existing facilities.⁸⁷ This annual funding scheme provides €450,000 in funding to local authorities across Ireland.⁸⁸

Commitment to develop a new play policy

In November 2023, *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*, was published with a renewed focus on play and recreation and committed to move towards child and youth friendly urban spaces.⁸⁹ By 2026, it is anticipated that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) will assess current play and recreation policy, practice and provision.⁹⁰ Complimentary to this, the current *First Five A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* implementation plan commits to completing a draft play and recreation policy by 2025.⁹¹ The development of a national policy can ensure that there is a consistent approach to delivering access to play opportunities throughout the country.



87 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman announces funding to Local Authorities for the refurbishment and development of playgrounds and play areas' (Press Release 6 April 2023).

88 *ibid.*

89 Government of Ireland, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* (2023).

90 *ibid.*

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

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 150 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child.

We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

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