

Fine Gael General Election Manifesto 2024:

Securing Your Future

Law

- **Zero Tolerance of Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence**
 - We will increase the maximum sentences available for offences related to child sexual abuse, underscoring our commitment to protecting vulnerable children and ensure the punishment always matches the crime
- **Children at the Heart of our Family Law System**
 - We will fully enact this strategy and publish a successor plan to enhance the family law system in the best interests of children.
 - A new Family Court system will be established to ensure that the best interests of children are at the forefront of all family law proceedings
 - We will finish constructing a dedicated Family Law Court complex at Hammond Lane in Dublin, providing a suitable environment for family law cases.
 - We will enhance the enforcement mechanisms for Child Maintenance orders to ensure that children receive the financial support they need from both parents.
 - We will ensure proper regulation and funding for Voice of the Child and Welfare Reports, giving children a voice in legal proceedings that affect them.
- **Effective Integration and Social Cohesion**
 - In the first year of government, we will introduce a comprehensive strategy that reflects the significant increase in immigration and strong population growth over recent years.
 - We will enforce policies to protect migrants from exploitation and abuse, highlighting the social and economic benefits of migration to counter anti-immigration sentiments.

Education

- **Fine Gael's Commitment to Arts and Education**
 - Ensure that every child has access to tuition in art, music, drama, or coding through an expanded Creative Schools programme, embedding creativity within the curriculum to develop diverse skills and cultural appreciation
- **Reducing Childhood Poverty: A Path to Brighter Futures**
 - We will encourage all primary schools to establish uniform swap shops to cut costs and support sustainability
- **Making Education More Affordable for Families**
 - We will work to remove the exclusion of drivers aged over 70 years from the School Transport Scheme explore flexible work options to attract more drivers, and encourage more women to join, boosting transport availability
 - We will build on the 12% increase to the capitation rate for schools in Budget 2025 to help with increased day-to-day running costs
- **Reforming Education: Raising Standards**
 - We will continue reform of the Leaving Cert and consider:
 - Introducing open-book exams to promote critical thinking and analysis.
 - Changes to Irish language education to Leaving Cert to enhance reading and speaking skills.
 - We will increase access to third-level courses outside the points system, supporting students' diverse career paths.

- We will enable schools to host after-school care, community activities, and public access to school sports facilities, creating child-centred campuses offering a range of support services.
- We will support the rollout of a Common Application Process in areas with high demand for school places.
- We will work with school leaders to manage and limit disruptions from smartphone use in schools.
- In partnership with stakeholders and representative groups across Ireland, we will create an inclusive education model that serves students of all abilities.
- We will implement recommendations from the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act to improve educational access for children with special needs.
- We will increase funding for new school buildings to meet the growing demand for places.
- We will hold a Citizens Assembly on Education, to consider – among other issues – provision of an inclusive education for children with special educational needs.
- **Promoting Inclusion and Access in Education**
 - We will provide enhanced supports through a DEIS-plus model to ensure schools in need receive targeted help.
 - We will boost access programmes for students aiming to continue to higher and further education.
 - We will create better pathways for students who may prefer practical careers after school, ensuring options are available for all abilities.
 - We will examine and address cost barriers to the Transition Year Programme, making it affordable and accessible for more students.
 - We will increase well-being initiatives in primary and post-primary schools, including supports against bullying, online abuse, and expanded counselling resources.
 - We will develop student councils in schools to give students a voice in decision-making and help shape policies on inclusion and smartphone use.
 - We will provide free period products in schools to ensure no student is held back due to period poverty.
 - We will ensure every school for the deaf has qualified Irish Sign Language interpreters, enabling full participation in education for deaf and hearing-impaired students.
 - We will improve information-sharing between special and post-primary schools to support student transitions.
 - We will continue working on the EU-backed campus inclusion model to develop environments where all students can thrive.
 - We will implement guidelines for managing behaviours of concern to ensure that the needs of children with special educational requirements are met.
- **Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs**
 - We will establish a dedicated therapy service for students in all special schools and extend over time to special classes within mainstream schools.
 - We will introduce a common application process at the primary level for children with additional needs, building on the successful pilot in Dublin 15.
 - Recognising that children with special needs may struggle with the shift from primary to post-primary school, we will review and improve transition supports, including career guidance in special schools.

- We will implement a multi-year capital programme to provide early accommodation for special classes and special schools.
- We will establish a service to help parents navigate admissions policies, processes, and language barriers, ensuring they have access to clear information
- We will increase the number of special classes at primary and post-primary levels, adding to the existing 3,300. In 2025, we will open five new special schools to support children with complex needs.
- We will work to deliver therapy and other supports to children at the earliest possible stage.
- We will work with the relevant stakeholder groups to collect data to create more targeted, effective services for children with special needs.
- We will increase funding to allow more schools to offer Summer Programmes for students with special needs.
- We will introduce specific measures to support students with exceptional abilities.
- We will consider additional time during State exams for students with special educational needs and ensure that those who use assistive technology can do so in exams.
- We will develop a curriculum for Irish Sign Language for primary and post-primary students, including a standalone Leaving Cert subject
- **Supporting Schools, Teachers, and Education Professionals**
 - We will provide dedicated work placements in special schools and special classes as part of teacher training, with placements subject to assessment
 - We will examine how best to create administrative support roles in schools to reduce the non-educational workload of principals, assisting with tasks like managing hot meal programmes and free book schemes
 - We will explore ways to recognise teaching experience gained abroad in salary calculations, attracting qualified teachers back to Ireland.
 - We will provide teachers and SNAs with better access to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and ensure substitute cover so training can take place before the school year begins.
 - We will expand training for teachers to include essential therapy supports.
 - We will complete the SNA workforce development programme, providing clarity on their role and career paths for supporting vulnerable students.
 - We will increase the availability of training for schools opening new special classes, ensuring staff are well-prepared.
 - We will ensure school leaders have the resources they need, including funding and administrative support.
 - Recognising the important role of bus escorts, we will complete and implement the current review of their pay rates.
 - We will help schools install solar panels and other renewable technology to reduce emissions and heating costs.
 - We will establish Transport Managers to handle transportation for students with special needs, freeing principals from these logistics
- **Fostering Leadership, Innovation, and Best Practice in Schools**
 - We will offer modern leadership courses to prepare educators before they take on new responsibilities, ensuring they are equipped to lead effectively.
 - We will establish a fund for schools to support new initiatives and encourage collaboration between clusters of schools, fostering creativity and shared learning.

- We will work to improve teaching and learning methods, especially as schools adapt to digital learning and the opportunities presented by artificial intelligence.
- **Expanding Nationwide High-Speed Broadband**
 - Equip all schools with high-speed internet, ensuring that students are prepared for a digital future with access to technology resources and adaptive learning methods for diverse abilities and learning styles.
- **Active Travel Initiatives**
 - Continue rolling out the greenways programme and expand the Safe Routes to School initiative, making travel safer for young people
- **Futureproofing Ireland's Built Environment**
 - Drive the installation of solar panels in schools and third level institutions across Ireland, supporting renewable energy uptake in education facilities.
- **Education in Irish**
 - Outside the Gaeltacht, Fine Gael will:
 - Support parents choosing Irish-medium education for their children.
 - Establish gaelscoileanna and gaelcholaistí in areas where demand exists.
- **Education; Stem, Digital, and Artificial Intelligence**
 - Ensure subject choice is gender equal by focusing on teacher training and increased funding for so called nontraditional subjects in all-girl schools. Commit to a campaign in the Department of Education/Further and Higher Education –to boost leadership and IT skills, with a special focus on girls.
 - Advance education, training and maintenance of new digital skills and capacities, and particularly STEM subjects, with a special focus on girls (universal access to coding, maths and ICT classes), through training and life-long learning, and to prioritise diversity and inclusion in STEM.

Social Protection/Welfare

- **Reducing Childhood Poverty: A Path to Brighter Futures**
 - We will set an ambitious child poverty target to ensure a focus on inequality and supporting families.
 - We will ensure children have access to meals during school holidays
 - We will explore a targeted child benefit payment, and the extent to which the Working Family Payment and Child Support Payment already help to reduce poverty
 - We will extend the Free Travel Pass to children with disabilities.
 - We will provide an additional Child Benefit payment each August to ease back-to-school expenses.
 - We will increase income disregards for the One Parent Family Payment in line with National Minimum Wage increases.
 - Seek to extend the Jobseekers Transitional Payment until the youngest child completes full-time education.
- **Fairness for Families**
 - We will ensure that all primary schools offer hot meals by 2025, enhancing nutrition for children.
 - Over the lifetime of the next government, we will roll out hot meals to all secondary schools.
 - Implement the Summer 2025 Holiday Hunger pilot project: We will evaluate this initiative aimed at closing the nutritional gap during school closures.

- **Acorn, a new Child Savings Account: Investing in Every Child's Future**
 - Launch "Acorn," a savings account for every child from birth, inspired by successful models in the UK.
 - The government will establish a managed savings account for each child born each year, starting with an initial contribution of €1,000, accruing via a managed fund at a conservative interest rate of 4% per annum, compounded yearly. Each child gets a gift only once, so the costs to the exchequer are contained. Each child from a family receiving child support payments gets €1500. The government will contribute €1,000 per child only once, keeping the programme affordable for the Exchequer.
 - Enable Additional Family Savings: Parents can add up to €2,000 per year to their child's account. With this regular contribution and the government's initial €1,000, the account could reach €53,316 by the time the child turns 18.
- **Supporting Families: Accessible Resources, Tax Credits, Family-Friendly Policies, and Alternative Care**
 - Fine Gael will raise the Home Carers Tax Credit to match the PAYE Tax Credit, recognising the essential role of parents who stay at home to care for their families.
 - Extend paid family leave and introduce Pay-Related Parents Benefit modelled on the new Pay-Related Benefit, and seek to extend this to other forms of leave over time
 - Enhance Support for Foster Carers:
 - Increased Foster Care Allowance and increases in the new Initial Placement Payment.
 - Exploration of pension provisions for foster carers to acknowledge their long-term commitment and ensure valued support after their fostering years.
 - Recognise Kinship care: We will improve support for kinship care to enhance outcomes for kinship families.
- **Expanding Social Housing and Tackling Homelessness**
 - Prioritise securing private tenancies and other accommodation to prevent homelessness
 - Focus social housing allocations on getting families out of long-term homelessness.
 - We will establish the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme on a statutory footing, with annual targets for each local authority.
 - Ensure all government departments and agencies work together to help individuals exit emergency accommodation as quickly as possible.
 - Ensure Adequate Homeless Budgets: Maintain a budget that provides a bed for everyone who needs one and minimises rough sleeping.
 - Broaden the Housing First Approach: Expand Housing First, a holistic programme for individuals facing mental health, addiction, and other challenges
- **Supporting a Better System for Renters and Landlords**
 - Raise the Rent Tax Credit to €1,500 per renter, or €3,000 per couple, to alleviate rental costs and support tenants in managing expenses.
 - Maintain the Rent Pressure Zone framework to help keep rent increases under control in high-demand areas.
- **Housing Adaptation Grants**
 - Proceed with a 30% increase in the grant limits and a 25% increase in the income thresholds for the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability Scheme

- **Supporting the Traveller Community**
 - Require local authorities to deliver Traveller-specific housing and draw down their full budgets to maximise the impact of allocated funds.
 - Provide the necessary structures and resources to help local authorities deliver suitable and well-maintained accommodation for Travellers.
 - Allocate additional capital funding to enhance infrastructure on Traveller accommodation sites, improving quality and accessibility.
 - Continue to support the caravan loan scheme, offering Travellers alternative housing options suited to their lifestyle.
 - Implement the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy Action Plan: Work to fulfil the objectives of this strategy, promoting equality, inclusion, and better quality of life for the Traveller and Roma communities.
- **Community-Led Climate Action**
 - Make home retrofitting affordable for families, improving energy efficiency and reducing costs
- **Futureproofing Ireland's Built Environment**
 - Offer a grant for low-income families with homes in very poor energy condition who don't qualify for free upgrades, focusing on essential improvements like attic insulation and heating controls, especially in regions with older housing
- **Fairness for Families**
 - We will increase the monthly rate of Child Benefit.
 - Progressively increase core weekly payments in each Budget: We will commit to enhancing the financial support provided to families in each budget cycle
- **Caring for our Carers**
 - We have introduced lump sum payments to further assist carers in their essential roles.
 - We have raised the annual Carer's Support Grant to €2,000, its highest level ever, to help support those who dedicate their time to caring for others.
 - Over the lifetime of the next government, we will introduce a new Family Carer Payment of €325 per week in recognition of the vital role carers play in our society.
 - We will increase the weekly income disregard for Carer's Allowance to €1,250 for a single Carer and €2,500 for a couple in Budget 2026. We will continue to progressively increase these limits in each Budget with a view to ending the means test and transforming into the Family Carer Payment over the lifetime of the next Government
 - Increase the Annual Carer's Support Grant to €2,500
 - We will make the Free Travel Pass available to all children receiving Domiciliary Care Allowance.

Online Safety

- **Promoting Online Safety for All**
 - We will support Coimisiún na Meán in enforcing the Online Safety Code, which can fine platforms up to €20 million or 10% of annual revenue.
 - We will work with Coimisiún na Meán to inform children, young people, and their parents about their rights online under the new safety framework
 - We will act on the Online Health Taskforce's recommendations to improve digital well-being.
 - We will ensure regulators have the resources to protect citizens and offer certainty for industry.

- We will work closely with the European Commission to create a unified and effective digital regulatory framework.
- We will work on a new EU Child Sexual Abuse Directive which will put an onus on platforms to detect and remove child sexual abuse material and prevent grooming.
- We will launch a campaign, especially for parents, on the risks of excessive screen time and online dangers.
- We will increase online safety funding for schools, giving them more flexibility in how to use it.
- We will ensure the effective implementation of the new action plan on bullying and implement measures to tackle cyber bullying.
- We will tackle the use of recommender algorithms protecting children from harmful content.

Early Years/Childcare

- **Better Early Childhood Care and Education**
 - Cap Childcare Costs: We'll limit childcare costs to €200 per month per child, or €600 for a family with more than 3 children.
 - Expand Early Learning Places: We'll create 30,000 new early learning places in public early learning and school aged care services by 2030, offering full day and school-age care in areas of unmet need to close existing gaps and prepare for future demand. We will include an opt-in for private and community providers where appropriate.
 - The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme will provide an extra hour of free care each day in the second year of preschool.
 - We'll offer flexible options for parents of children who don't qualify for the full two-year ECCE due to their date of birth.
 - Extend free care and education for pre-school children from 3 to 4 hours/day (ECCE)
 - Make ECCE a Legal Entitlement: All eligible children will have a right to access the ECCE programme.
 - We will enable schools to host before and after-school care and plan the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme.
 - Boost Access for Children with Disabilities and Disadvantaged Families: We'll increase participation in the Access and Inclusion Model and the Equal Start programme
 - Include Childminders in the National Childcare Scheme: We'll extend the scheme's benefits to all childminders.
 - We'll review and establish fair, progressive wages for childcare workers in public services and support pay increases across the sector to attract and retain talent.
 - We'll remove barriers in education and training for early years educators to broaden access to the profession.
 - We'll review Core Funding to ensure it meets providers' needs and reduce their administrative workload.
 - Review the 2001 Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put into use.
 - We'll start a broad consultation with families, educators, and providers, and within 100 days, release a detailed Action Plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system with State-led facilities to add capacity.

- **Supporting Childminders as Part of Affordable Childcare**
 - We will extend the National Childcare Scheme to cover childminders working in families' homes, with sensible regulations that fit home-based care.
 - We'll continue funding grants that help childminders improve safety and quality through essential toys, equipment, and technology.
 - We'll guide childminders through the registration process and expand access to local training opportunities.
- **Baby bundles for every Newborn:**
 - Fine Gael will give every newborn and their parents a Baby Bundle, providing essential items to support them from day one. Each bundle will include blankets, nappies, a digital ear thermometer, clothes, and other necessities, along with a letter introducing the family to their new Acorn savings account, ensuring every child gets an equal start in life.
- **Strengthening Tusla to Protect and Support Children**
 - Our goal is to create a well-resourced, robust Tusla capable of safeguarding every child in need.
 - We will strengthen measures aimed at preventing violence against children and ensure prompt access to comprehensive support for children who are victims or witnesses of violence, supported by the expansion of the Barnahus model.
 - We will ensure Tusla has the funding to recruit and retain vital frontline staff and foster carers. We will also work with third level institutions to increase the supply of social work graduates.
 - To ensure effective and mandatory co-operation between state agencies we will put the inter-agency committee on vulnerable children on a statutory footing.
 - We will develop a national plan on alternative care which will include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places. It will also set out a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future examining initiatives to prevent admissions into care, new placement options, recruitment and retention. It will be strongly linked to our action plan for foster carers.
 - We will increase training opportunities and support programmes for Tusla staff and carers to enhance service quality.
 - We will place the National Review Panel on a statutory footing.
 - We will ensure children have access to legal support, and confidential and child-friendly complaints mechanisms, in education and care settings for reporting of violence and abuse.
 - We will provide training on children's rights and child-friendly proceedings for the judiciary, lawyers and law enforcement officials, and consider the introduction of a specialised child justice court model.
 - We will strengthen public education programmes to increase awareness of child sexual abuse and exploitation, including the need for online safety.
- **Fuelling Ireland's Cultural Landscape**
 - Introduce and expand arts programming in early childhood education and care settings, nurturing creativity from a young age
- **Promoting Gaelige and Supporting Gaeltacht Communities**
 - Strengthen naionraí to ensure early education access in Gaeltacht communities and support naionraí in areas beyond the Gaeltacht
 - Expand immersive Irish education in the early years of primary school, providing a solid language foundation for Gaeltacht children

Health

- **Reducing Childhood Poverty: A Path to Brighter Futures**
 - We will provide free GP care for all children and young people under 18
- **Building a Stronger Child Health Workforce**
 - Within 100 days undertake a consultation with all relevant representative bodies to identify practical recruitment and retention initiatives, including sign up and retention payments for staff in child and adolescent mental health and children's disability services to address acute needs and positively impact children's futures. All public sector wage measures will be taken with regard to the current public service wage agreement
 - We'll double college places in Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, and Speech and Language Therapy, and engage with third level institutions to make assessed placements in special education and disability courses a key component in therapy and teacher training
 - We'll help therapy assistants qualify as therapists and encourage retired therapists to return, while increasing the number of Therapy Assistant positions through FETAC programmes to better support therapists
 - We'll develop apprenticeship programmes to fill critical clinical support roles.
 - We will provide funding for private assessments of need for long waiting families and introduce a similar initiative to access therapies and mental health supports, while legislating for the National Treatment Purchase Fund to increase access in the longer term.
 - We will increase Public Health Nurse numbers through a sponsorship scheme for nurses training in public health.
 - In collaboration with stakeholders and parents, we'll review the 2005 Disability Act to improve service delivery, support the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and ensure we can deliver assessments of need in a timely way.
- **Supporting Families: Accessible Resources, Tax Credits, Family-Friendly Policies, and Alternative Care**
 - We will drive the early establishment of the Assisted Human Reproduction Regulatory Authority, commit to commencing the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024 within the first 100 days, and enact without delay supplementary legislation. We will introduce leave for parents through surrogacy.
 - We will enhance support for breastfeeding with a government-wide strategy, funding for community initiatives, more lactation consultants in hospitals and communities, and increased support for voluntary breastfeeding groups.
- **Promoting Health and Wellness in Schools**
 - We will introduce a holistic wellness programme that addresses urgent health and social issues facing young people today.
 - We will focus on physical activity, nutrition, mental wellbeing, and positive social behaviour in schools, aiming for 60 minutes of daily activity for children of all abilities.
 - We will promote inter-school competitions, sports festivals, and collaboration with parents, local sports clubs, and national sporting organisations to create a dynamic, inclusive approach to physical activity.
 - Starting with a pilot in high-need areas, we will monitor outcomes, gather feedback, and work with school communities to ensure consistency for a wider rollout.

- **Healthy Starts, Healthy Lives**
 - Promote at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity for children of all abilities through schools and community initiatives
 - Equip schools with resources to better promote physical activity and health
- **Women's and Girls' Health**
 - We will advocate for a coordinated effort at the European level to procure the HPV vaccine, ensuring equitable access for both boys and girls across Ireland
- **Preventative Health**
 - Enhance early detection practices in accordance with international best practices
 - Reach underserved communities, including homeless individuals and the Traveller and Roma populations.
- **Supporting and Expanding GP Services**
 - Implement Smile agus Sláinte: We will fully roll out this initiative, which includes preventive dental packages for children and adults, along with workforce planning actions to increase capacity and ensure timely access to local dental services
 - We will target recruitment efforts to provide dental care in schools, ensuring that children receive essential dental services
- **Better Hospital and Emergency Care**
 - Open the National Children's Hospital: We will complete and open this facility to ensure specialised and integrated care for children.
- **Paediatric Spinal Surgery**
 - Resource the Paediatric Spinal Surgery Management Unit: We will ensure continuous funding is allocated to the unit, focusing on reducing waiting lists and enhancing service delivery for paediatric spinal surgery.
 - While these improvements are implemented, we will also leverage capacity in private hospitals, both domestically and internationally. Families of children requiring surgery will receive comprehensive support, including assistance with flights, accommodation, travel insurance, and other expenses.
- **More Effective Supports for Cancer Patients**
 - Implement the Model of Care for PsychoOncology for patients aged 0-24, addressing the psychological impact of a cancer diagnosis
- **Disability**
 - We will create additional residential places for both adults and children to meet the growing demand for services
- **Mental Health**
 - We will continue to hire mental health professionals, particularly in community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and expand psychology assistant posts enhancing the capacity of primary care psychology services
 - Create a central referral mechanism: This will simplify referrals to community paediatric services, including CAMHS, ensuring that no child is placed on the wrong waiting list
 - Examine and implement targeted supports for children with autism experiencing mental health challenges
 - We will leverage telehealth, particularly for young people, to improve access to mental health services.
 - We will create an app to support the mental health needs of young people

Other

- **Community Initiatives**
 - Triple the My Open Library facilities and enhance library sensory spaces for inclusive community use.
 - Progressively increase funding for the Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme which is critical to addressing social exclusion and disadvantage in communities
- **Fuelling Ireland's Cultural Landscape**
 - Introduce a €300 Culture Card for 16 and 17-year-olds to access theatre, music, and art events, making cultural experiences more accessible for young people
 - Continue funding Creative Youth, ensuring inclusivity and access for young people of diverse backgrounds interested in the arts
- **Sporting and Leisure Facilities in All Towns**
 - Implement the National Swimming Strategy and set an objective so that 95% of children will have access to a pool within a 30-minute journey from home or school.
- **Empowering Women**
 - Complete, extend, and update the National Strategy for Women and Girls
 - Increased funding and support will be directed towards female sports at both national and local levels, including specific programmes for young girls in primary and secondary schools to inspire future generations
- **Supporting Families: Accessible Resources, Tax Credits, Family-Friendly Policies, and Alternative Care**
 - We will increase the number of Family Resource Centres, while exploring ways to better support non-profit and social enterprise organisations.