

## Social Democrats General Election Manifesto 2024:

### The Future Starts Here

#### Law

- **Ending Child Poverty**
  - Ensure that policy in relation to children is underpinned by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- **Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence**
  - Ensure training on domestic abuse and coercive control is available for legal professionals in the family law and criminal justice systems.
  - Establish mechanisms to prevent the current siloing of criminal justice, private family law and public law childcare processes in relation to domestic and sexual violence.
  - Ensure policy on DSGBV has a strong focus on children and that refuges are funded to specifically support and accommodate children traumatised by domestic violence and abuse.
  - Resource and implement the Family Law Reform Strategy and the Family Justice Strategy
  - Initiate new legislative powers to enable An Garda Síochána to remove abusers from the family home where appropriate.
  - Amend legislation so a parent convicted of the murder or manslaughter of the other parent does not retain guardianship of a surviving child or children, and ensure a person cannot financially profit from murder or manslaughter.
- **A Fairer, More Efficient Immigration System**
  - Build, as per the government White Paper, new reception and integration centres for international protection applicants. Vulnerability Assessments should be carried out to determine accommodation and service needs, and there must be a particular focus on the needs of children who come to Ireland, with or without their families.
  - Immediate family reunification is currently only available to workers on Critical Skills Permits. We would end this discrimination and extend family reunification rights to GEP holders with full time jobs.
- **LGBTQI+ Rights**
  - Amend the Assisted Human Reproduction Act and reform the Children and Family Relationships Act to ensure equality for children of LGBTQI+ people and ensure full legal recognition for trans parents.
  - Implement the recommendations of the Government's Review of the Gender Recognition Act to provide legal gender recognition to non-binary people and trans people aged 16 and older
  - Legislate to protect the rights of intersex people – including a ban on infant genital mutilation.
- **Justice and Penal Reform**
  - Recognise that a properly functioning and accessible court service is essential to providing access to justice. We will conduct a full review of existing facilities, and

allocate an appropriate budget to build the dedicated Family Law and Children's Court at Hammond Lane

- Review and reform the in camera rule in family courts.
- Establish a Statutory Maintenance Authority, separate from the family courts, to manage payments of family maintenance.
- Develop an interdepartmental strategy to support children with a parent in prison.

### **Social Welfare/Protection**

#### • Ending Homelessness

- Build 70,000 social homes over a 5-year term.
- Scale up the delivery of Housing First tenancies. Endless cycles of temporary emergency accommodation are costly, cruel, and ultimately ineffective in tackling homelessness.
- End 'no-fault evictions' to protect renters from the trauma of becoming homeless.
- Double investment in homeless prevention measures to help stop more people becoming homeless.
- Instruct the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) to conduct independent inspections of all homeless services.
- Tackle hidden homelessness and take steps to ensure the housing needs of those not presenting to services, but still effectively homeless, are met.
- Implement a strategy to eliminate youth homelessness, with a strong focus on those exiting care. Our strategy will be disability proofed, LGBTQ+ inclusive, and will address issues faced by Travellers and other minorities.

#### • Ending Child Poverty

- Set a clear target in the next Programme for Government that consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated by 2030
- Acknowledge that children live in households with adults. Therefore, child poverty cannot be eliminated without lifting the households in which they live out of poverty. Working-age income supports are part of the solution.
- Benchmark our social protection system to the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living to ensure everyone has enough to live a decent and dignified life
- Set the Qualified Child Increase payment at a level that properly reflects the costs of raising children and the depths of child poverty in Ireland
- Use the Working Family Payment to support low-income families who are at work.
- Examine the possibility for reform of certain payments to better target child poverty, including the possibility of an additional (targeted) tier of child benefit.
- Increase supports for Foster Carers to a level that better reflects both the cost of raising children and the benefits of having children in foster homes rather than institutional care.
- Introduce a statutory Child Maintenance Service.
- Increase funding for Tusla and recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- Poverty-proof Government Budgets

- **Tackling the Problem of Low Income**
  - Prioritise increases in social welfare payments that will target the most vulnerable and reduce poverty rates. This will include using targeted payments like the Fuel Allowance, the Living Alone Increase, the Working Family Payment, and the Qualified Child Increase
  - Benchmark core social welfare rates to the MESL over time, to ensure income adequacy.
  - Extend the Jobseekers Transitional Payment to take account of whether the child/children are in education.
- **Caring for Carers**
  - Develop a new National Carers Strategy.
  - Abolish the means test for Carer's Allowance.
  - Ensure that the rate of Carer's Allowance is set at a level that reflects the work carried out by carers and the contribution that they make to society.
  - Invest to ensure carers have proper access to necessary Respite.
  - Working in consultation with carers and their representatives, create a suite of policies that support carers to enter (or remain in) employment or education where they wish to do so.
  - Continue to develop the supports and services available to family carers throughout the country, including with adjustments to the Carer's Support Grant, Domiciliary Care Allowance, Home Carer Tax Credit, and other policy levers.
  - Expand the Free Travel Scheme to include people in receipt of the Domiciliary Care Allowance
- **Our Child Care System**
  - Conduct a review of Tusla's remit and functioning and create a sustainable workforce plan.
  - Increase funding for Tusla and recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
  - Develop a mechanism to ensure that the work of foster carers is properly recognised by the State Pension system.
  - Auto-enrol foster carers for the Back-to-School Allowance.
  - Work with foster carers and their representatives to ensure that a fit-for-purpose system of start-up payments, allowances and other supports is in place
- **A New Deal for Families**
  - Increase paid parents' leave by 4 weeks for each parent, to a total of 13 weeks each
  - Increase benefit payments to €350 per week for Maternity, Paternity, Adoptive and Parents' benefit
  - We should also be moving to a situation where the overall amount of paid and unpaid leave for parents is extended to the European average of around 100 weeks per child
  - We would also like to see the general child qualifying age for unpaid parental leave extended to 16 years
  - We would also reform the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 to provide additional support to one-parent families, acknowledging the disparity in benefit of paid parents' leave compared with two-parent families

- **Improved Flexible Work Options**
  - Recognise that parents of children with disabilities and certain carers have particular demands on their time and require further flexibility.
  - Raise the qualifying child age for unpaid parental leave to 16 years and to 18 years for children with disabilities.
  - Make it compulsory for employers with more than 250 employees to make publicly available their policies regarding their financial contributions to Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave and Parents' Leave for their employees.
- **Other Priorities**
  - Expand leave entitlements to those who suffer from early miscarriage or require other fertility or reproductive health-related treatment

## **Education**

- **Education and Prevention**
  - Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools (primary and secondary) have access to at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist as a permanent member of the staff. This will begin with a local area team, first, before evolving to one per school
  - Reconstitute NEPS and expand it as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service (NEPCS) and mandate it to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools
  - Ensure that all secondary schools have a guidance counsellor, distinct from specialist emotional counsellors/therapists.
- **Supporting Autistic People**
  - Develop a mandatory national training programme on autism for all school staff
- **Transport**
  - Build a Comprehensive School Transport system
- **Safer School Trips**
  - We will work to provide safe walking and cycling paths around every school in the country, so that those children who choose to walk, scoot or cycle to school can do so safely.
- **Make Primary and Secondary Education Truly Free**
  - Fully funding all school textbooks and classroom resources, abolishing payments for the school transport scheme, and providing capitation grants at such a level as to remove the need for voluntary contributions.
  - Fund hot school meals in every school over the lifetime of the next government
  - Invest in the establishment of more school Breakfast Clubs.
  - End the state subsidy of fee-paying schools over the course of the next Government, and invest these funds in public education.
- **Investing in Our Educators and Infrastructure**
  - Reduce the student/teacher ratio at primary level to 20:1 and at secondary level to 18:1.
  - Fully restore posts of responsibility in primary and secondary schools
  - Recruit additional Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and recognise the contribution of our SNAs and further professionalise the sector by providing improved job security, further

education opportunities, and a clearer career pathway, in consultation with their representatives

- Accelerate the school investment programme and phase out the use of pre-fabs in schools
- **Targeting Disadvantage, Investing in Wellbeing**
  - Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools (primary and secondary) have at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist as a permanent member of staff. This will begin with a local area team, evolving to one per school
  - Establish a DEIS+ scheme to provide multidisciplinary teams to address intergenerational poverty, including counsellors/ play therapists for the most disadvantaged areas
  - Continue to fund the School Completion Programme, and develop a new employment framework for SCPs to retain staff.
  - Extend the Home School Liaison Scheme to more schools
  - Reconstitute NEPS and expand it as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all schools. This will help schools dealing with complex needs that teachers are not qualified to deal with
  - Work to reduce the barriers that exist for many young people accessing their right to education, e.g. the use of reduced school timetables violates a child's right to education and should be exceptional; schools should be resourced to provide supports as required
  - Increase the school meals programme budget by 20 per cent to improve food quality
  - Step up investment in guidance counselling to support student emotional wellbeing and future career development.
  - Develop an Arts & Social Inclusion in Education Strategy to promote a whole school approach to the arts and creativity, and develop community arts spaces for young people especially in areas of higher poverty
  - Invest in books to encourage children to read for pleasure, by establishing an annual School Library Grant and having a long-term aim of a school library (with a librarian) in every school.
  - Ensure every child has access to nature by establishing School Gardens in urban schools.
- **Ensuring Equality and Inclusivity in Education**
  - Establish a Citizens' Assembly to make recommendations on the future of the education system, including how it might better reflect and serve a more modern, inclusive and diverse Ireland
  - Aim to remove 'faith formation' from the school day, with it to be provided as an afterschool option, and use the time for a new ethical education programme as part of SPHE, along with enhanced time for other subjects.
  - Rigorously follow through on school divestment as per recommendations from the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage
  - Amend the Employment Equality Act so teachers cannot face religious discrimination.

- Ensure children’s relationship and sexuality education that is informed by best practice in science and healthcare, with a standardised curriculum across all publicly funded schools.
- **Ensuring Educational Equality for Children with Learning Difficulties**
  - Review the EPSEN Act to bring it in line with the UNCRPD and then fully enact it.
  - Develop a road map and strategic plan on Special Education and Inclusive Education, codesigned with children and families. The strategy will ensure all school buildings are accessible and suitable to support all children, that educators and school staff have training which is firmly focused on children's rights, and will develop a system wide model to enable access to therapies in schools.
  - Invest in more speech and language support, shared between schools if necessary.
  - Ensure that every disabled child or child with additional educational needs gets access to a school place in the same time frame as every other child in the country.
  - Ensure that all schools are resourced to meet the needs of all children with adequate special education teachers, SNAs and any other resource children require to access their right to education.
  - Support the call for increased time in state examinations for students with dyslexia.
  - Provide additional funding for accessible educational material for deaf, blind, or vision impaired students.
  - Compile disaggregated data on the education experience of disabled children and children with additional educational needs
- **Education and Equality**
  - Ensure universal access to arts education at both primary and secondary levels.
  - Expand the Creative Schools programme and ensure it continues beyond the life of the Creative Ireland initiative.
  - Ensure all National Cultural Institutions take action to promote equality, diversity, inclusivity and accessibility.
  - Introduce Drama and Theatre Studies as a Leaving Cert subject.
  - Support the rebalancing of arts curricula to ensure a more equitable gender representation.
  - Provide an additional Arts budget for DEIS schools.
- **The Irish Language**
  - Creating a new strategy for Irish in the Education System from Early Childhood to Third Level, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, linking all stages of the system.
  - Improving supports to teachers and leaders in English medium schools to ensure the full delivery of the Primary Language Curriculum, including training support for the delivery of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), to support the teaching of other subjects through Irish.
  - Advocating for better emphasis on oral proficiency in Irish at secondary level, similar to education models in place in Wales
  - Enabling more young people to attend Irish language summer schools by expanding funding for scholarship programmes

- **Promoting Active and Healthy Lifestyles**
  - Require all schools to have healthy food policies and provide guidelines on school lunches.
- **Better, More Affordable Public Services**
  - We will also ensure that school managers adopt a principle of cost-minimisation in relation to school uniforms and other school costs
  - We will invest in more primary school teachers, supports for special needs, and strive towards the full commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 so that parents of children with special needs do not need to campaign eternally for their child's rights
- **Empowering Youth**
  - Review the CAO points system in partnership with young people, teachers and higher education institutions, to develop a fairer framework for third level admissions.
- **Traveller and Roma Equality**
  - Resource existing policy commitments to improve access to, and outcomes in, employment and education for Travellers and Roma, including allocating resources to support children at all levels of education.
- **Other Priorities**
  - Improve LGBTQI+ inclusive relationships and sexuality education in schools.
- **Separation of Church and State**
  - Establish a Citizens' Assembly to make recommendations on the future of the education system, including how it might better reflect and serve a more modern, inclusive and diverse Ireland

## **Online Safety**

- **Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Violence**
  - Work to combat online gender-based violence, including intimate image abuse, and address the harms of online pornography
  - Make technology platforms accountable for their content and business models, including for algorithms which push violent, extremist and pornographic material to young people.
- **Protecting Children Online**
  - Enact specific and effective legislation to protect children online, by regulating 'preferences algorithms' and ensuring that engagement-based recommendation algorithms are turned off by default.
  - Expand the mandate of Coimisiún na Meán so they have authority to instruct for content to be taken down from online platforms on the basis that it represents misinformation or disinformation.
  - Provide guidelines for best practice for smartphone use by children, including no smartphones for children while in primary/secondary school, and age verification requirements for social media.
  - Provide education on digital and media literacy in schools, including by having misinformation – and how to identify it – included in primary and secondary school curricula via SPHE.

- Provide resources to support public health awareness campaigns, wellbeing training, and support services for schools.
- Enact stricter rules on influencers, including around what they can promote, and guidance around how they promote it. For example, promoting cosmetic surgery has been banned in France and promotional images promoting cosmetics must come with a disclaimer if they have been altered or a filter has been used

### Early Years/Childcare

- **Ending Child Poverty**
  - Automatically fund 'sponsorship' for childcare as full-day care (min 40 hrs p/week) with a minimum capitation rate of €350 per child per week, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year, for children experiencing the worst deprivation.
- **The Irish Language**
  - Supporting training for early years practitioners to work in Irish language settings.
- **Childcare- A Public Model of Early Childhood Education and Care**
  - Begin building a public model of early childhood education and care (ECEC) built around three core principles:
    - Universal access
    - High quality
    - Public good
  - Create a National Childcare Agency that would run this public ECEC service
  - Ensure affordability for parents, by capping fees at €250 per child per month, with a cap of €200 for lower income households
  - Invest €100m every year to acquire 80 childcare facilities as part of building a base level of public capacity in the sector
  - Conduct an audit of purpose-built settings lying vacant around the country, with a view to acquiring a number of these to begin building public capacity.
  - Invest significant capital spending over our term in government to directly build additional settings in the areas most in need, including, where possible, on the grounds on other educational campuses, and ensure that no new schools in Ireland are built without an early year setting
  - Focus on using ECEC funding to disrupt the cycle of poverty and exclusion which exists in many parts of Ireland
  - Target ECEC funding to ensure access to high-quality, full-day care throughout the year for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion
  - Ensure sponsorship under the National Childcare Scheme reflects the 'real' cost of provision for children facing adversity
  - Sustain and upscale the important work of the Area Based Childhood Programmes.
  - Take measures to ensure a highly skilled and fairly remunerated ECEC workforce.
  - More Community-based infrastructure of ECEC in Ireland.
  - Equal Participation in ECEC for Children experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion.
  - Adequate levels of Sponsorship for children experiencing extreme vulnerability.



## Health

- **Supporting Autistic People**
  - Hire additional caseworkers to support Early Intervention and School Age Teams for autistic children's referrals around the country
- **Public Dental Service**
  - Increase investment in the HSE public dental service and expand the capacity of services for children and special care patients
- **Other Healthcare Priorities**
  - Provide a sustainable level of funding for LauraLynn Children's Hospice, and commit to develop, implement and resource a new national policy on Palliative Care for Children with Life-limiting Conditions.
  - Address children's spinal surgery waiting lists and honour the four-month target for scoliosis surgery
  - Include SMA and SCID screening in the newborn bloodspot screening test and endeavour to expand the spectrum of conditions screened for in Ireland, aligning our national screening programmes with best practices across Europe
  - Update the Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) prevention plan and develop FASD diagnostic and treatment pathways
- **The Key Role of GPs**
  - Continue the phased rolling out free GP care to all age groups. It will mean that basic services that are key to a child's development such as public health nursing, speech and language therapy, and eye, ear and dental services will be significantly improved so that parents can rely on them if their child needs them.
- **Mental Health**
  - Fully staffing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Teams, and expanding Adult Community Mental Health Teams
  - Significantly reduced waiting times for Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and it would address the significant regional imbalances in waiting times.
  - Massive investment in the recruitment of extra psychologists for the National Educational Psychology Service and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health.
  - Implement the recommendations of the Inspector of Mental Health Services July 2023 report into CAMHS, including the independent regulation of CAMHS by the Mental Health Commission.
  - Implement the recommendations of Families for Reform of CAMHS
  - Work towards the full clinical and administrative staffing of CAMHS teams. This includes working towards the aim of establishing 16 CAMHS-Intellectual Disability teams. This will help to improve access, and reduce CAMHS waiting times
  - Expand CAMHS to cover young people up to age 25, in line with international best practice, and improve focus on early intervention, targeting programmes at young adults 18-25.
  - Restore CAMHS bed capacity to 72, moving towards the necessary 115 beds over time
  - Expand services for young people that do not qualify for CAMHS, including by resourcing primary care and community-based mental health teams to provide a more comprehensive service

- Increase investment organisations that specialise in youth mental health services to allow them to expand service provision.
- Develop national standards of youth mental health services, driven by the regulation of CAMHS.
- **Better, More Affordable Public Services**
  - We will provide additional funding for public health nursing and want to see some of this investment going to dedicated child and family public health nurses
- **Traveller and Roma Equality**
  - Continue to seek to identify the specific physical and mental health needs of the Traveller Community, particularly with regard to Traveller youth mental health, and use these to inform a new health action plan for 2027 onwards.
- **Promoting Active and Healthy Lifestyles**
  - Introduce a ban on all food advertising aimed at children.
  - Invest heavily in sport and recreation, ensuring that there are grant allocations on an annual basis and that qualifying criteria are strongly skewed towards driving participation.
  - Promote safe cycling as a viable option for children.

## **Other**

- **Transport**
  - Providing free public transport for under 18s.
- **Arts and Culture**
  - Introduce an annual Culture Voucher, worth €200, to encourage 18–24-year-olds to take part in cultural activities.
- **Empowering Youth**
  - The Social Democrats are proposing a €150 Sports and Cultural Activity voucher for all children aged 6 to 18. This voucher would ensure that children get to participate in their chosen sport or activity for free, or at a heavily subsidised price.
  - Seek an amendment to the Local Authority Strategic Policy Committee scheme to provide two spaces on each Strategic Policy Committee for young people
  - Continue to support the expansion of Gaisce – The President’s Award and its role in supporting the development of Ireland’s young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation, or who are otherwise vulnerable.
  - Increase funding for youth work services, restoring youth work funding to pre-austerity levels. All young people who wish to avail of youth work services should be able to benefit from them
  - Reform the capital budget for youth work services to ensure it is more accessible, and increase capital investment to create and develop community spaces and facilities that offer opportunities to young people.
  - Examine the needs of the sector and establish an investment fund for youth work facilities and infrastructural improvements.
  - Commit to multi-annual funding of youth projects, that includes ongoing and evolving provision for supports that will retain and develop youth workers

- **Supporting the Community and Voluntary Sector**
  - Increase funding for Family Resource Centres to allow for the optimum core funding levels identified.
- **Supporting Gardaí, Preventing Crime**
  - Invest in youth facilities and youth work to help prevent young people entering crime.
- **Ending Child Poverty**
  - Replicate targeted area-based investment similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving learning and well-being outcomes