

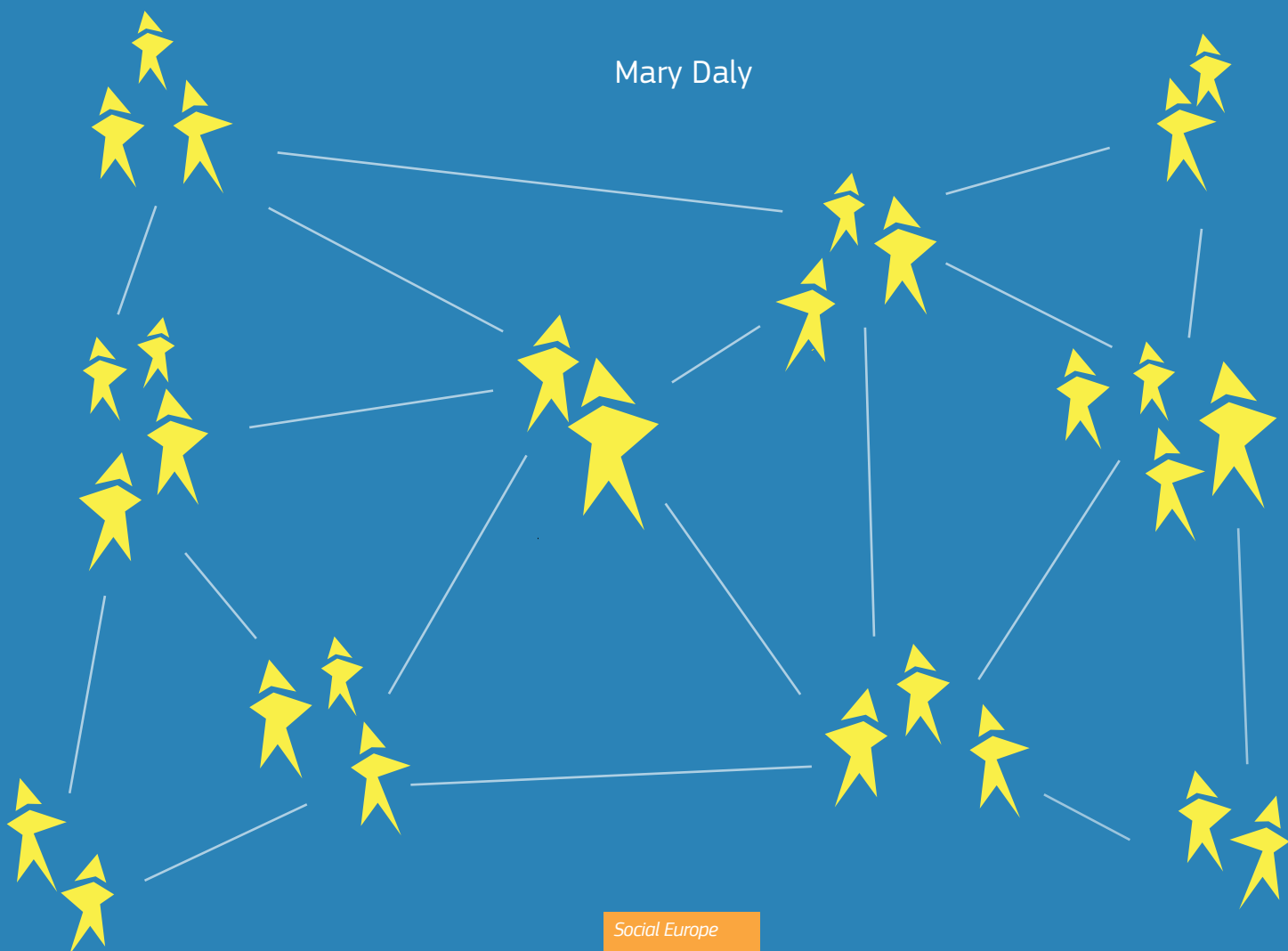


EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

Social protection and inclusion policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis

Ireland

Mary Daly



Social Europe

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
Directorate D — Social Rights and Inclusion
Unit D.2 — Social Protection

Contact: Giulia Pagliani

E-mail: Giulia.PAGLIANI@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

European Social Policy Network (ESPN)

**ESPN Thematic Report:
Social protection and inclusion
policy responses to the
COVID-19 crisis**

Ireland

2021

Mary Daly

The European Social Policy Network (ESPN) was established in July 2014 on the initiative of the European Commission to provide high-quality and timely independent information, advice, analysis and expertise on social policy issues in the European Union and neighbouring countries.

The ESPN brings together into a single network the work that used to be carried out by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, the Network for the Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms (ASISP) and the MISSOC (Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection) secretariat.

The ESPN is managed by the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER) and APPLICA, together with the European Social Observatory (OSE).

For more information on the ESPN, see:

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Manuscript completed in July 2021

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Summary

Between Monday 3 February 2020 and Sunday 18 April 2021, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people was 6,740 for the EU-27 as a whole; in Ireland, it was 4,995. The total number of deaths per 100,000 people was 151 for the EU-27 versus 99 in Ireland.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Ireland was on 29 February 2020. On 12 March, schools, pre-schools and further and higher education settings were instructed to close (initially for the period to 29 March). Pubs were advised to close on 15 March. On 27 March, Ireland entered full lockdown with the mandatory closure of all non-essential businesses and advice to citizens that they should only leave their homes for essential trips. The rollout and take-up of income support measures was very rapid. By the week ending 24 April, there were more than 1.1 million persons in receipt of state support interventions, mainly organised in terms of a newly introduced Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and a Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

Ireland entered a second period of full level-5 restriction (or lockdown) on 30 December 2020 (having had various but lighter-touch, level-5 restrictions in place since October but easing these on 1 December 2020). The lockdown continued to 26 April from whence it is being gradually eased. Many of the income and job support and other measures that had been introduced in the first lockdown were continued or reintroduced.

The pandemic occasioned significant response from Ireland, with both the social welfare and tax systems used extensively to construct a far-reaching system of income and employment supports. The response saw unprecedented levels of state activism along four main dimensions: a) instituting a new (but temporary) set of unemployment and illness payments; b) extending the existing contingency-based income supports; c) instituting a system of support to employers to retain their employees on the payroll; and d) instituting a moratorium on rent increases and evictions.

Since all the measures were temporary and intended to be short-term, it is difficult to see them having a long-term impact. But they do shed a light on the existing system in Ireland and also indicate possibilities for reform. Among the strengths demonstrated by the Irish social protection system during the pandemic are its wide reach in terms of contingencies covered, its strong administrative apparatus and public and government confidence in it.

Among the weaknesses are the complex routes to qualifying – with more than two-thirds of the support programmes for people of working age being social assistance (and hence conditional) payments/benefits. This among other things makes the system bureaucratic which hindered its capacity for rapid response to the 'shock' of the pandemic (especially in the initial period). A second issue raised by the pandemic concerns the degree of integration of the tax and social security systems. With income support for individuals organised through the social welfare system and that for employers lodged in the tax system, there are gaps and potential overlaps in who is being supported through which system as well as some reports of fraud. There is also, thirdly, the issue of benefit adequacy in terms of payments. Some have commented on the gap between the value of the PUP of some €140 and that of the usual unemployment benefit.

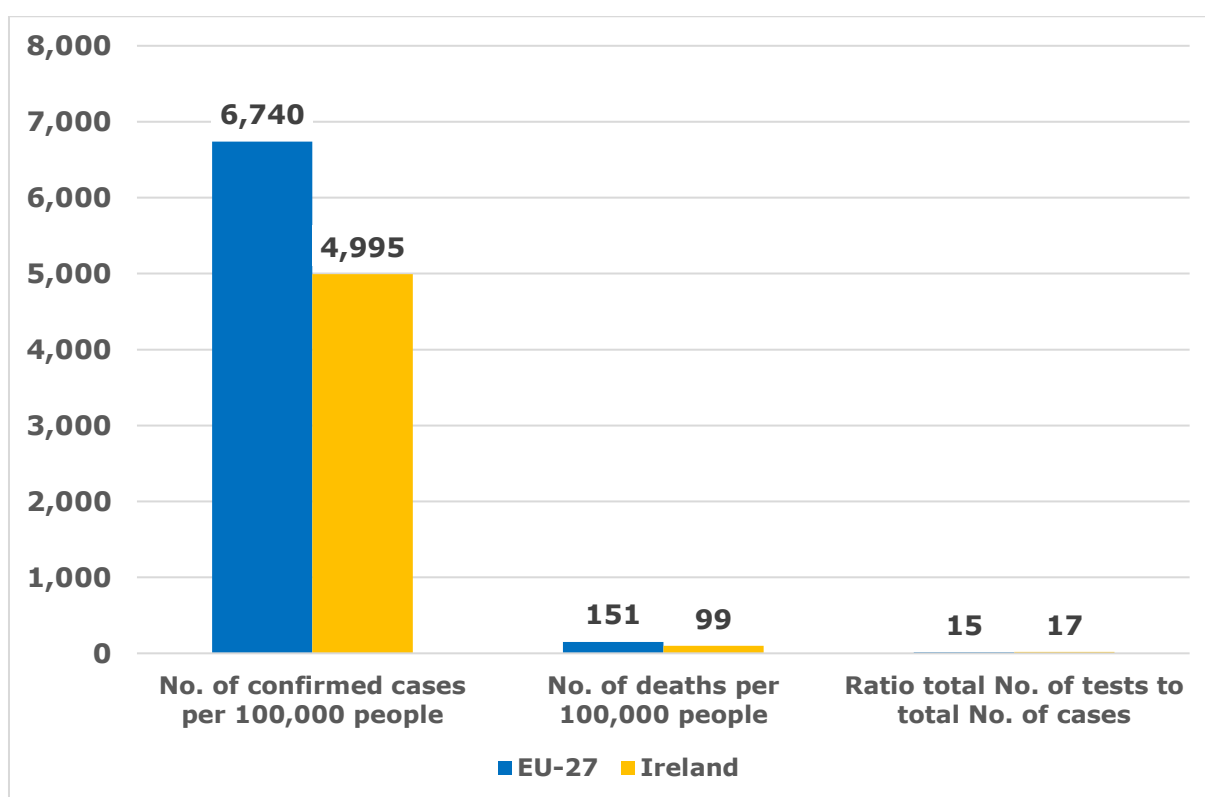
In terms of impact, it is difficult to see whether the pandemic will have a large impact on the Irish system of social and employment. This is because the main measures were temporary and 'add ons' to the system rather than heralding reform. However, as elsewhere, the pandemic has raised for debate issues around inequality and social exclusion and is acting to place the spotlight on benefit adequacy and especially the housing provisions and supports for those who have to rent in the private sector.

1 TRENDS OF THE PANDEMIC AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT¹

1.1 Epidemiological situation

During the 63 weeks considered for these three indicators (from Monday 3 February 2020 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people was 6,740 for the EU-27 as a whole; in Ireland, it was 4,995. The total number of deaths per 100,000 people was 151 for the EU-27 versus 99 in Ireland. The ratio of the total number of COVID-19 tests conducted to the total number of confirmed cases was 15.3 for the EU-27 and 17.3 for Ireland.

Figure 1: Total number of COVID-19 cases and deaths per 100,000 people & ratio of total number of COVID-19 tests to total number of cases, 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and IRELAND)

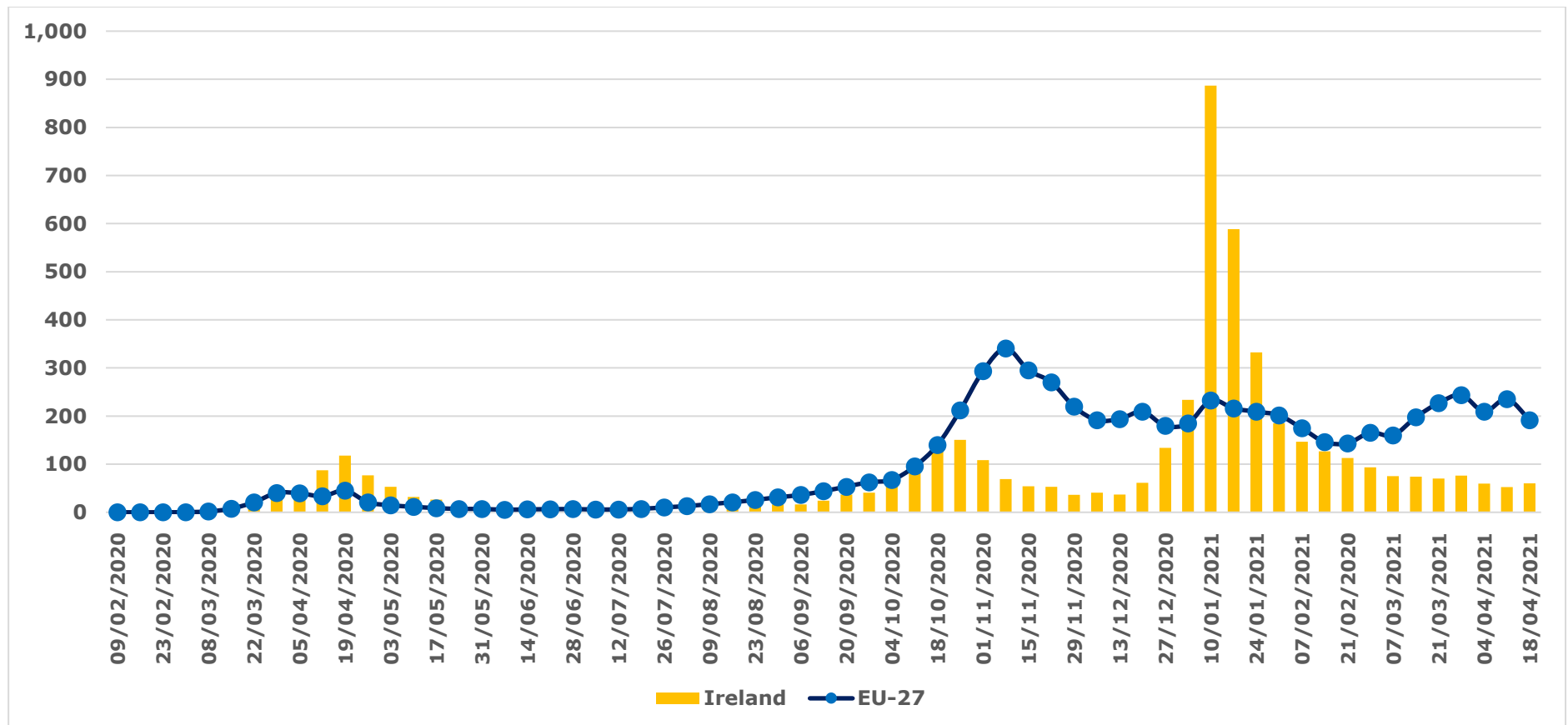


Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021

¹ Except if otherwise specified, the indicators presented in Sections 1.1 and 1.2 were calculated by the ESPN Network Core Team on the basis of data coming from two data sources: Our World in Data (OWID: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-source-data>) and the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). These indicators were calculated for all the 35 ESPN countries for which data were available. All of them are presented in Annex B of the following report: Isabel Baptista, Eric Marlier, Slavina Spasova, Ramón Peña-Casas, Boris Fronteddu, Dalila Ghailani, Sebastiano Sabato and Pietro Regazzoni (2021), *Social protection and inclusion policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis. An analysis of policies in 35 countries*, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. This report also provides additional explanations on the data sources used and the calculation of the indicators. In addition, Annex B of the report provides the country results related to all ESPN countries included in the two international data sources used (see Tables B1.1, B2.1 and B3.1 for Figure 1, Table B1.2 for Figure 2, Table B2.2 for Figure 3, Table B3.2 for Figure 4, Tables B4.1, B4.2 and B4.3 for Figure 5, Table B5 for Figure 6, Tables B6.1-3 for Figures 7a-c, and Tables B7.1-3 for Figures 8a-c). The full report and its various annexes can be downloaded [here](#).

In the last week of observations (from Monday 12 April 2021 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people reached 191.8 for the EU-27. In Ireland, it was 60.1.

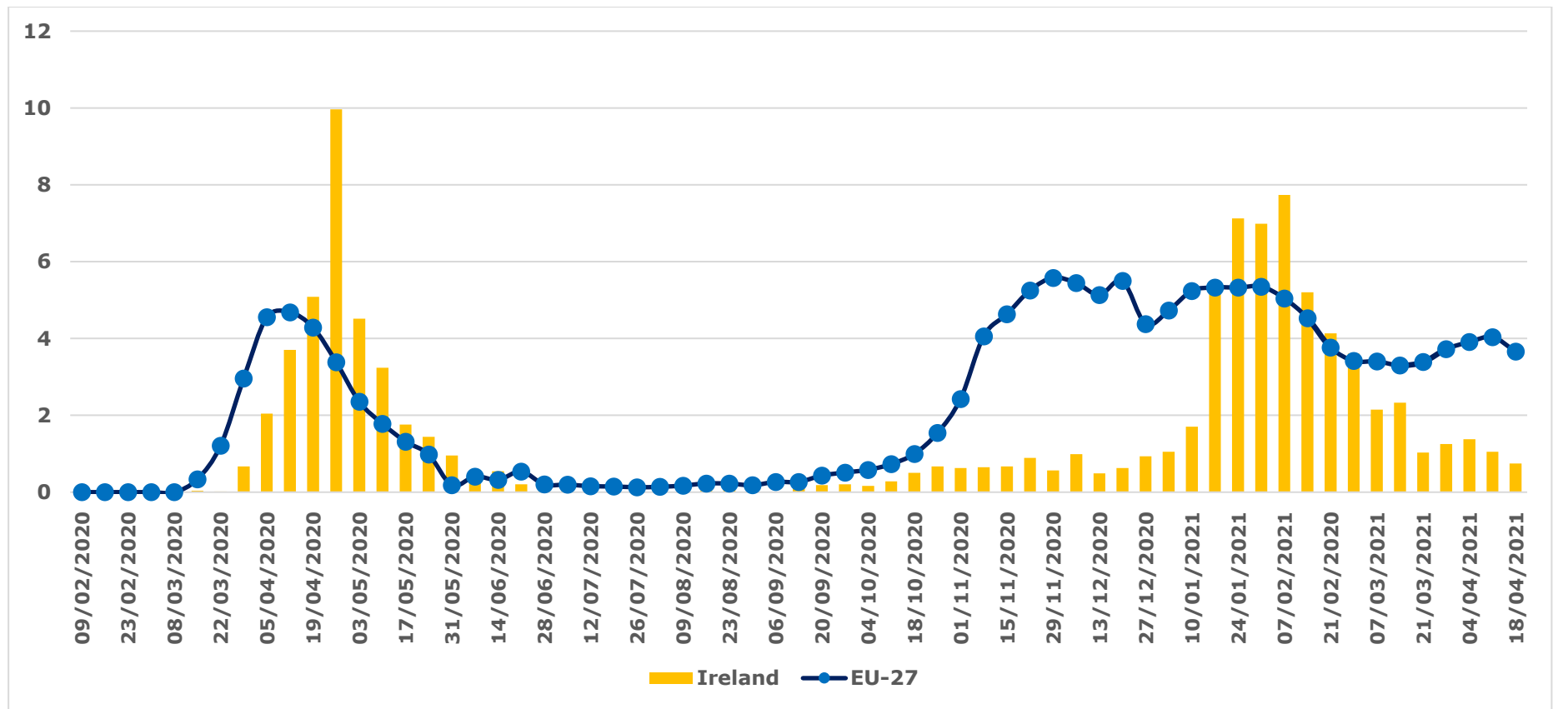
Figure 2: Weekly evolution - Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people from 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and IRELAND)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the last week of observations (from Monday 12 April 2021 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the number of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people reached 3.66 for the EU-27 as a whole. In Ireland, it was 0.75.

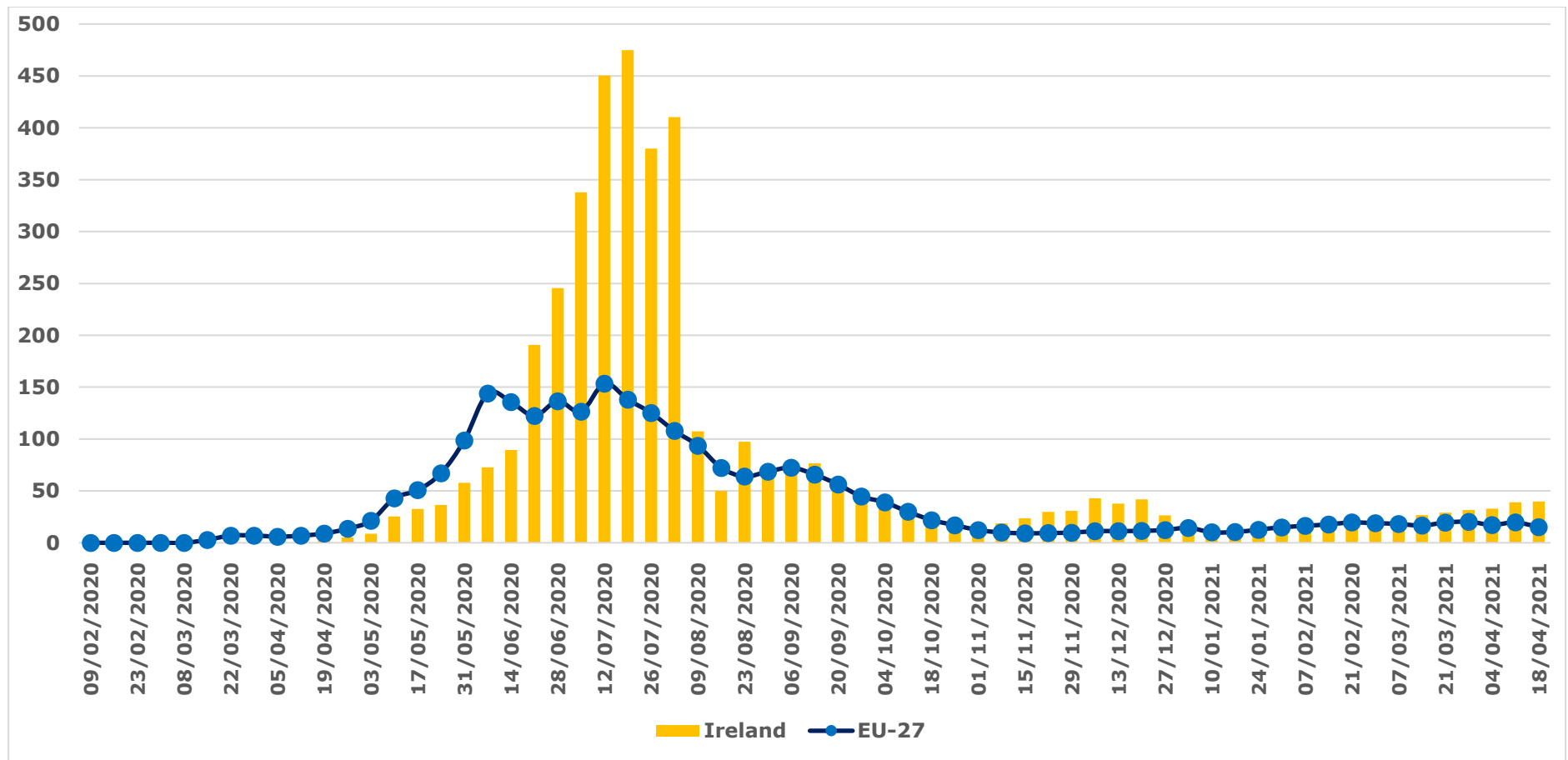
Figure 3: Weekly evolution - Number of COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people, 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and IRELAND)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the last week of observations (from Monday 12 April 2021 to Sunday 18 April 2021), the number of COVID-19 tests per new confirmed COVID-19 cases was 15.2 for the EU-27. In Ireland, it was 39.9.

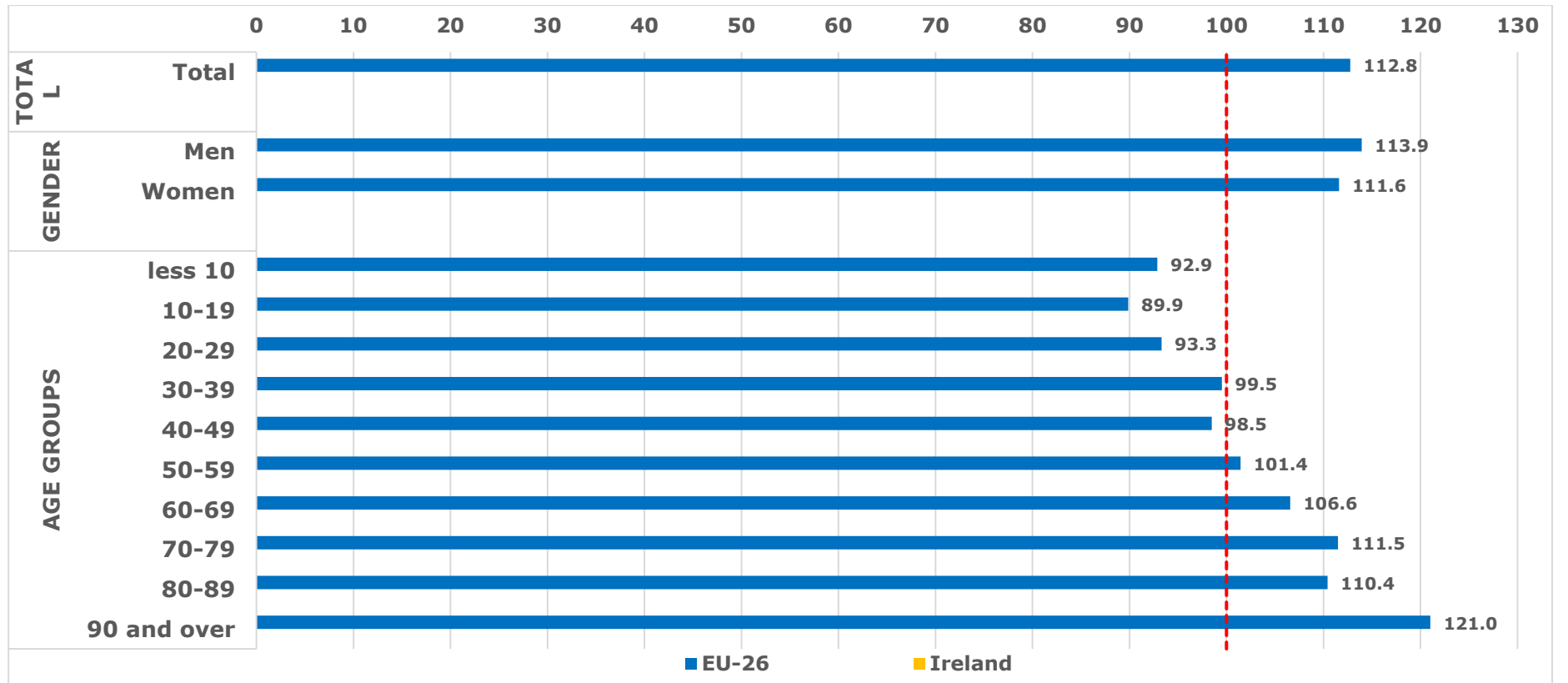
Figure 4: Weekly evolution - Number of COVID-19 tests per new confirmed COVID-19 case, 3 February 2020 to 18 April 2021 (EU-27 and IRELAND)



Source: Our World in Data (OWID) online database on COVID-19 - downloaded 26 April 2021. Full quote for these testing data: Hasell, J., Mathieu, E., Beltekian, D. et al. (2020). "A cross-country database of COVID-19 testing". *Sci Data* 7, 345 (2020) (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41597-020-00688-8>).

The excess mortality ratio for 2020 is the total number of deaths (without distinction of causes) in the year 2020 expressed as a percentage of the previous 4-year (2016-2019) annual average of the total number of deaths. For the EU-26 average (no data for Ireland), the ratio of the total population is 112.8% while it is not available in Ireland. For the EU-26, it is 113.9% for men and 111.6% for women. In Ireland, these gendered ratios are not available. Excess mortality is higher among older age groups. For those aged 90 years and more it reaches 121.0% for EU-26 and it is not available for Ireland.

Figure 5: Excess mortality - Total number of all deaths in 2020 as percentage of the 2016-2019 annual average (including gender and age breakdowns (EU-26 and IRELAND))

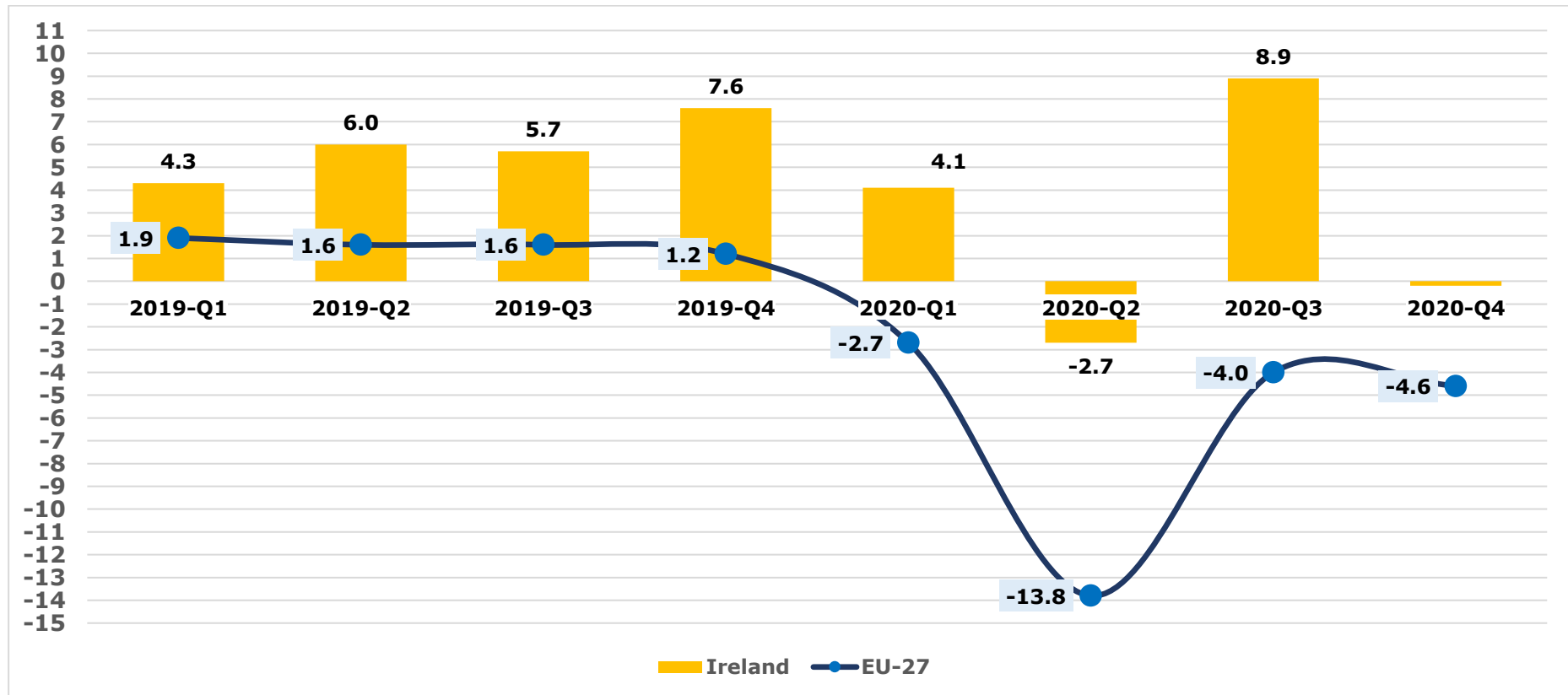


Source: Eurostat - indicator [DEMO_R_MWK_10__custom_560457] Deaths by week, sex and 10-year age groups - downloaded 26 April 2021. For Bosnia and Herzegovina: Agency for statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (data received upon request on 19 April 2021).

1.2 Economic and (un)employment situation

In the EU-27, GDP in the fourth quarter (2020-Q4) of 2020 fell by 4.6% compared to the fourth quarter of 2019 (2019-Q4). In Ireland, the decrease was 0.2% for the same period.

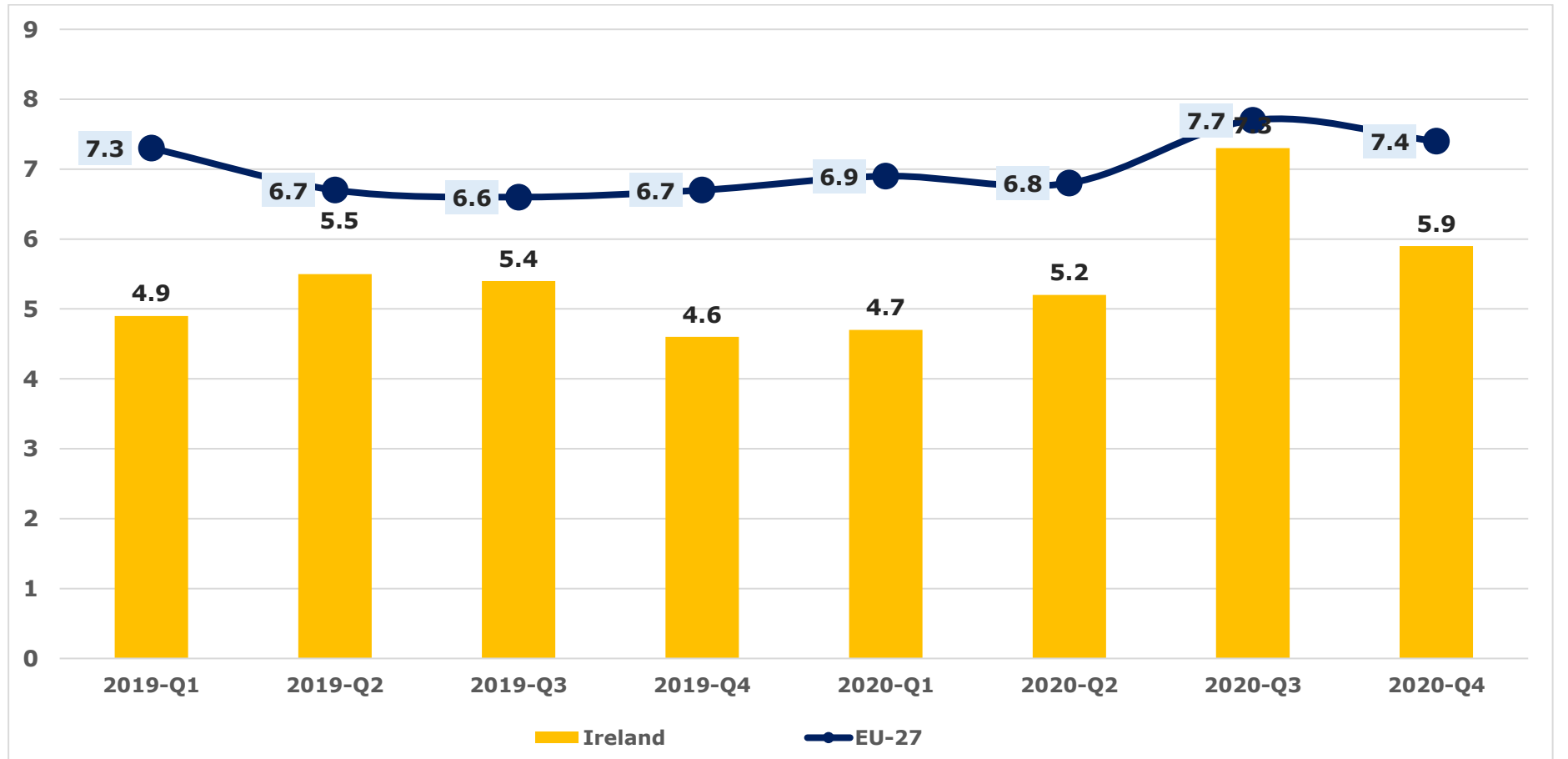
Figure 6: Gross domestic product at market prices, chain-linked volumes prices adjusted, percentage changes in quarter compared with same quarter in previous year (2019-2020, EU-27 and IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat -GDP and main components (output, expenditure and income) - indicator [NAMQ_10_GDP__custom_507806] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the unemployment rate in the EU-27 for people aged 15-64 years is 7.4%. In Ireland, it is 5.9%.

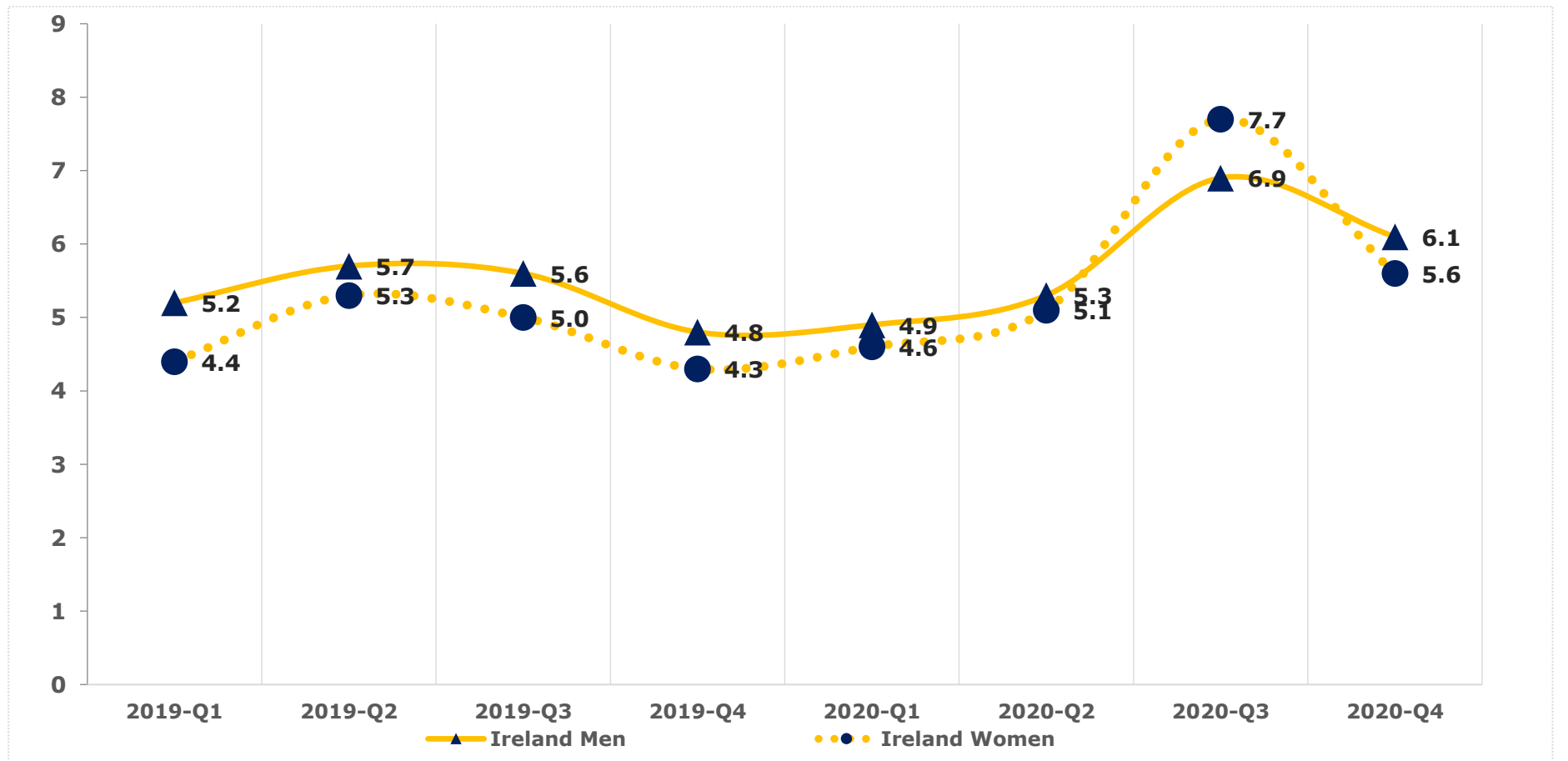
Figure 7a: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 (2019-2020, EU-27 and IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_urgan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the unemployment rate in the EU-27 for people aged 15-64 years is 7.1% for men and 7.7% for women. In Ireland, these figures are 6.1% and 5.6% respectively.

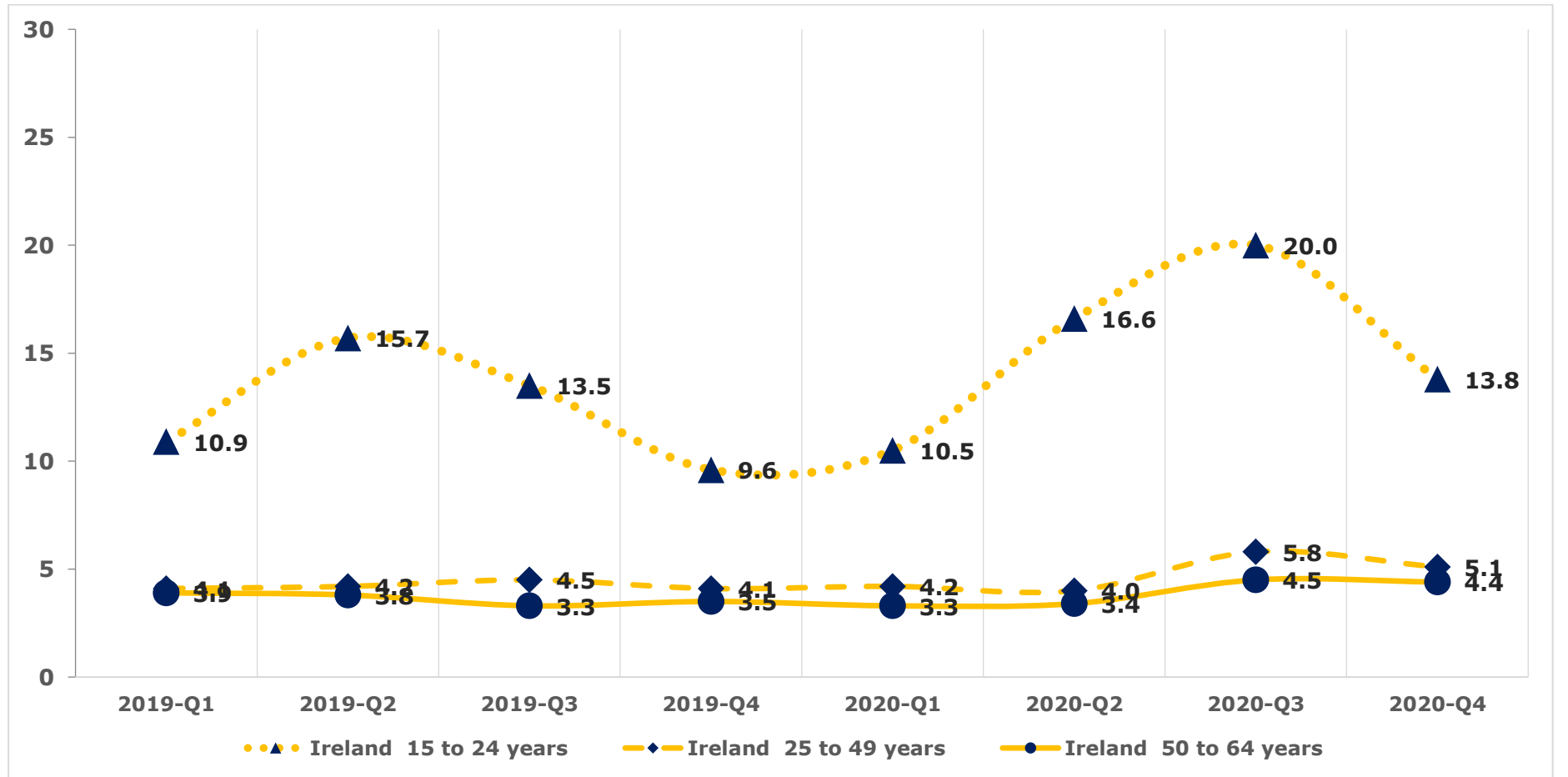
Figure 7b: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by gender (2019-2020, IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_organ] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the unemployment rate in the EU-27 is 16.9% for the 15-24 age group. In Ireland, it is 13.8%.

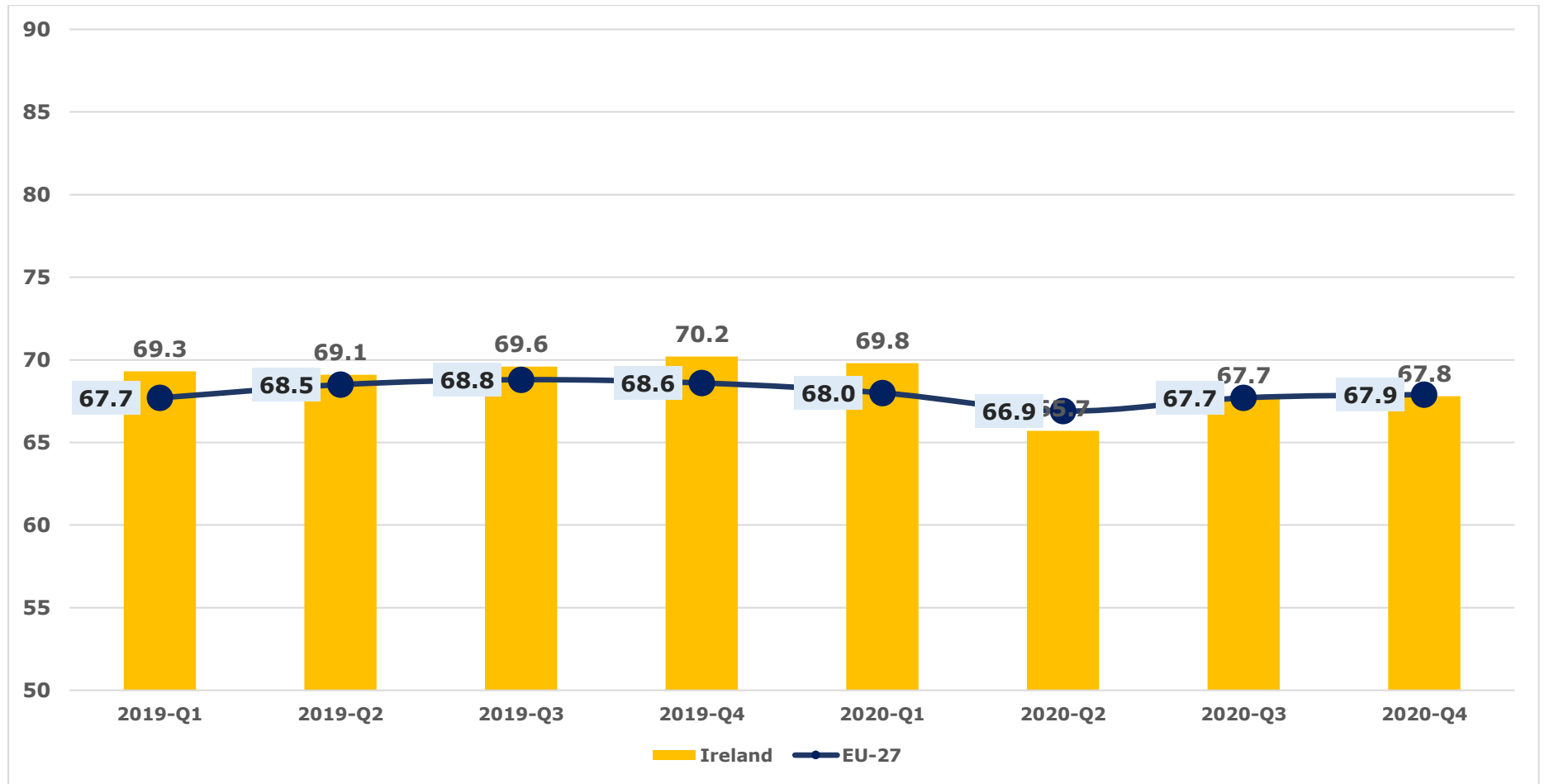
Figure 7c: Seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by age group (2019-2020, IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_urgan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the employment rate for people aged 15-64 in the EU-27 is 67.9%. In Ireland, it is 67.8%.

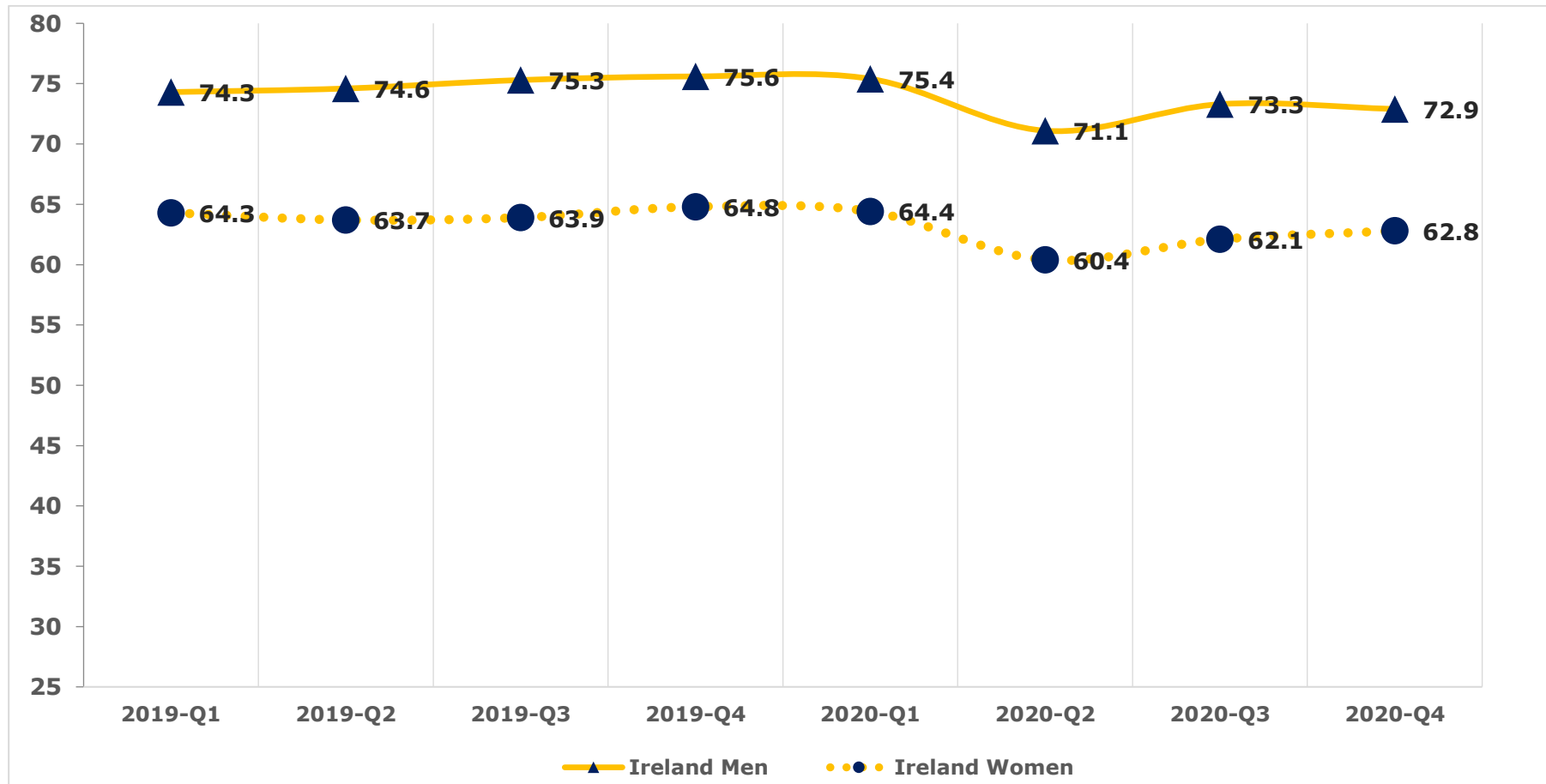
Figure 8a: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 (2019-2020, EU-27 and IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_ergan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the employment rate in the EU-27 is 73.0% for men and 62.8% for women. In Ireland, these figures are 72.9% and 62.8% respectively.

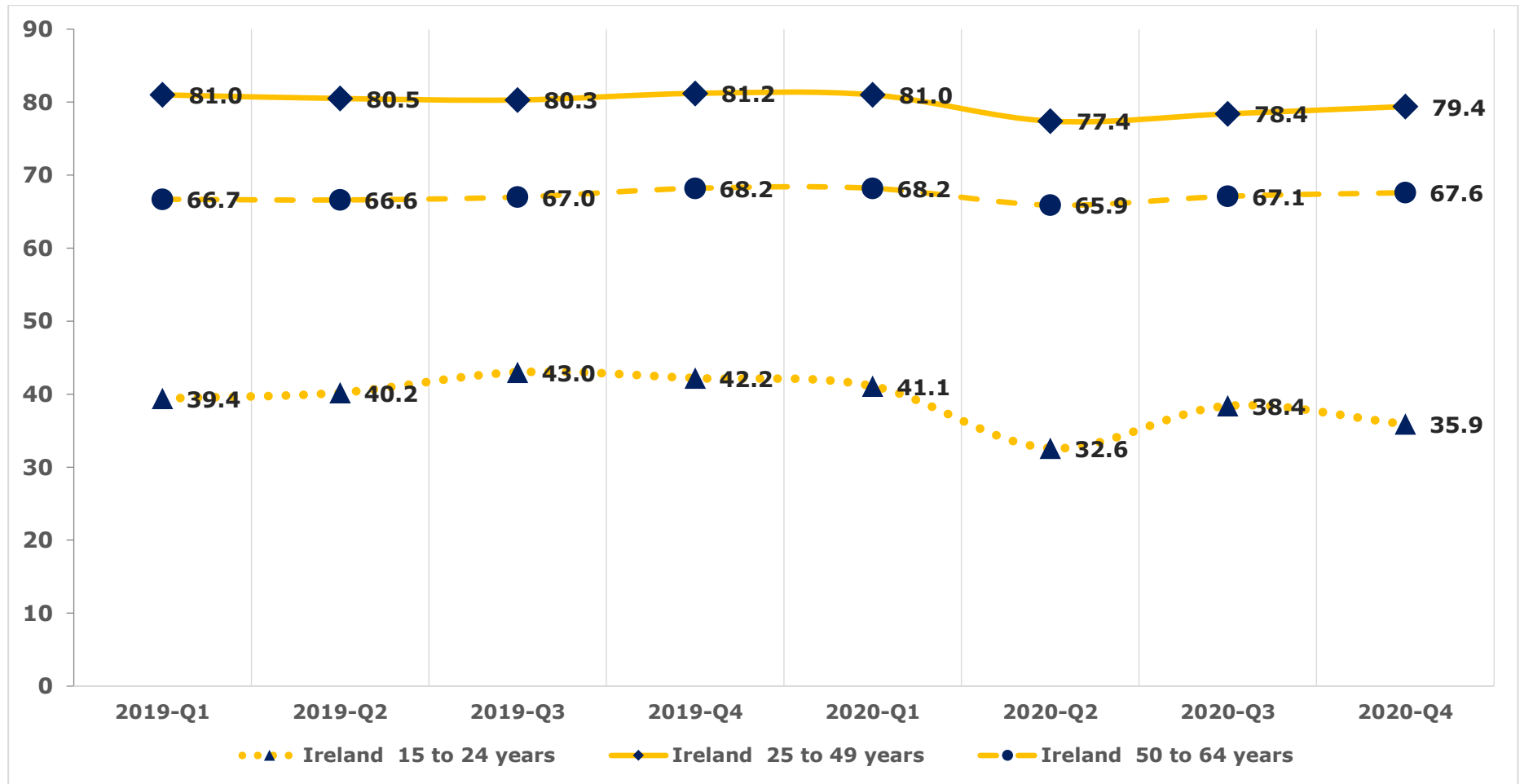
Figure 8b: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by gender (2019-2020, IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_ergan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

In the fourth quarter of 2020 (2020-Q4), the employment rate in the EU-27 is 31.1% for the 15-24 age group. In Ireland, it is 35.9%.

Figure 8c: Seasonally-adjusted employment rate, quarterly data, total population aged 15-64 – by age group (2019-2020, IRELAND, %)



Source: Eurostat LFS - indicator [lfsq_ergan] - downloaded 26 April 2021.

1.3 Poverty, inequality and social exclusion situation

There is currently no information available on the effect of the pandemic on the prevalence of poverty or deprivation.

2 Social protection and inclusion measures in response to the pandemic²

This section provides a brief description of the main measures related to social protection and social inclusion that have been put in place to help mitigate the financial and social distress produced by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. It is based on readily available data and evidence. For each measure, it provides the following:

- a) Short description of the measure.
- b) Category: Is it a flat benefit, a conditional benefit, both a flat and a conditional benefit, or neither a flat nor a conditional benefit?
- c) Timing: When did the measure start/end? Has it been extended?
- d) Depending on the category:
 - Amount and duration (for flat measures).
 - Range (minimum-maximum), duration and conditionality (thresholds) (for conditional measures).

If the measure is neither flat nor conditional, this is "Not applicable").

- e) Targeted population: what is/are the target(s), i.e. the parts of the population/ labour force/ sectors targeted by the measure? In case data and evidence are readily available, estimated number of people targeted and/or applicants.
- f) Beneficiaries: What is the number of recipients of the measure (if relevant and available)?
- g) Novelty (was the measure new or an already existing one that was adjusted?).

2.1 Measures related to unemployment benefits

2.1.1 Jobseeker's allowance and Jobseeker's benefit

- a) Short description of the measure: These are the main payments/benefits for the unemployed, differentiated by basis of eligibility. The Jobseeker's Benefit is a social insurance-based benefit whereas the Jobseeker's Allowance is a means-tested payment available to people aged between 18 and 66 years who meet conditions pertaining to: being fully unemployed; being available for full-time work and genuinely seeking work; being capable of work; passing a means test; meeting a habitual residency condition. The self-employed are also eligible for both Jobseeker's Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance provided they have lost their employment and meet the conditions. Hence, the changed conditions associated with COVID-19 also apply to them.
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: There were two main changes. The first measure – increasing the adult allowance – was introduced in late March 2020, and has continued. The second measure – relaxing the sign-on conditions – was also introduced on lockdown but was reinstated in mid-June. This meant that the 'traditional' focus on retaining work incentives and

² The temporary measures mentioned in this report refer to the situation as of 15 April 2021. Their duration may have been extended since then.

activating people into new employment was reinstated when the Department for Employment Affairs and Social Protection restarted activation and case management processes and the narrative shifted to getting people back to work as quickly as possible (Hick and Murphy 2020).

- d) Amount and duration: The adult allowance for the claimants of these benefits with partners or spouses was raised by €12.30 a week (from €134.70 to €147 a week) on 26 March 2020.
- e) Targeted population: First, the payment for the spouse/partner (the adult allowance) was increased to bring the payment rate closer to the PUP payment rate (see section 2.5.1). Explicit target numbers were not mentioned at the time of introduction but can be estimated using statistics for the year 2019 (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection 2020). Taking the 2019 average, there were 31,449 adult allowance recipients for both Jobseeker's Allowance and Jobseeker's Benefit (28,853 and 2,596 respectively) in that year. Second, the actively seeking work condition was suspended. From the time of lockdown in March 2020 people no longer had to sign in at the local Intreo office³ to prove their availability for work. This was a measure introduced in the context of social distancing and lockdown policy and has been reintroduced in the second lockdown.
- f) Beneficiaries: Regarding the increase in the adult allowance, it can be taken that all eligible family units received it since payment is automatic.
- g) Novelty: Neither of these is novel measure in that they constitute changes in existing arrangements or rules.

2.2 Measures of job protection provided through support to the employers, employees and the self-employed

2.2.1 Temporary wage subsidy and employment wage subsidy schemes

- a) Short description of the measure: The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) subsidised employers to continue to pay their employees during the pandemic. Employers availing of the scheme maintain the employee on their payroll system and the government pays the firm a subsidy based on the average net weekly wage of the employee. Employers are also eligible to pay Pay-Related Social Insurance at a heavily reduced rate (0.5% compared to normally 8.8% for employees earning €398 a week and 11.05% for employees earning over that threshold).

Oriented to job retention, the TWSS was operated by Ireland's tax authority (the Revenue Commissioners) rather than through the social security system (as for the PUP). In common with the PUP however, eligibility was based on self-assessment principles, with eligibility/compliance checks instituted post hoc.

- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The scheme was announced one week after the PUP on 24 March 2020 under the *Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act (27/03/20)* and was initially intended to run for a 12-week period but was subsequently extended to 31 August. From 1 July a new scheme was introduced - the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) - and the two ran in parallel until the closing of the TWSS on 31 August 2020. The EWSS was planned to be operational until 31 March 2021 but as part of Budget 2021, published on 13 October 2020, it was announced that the scheme will likely continue to December 2021 in some form of transitional arrangement (details as yet not publicised). The EWSS was introduced to achieve the goal of reconciling pandemic and pre-pandemic supports - especially so as to encourage people to retain

³ The *Intreo* is the public employment service in Ireland and acts as the single point of contact for all employment and income supports.

their connection to the labour market and is consistent with the aim of parity of payments between retained workers and those who are newly unemployed during the pandemic (Hick and Murphy 2020).

- d) Range, duration and conditionality: When first introduced on 26 March 2020, the TWSS scheme refunded employers up to a maximum of €410 for each qualifying employee (up to a maximum of 70% of an employee's net pay in January and February 2020 subject to a cap of €410) or 85% if the employee's wage was less than €412 a week.⁴ The latter (higher for those on lower wages) wage replacement level was introduced from 15 April so as to weaken incentives to move from the TWSS to the, in some cases more generous, PUP (Hick and Murphy 2020). TWSS was more generous than the PUP on only a narrow band of earnings, but lower earners could be better off on the flat-rate PUP as compared with the TWSS (Beirne et al 2020).

However, from 4 May tapering was introduced with a series of pay bands based on the previous net weekly wage for each employee (making the payment overall less generous, a trend also carried through with the EWSS). For those earning less than or equal to €500 a week or in excess of €586, the subsidy was lowered to €350 per week maximum. And for those paid between €500 and €586 a week a maximum payment of €410 a week was specified. Those whose average net pay was more than €960 per week received no subsidy.

From 1 July to 19 October 2020 there were two rates but from the 20 October 2020 five rates were introduced, effective to 30 June 2021. These revised rates are: gross weekly pay less than €151.50 – no subsidy; gross weekly pay between €151.50 and €202.99 – subsidy of €203; gross weekly pay between €203 and €299.99 – subsidy of €250; gross weekly pay between €300 and €399.99 – subsidy of €300; gross weekly pay between €400 and €1,462 – subsidy of €350.

- e) Targeted population: In terms of targeted population, employers had to meet the following conditions to be eligible: employers must be experiencing "significant economic disruption" from the crisis; have a demonstrated decline in turnover of at least 25%; be unable to pay normal wages and outgoings; and be retaining their employees on the payroll. All types of workers, including those on reduced work hours, were eligible provided they were on the company pay-roll as at 29 February 2020 (and a pay-roll submission had been made on their behalf to the tax authorities in the period from 1 February 2020 to 31 March 2020). A subsidy could not be requested for an employee who was claiming the PUP. The targeting was for the unknown contingency and so no prior estimates were available, especially for the TWSS which was completely new.
- f) Beneficiaries: The provisional statistics published weekly by the Revenue Commissioners indicate that, within a month of its introduction on 23 April 2020, payments had been made to over 35,000 employers on behalf of over 337,000 employees.⁵ The numbers rose in the following months to reach a peak of 452,000 employees (in early May 2020). Towards late August 2020 (when closure of the TWSS was pending) some 299,000 payments were still being made each week. The latest provisional EWSS statistics (as at 29 April 2021) from the Revenue Commissioners indicate that, as at that date, some 29,700 employers were receiving payments for 266,600 employees.⁶
- g) Novelty: A job or employment subsidy scheme was hugely novel in the Irish context as there had never been a job retention (or furlough) scheme like it.

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/578596-covid-19-wage-subsidy/>

⁵ <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/registrations/wage-subsidy-scheme-statistics-23-april-20.pdf> (accessed 07-02-2021).

⁶ <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/registrations/covid-19-support-schemes-statistics-29-april-2021.pdf> (accessed 10-05-2021).

2.2.2 Temporary wage subsidy childcare scheme

- a) Short description of the measure: The Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) was a supplement to the TWSS. Through it, workers in the childcare sector were provided with an additional financial 'top up' to the state subsidy available under the broader TWSS and employers (childcare providers) received a contribution to their overheads.
- b) Category: Conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The scheme came into effect on 26 March 2020 and lasted for 12 weeks. The services were cleared to reopen from 29 June 2020. No new measures were taken when the full level-5 lockdown was instituted on December 30, 2020.
- d) Range, duration and conditionality: The measure had two components: a wage subsidy for staff and a contribution to overhead costs for providers. In regard to the former, the scheme subsidised the remaining 30% of the wage (to that covered by the TWSS) to cover pre-COVID-19 staff costs up to a maximum of €586 per worker. Some income bands were applied depending on previous wages but in general the intent was a full wage compensation package equivalent to 100% of pre-closure levels. The second part made available funding equivalent to 15% of staff costs towards childcare providers' overheads and non-deferrable operating costs, with a minimum payment of €300 a week.
- e) Targeted population: This uniquely-targeted scheme was designed to ensure that childcare staff were retained and received an income during the pandemic and that the services would not become unviable. The intervention reflects the specific nature of the early education and childcare (ECEC) sector in Ireland. While staff in many educational institutions are paid directly or indirectly by the State, payroll costs in the childcare sector are mostly derived from parental fees with some cost subsidies provided via Exchequer-funded schemes to employers. Initially, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs committed to continuing these scheme payments to childcare providers for the duration of the mandatory closures, with the expectation that funding would be used to pay staff wages. However, it was reported by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection that upon the introduction of lockdown very significant numbers of sector staff presented to claim PUP or other benefits (Parliamentary Budget Office 2020a). As a result, on 26 March 2020, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs announced plans for the TWSCS which would interact with/top-up the TWSS for staff. The schemes would operate for an 11-week period initially, subsequently extended. The objectives were: promote staff retention; mitigate loss to providers of parental fee income; and attempt to safeguard the ongoing business viability of childcare establishments throughout the closure period. Hence it could be paid only for retained workers or those who had been laid off but were reinstated.

Some 30,000 people were targeted. Based on a survey conducted between 2018 and 2019 by Pobal (the management and support body for childcare schemes), there are 4,598 childcare providers delivering at least one Department funded scheme (and therefore eligible for the TWSCS) (Parliamentary Budget Office 2020a). An estimated 30,757 staff are working in the sector with approximately 26,882 individuals working in a childcare capacity along with 3,894 ancillary staff. According to Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the average weekly wage in the sector prior to closure was €364 per week (ibid). The Parliamentary Budget Office has estimated that Department of Children and Youth Affairs spending for its funded wage subsidy and operation overhead contributions to be approximately €65 million for the 11-week period up to 18 June (ibid). The total public expenditure cost (including also the monies expended by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection) was estimated at some €150 million combined for all support to the childcare sector.

- f) Beneficiaries: Not known.
- g) Novelty: This, too, was extremely novel in the Irish case and indeed was a unique sector-specific subvention. It arose out of a concern about the sustainability of the

(largely private) early childhood education and care sector as a vital sector that would need to resume functioning quickly once lockdown was lifted and as a sector that had already been experiencing staff recruitment and retention challenges.

2.2.3 Redundancy

- a) Short description of the measure: The law on claiming redundancy by those who were temporarily laid off, or temporarily put on short-time work, because of COVID-19 was also changed in March 2020 (on the grounds of 'ensuring the future viability of businesses and help prevent further permanent job losses').
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: From 13 March 2020 people in either situation cannot claim redundancy – rather they claim the PUP. Having been extended first to May 2020, then to August 2020 and again in September 2020, the rule is due to last until 30 June 2021.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: Those who would normally be entitled to claim statutory redundancy payment from their employers (that is, mainly standard employees who are laid off or put on short-time hours).
- f) Beneficiaries: Range and scale of impact unknown.
- g) Novelty: The suspension of redundancy law for the period of the pandemic was very novel in the Irish situation. Redundancy is a permanent scheme, in Ireland, providing for compensation for people who lose their job through no fault of their own (such as the closure of the business or a reduction in the number of staff). According to the law, people are entitled to a statutory redundancy payment from their employer (depending on specific conditions).

2.2.4 COVID-19 part-time job incentive scheme for the self-employed

- a) Short description of the measure: This is a scheme designed to encourage and enable a return to work on the part of the self-employed. It is designed as a route out of full-time receipt of the PUP or a jobseeker's payment.
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: In terms of timing this was a relative 'latecomer', introduced in October 2020; it has no time-limit or end point.
- d) Amount and duration: People are allowed to earn up to €960 gross over 8 weeks while receiving the PUP. However, if people are returning to work part-time (less than 24 hours per week) on a self-employed basis, they are eligible for this part-time scheme. It is a flat-rate payment: €128.60 for an individual and €209.70 if the claimant was receiving an increase for an adult allowance on their previous jobseeker's claim. The conditions of receipt include being tax and pay-related social insurance compliant, aged over 18 and under 66, having been in receipt of a payment and returning to employment for a maximum of 24 hours a week (with no limit on earning).
- e) Targeted population: Its target group is the self-employed.
- f) Beneficiaries: No information is available on take-up.
- g) Novelty: It is quite a novel benefit in Irish system targeting the self-employed, although there is precedent for benefit tapering to allow/encourage people into employment, especially on a reduced hours basis (e.g., the Part-time Job Incentive Scheme for claimants of jobseekers' and other payments).

2.3 Measures related to sickness benefits and sick pay

2.3.1 Enhanced illness benefit for COVID-19

- a) Short description of the measure: Enhanced Illness Benefit (COVID-19) is a new payment for insured persons who are advised to self-isolate by a doctor or the Health Service Executive (HSE) or have been diagnosed with COVID-19. Unlike standard Illness Benefit (which only applies to insured employees), it also applies to the self-employed. The legal basis for the payment is the *Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005* as amended by the *Health (Preservation and Protection and other Emergency Measures in the Public Interest) Act 2020 Act*.
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: The Enhanced Illness Benefit (COVID-19) was introduced on 15 March 2020 and, as of the latest evidence, will remain in place until 30 June 2021.
- d) Amount and duration: The personal rate for this payment is €350 per week, as compared with the normal Illness Benefit rate of €203. The development of the COVID-specific illness benefit mirrored closely that of the PUP, especially in regard to the payment rate. Initially introduced at €203 a week, the payment rate was increased to, first, €305 per week and, subsequently, €350 per week.
- e) Targeted population: Both employees and self-employed people can qualify for the COVID-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit. The payment is made for 2 weeks for those self-isolating and 10 weeks for those diagnosed with COVID-19. To receive the enhanced payment, one must be: self-isolating on the instruction of a doctor or the Health Service Executive (HSE) or diagnosed with COVID-19 and be absent from work and confined to home or a medical facility. It is a COVID-19 specific benefit in the sense that the recipient must have a COVID-19 exigency. In addition, to be eligible workers must have made at least one social insurance contribution in the previous four weeks and have a contract of employment; for self-employed persons, they must have worked immediately before applying for the payment and have 'reckonable income' in the current contribution year. The latter set of conditions is much more lenient than that pertaining to the normal Illness Benefit, for which one must have a record of contributing for at least 104 weeks since employment commenced.

In a major change of policy, on 6 August 2020 the government announced that those who live in direct provision (as 'asylum seekers') who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, or who have been advised to self-isolate, can access Enhanced Illness Benefit (COVID-19).

The 'normal' Illness Benefit was adjudged to function sufficiently well for those who are ill for a non-COVID-19-related reason or if they are self-isolating because they are medically vulnerable. The only change made to this is that the 6 waiting days for Illness Benefit were waived for those workers who needed, on GP advice, to self-isolate and from 1 March 2021 a waiting day period of 3 days was introduced.

- f) Beneficiaries: Since its introduction in late March 2020 and up until 27 April 2021, some 149,245 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of the COVID-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit (Department of Social Protection 2021).
- g) Novelty: As an extension of an existing provision, and given its pandemic focus and temporary nature, it is not a major innovation. What was mainly adjusted was the payment record for qualification (which was greatly shortened), the nature of condition and situation (e.g., self-isolation or illness related to COVID-19) and the time limit on receipt.

2.4 Measures related to health insurance

2.4.1 Health insurance

There were no changes of this nature introduced in Ireland.

2.5 Measures related to minimum income schemes and other forms of social assistance

2.5.1 Pandemic unemployment payment

- a) Short description of the measure: The PUP is a new payment/benefit, introduced originally on 16 March 2020. It is for employees and self-employed people living in Ireland who have lost their employment due to COVID-19 on or after 16 March, 2020. People can also receive the PUP if they are on a temporary lay-off from employment, or if they have been made redundant related to COVID-19.
- b) Category: Flat benefit that was made conditional over time.
- c) Timing: The PUP was introduced on 16 March 2020. It originally operated on an administrative basis but was later put on a statutory basis through the *Social Welfare (COVID-19) (Amendment) Act 2020* (signed into law on 5 August 2020). Initially it was to be available up to the 29 June 2020 but it has been extended several times (the latest to 30 June 2021). There have been a number of reform iterations, mainly addressing the period for which the PUP would be operative and the payment's generosity. In terms of timing, the extension of PUP to the end of 2020 for new applicants was affirmed on 13 October as part of Budget 2021 when government also restated its formal intention to end PUP in April 2021. To encourage workers back to employment after a full level five 6-week period of restrictions, on 24 November 2020 government further extended the application period for PUP to March 2021. It has since been extended again and is now due to end on 30 June 2021.
- d) Amount and duration: Initially paid at the primary adult Jobseeker's Allowance rate of €203 per week, within a week of its introduction it had been increased to €350 per week, a level of payment close to the weekly Jobseeker's Allowance payment for an adult claimant plus a dependent partner or spouse (then €337.70). The €350 level represented an increase of 72% on the extant €203 core weekly welfare rate for single people and was equivalent to 100% of average net salary in the low-paid sectors most affected by job loss (Coates et al 2020). Over time the trend in reform has been to reduce generosity and link the payment more closely to income. Flat-rate from its introduction to the 29 June 2020, from then until 10 August 2020, the scheme moved towards a two-tier system. Claimants whose prior weekly earnings were less than €199.99 received a payment of €203 per week while those earning €200 or more received a rate of €350 each week. A Fiscal Stimulus package announced on 23 July 2020 extended the PUP for a further 7 months, until 1 April 2021, with a gradual reduction in payment level, and now linked to three tiers of previous incomes. The goal was to adjust payments (downwards) so as to align with existing social welfare levels by April 2021 (Department of the Taoiseach 2020). From 16 October 2020 to the planned ending on 30 June 2021, the following four payment rates apply: for those earning €400 or more the weekly payment is €350; for those earning between €300 and €399.99 the weekly payment is €300; for those earning between €200 and €299.99 the weekly payment is €250; for those earning less than €200 the weekly payment is €203. The scheme was to close to new claimants from 17 September 2020, the date when maximum payments were to be reduced to €300 per week. However, that too has been rescinded by a second wave of the pandemic and the latest plan is to keep it open to 30 June 2021 at the graded payment scale described above.

Self-employed people can earn up to €960 gross income in the 8 weeks prior to receiving PUP and still qualify.

- e) Targeted population: The target group comprised both employees and self-employed people who were out of work because of the COVID-19 restrictions/lockdowns. The PUP is available to any registered employee or self-employed worker who has lost all of their work because of COVID-19 and is resident in Ireland.
- f) Beneficiaries: In the week ending 27 April 2021, the cost of the weekly payments made under PUP came to €119.9 million. At that date the number of recipients was 403,000

(Department of Social Protection 2021). These numbers are in addition to the 177,9696 people who were on the Live Register at the end of April 2021 (Central Statistics Office 2021) There has been considerable fluctuation in volume over time (associated with lockdowns). The highest recorded numbers were in the month of April 2020 (averaging some 600,000).⁷ As of 20 April 2020 and 5 June 2020 respectively, for example, there were 584,000 and 543,000 receiving the PUP.⁸ But the long-term trend is downwards – as of 27 April 2021, 17,600 people had closed their PUP accounts in the preceding week.

The sector with the highest number of people receiving PUP on the week ending 27 April 2021 was Accommodation and Food Service activities (101,637). This was followed by Wholesale and Retail Trade (65,984) and Construction (42,333) (Department of Social Protection 2021). These figures tend to reflect the long-term trends of sectoral vulnerability to lockdown measures. On the week ending 27 April 2021, some 47% of those receiving PUP are on the maximum rate of €350 per week (ibid).

- g) Novelty: There are many sources of novelty/innovation in the PUP. First there is the fact of a new payment being introduced. This deviation from the existing system may be attributable to urgency and the fact that the PUP was only intended to be a short-term measure, available up to 29 June 2020 initially. Secondly, the PUP was unusual in that it had no conditions attaching. That is, there were no means tests or other criteria regarding job search or previous contributions, a normally strong feature of the Irish system. Relatedly, the application process involved minimum administration and bureaucracy, comprising only a one-page application form, with compliance to be monitored ex-post. Speed of response was a primary consideration (Hick and Murphy 2020). Thirdly, the payment is given on an individualised basis and there are no household limits or additions for dependants applied. The thinking is that the administrative and data challenges of making payments for applicants' families were too onerous, hence the recourse to an individual basis. This means that the PUP was not universally generous though. Some, especially those with children, would be better-off claiming through the existing jobseekers' payments. Finally, it was a very inclusive measure in that even asylum seekers and those on student visas were eligible (albeit only over time and with some reservations). Greater 'inclusiveness' is especially notable given that the Irish system has never integrated asylum seekers into the main benefit system. Inclusiveness also pertained to the self-employed, who were generally given access to all the new measures. Overall, the one size fits all model is unusual in a very selective and group-specific nature of the Irish system.

2.5.2 Extension of fuel allowance

- a) Short description of the measure: A Fuel Allowance is a means-tested payment under the National Fuel Scheme to help certain benefit recipients with the cost of heating their home during the winter months.
- b) Category: Flat benefit.
- c) Timing: As part of the initial response to COVID-19 the period for which the allowance is paid (normally 6 months) was extended by 4 weeks (to 28 weeks). This measure was put into effect in March 2020 and extension has been continued into the 2020/2021 payment period. In a second measure, explicitly referencing COVID-19 and the additional costs of home heating and so forth, from January 2021 the value of it was increased by nearly 10%.
- d) Amount and duration: The extension of the duration of receipt enacted in March 2020 meant an additional €98 per qualifying household in the period targeted. The second

⁷<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/73805/7e117769fc20462e9215cb2135c364e0.pdf#page=1> (accessed 01-02-2021).

⁸<https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/labourmarket/liveregister/detailedcovid-19incomesupportandliveregistertables/> (accessed 02-02-2021).

measure, introduced in January 2021, increased the weekly Fuel Allowance rate by €3.50 from €24.50 to €28 per week.

- e) Targeted population: It is paid to people who are dependent on long-term social welfare payments and who are unable to provide for their own heating needs (on the basis of a means test). Only one Fuel Allowance is paid to a household. Some 350,000 households annually receive this payment.
- f) Beneficiaries: Over 352,000 people benefited from these changes.⁹ Those affected include the poorest population sectors.
- g) Novelty: The extension is novel mainly to the extent that it represents a more generous provision in terms of making the payment for a longer period and raising the value.

2.6 Measures related to housing support

2.6.1 Moratorium on rent increase and eviction

- a) Short description of the measure: The government introduced two main emergency measures to protect tenants in the private-rented sector (a very large housing sector in Ireland): a rent freeze and a prohibition on evictions (the latter with a few exceptions). For renters, this meant that landlords were not only prohibited from increasing rents during the (initial) three-month operation period from late March 2020 but that they should not backdate any intended rent increases during this time as arrears of rent due to them when the three months were up. For renters who could not pay their rent, the eviction moratorium gave them short-term protection (but not debt forgiveness). Both measures applied to all forms of rental accommodation, including, for example, student accommodation and accommodation shared with a landlord.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: Both the rent freeze and moratorium on eviction were introduced for a period of three months from 27 March 2020 (the date of commencement of the *Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020*). The Act allowed for the emergency period to be extended, which it ultimately was on 22 June 2020 and again on 20 July 2020. A further extension beyond 20 July raised legal questions, with reports that the former Attorney General, Seamus Wolfe, advised the government that an extension, particularly of the rent freeze, might be open to legal challenge in circumstances where the wider economy was reopening (Walsh and Hamill 2020, p. 10). As a result, the Minister for Housing consulted with the Minister for Health about the public health rationale for extending the rent freeze. On foot of that consultation, the general rent freeze and prohibition of evictions was extended for a very short period, from 20 July 2020 to 1 August 2020.

A new Act was signed into law on 2 August 2020. The *Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020* ('RTV Act') moved away from a general rent freeze and prohibition of evictions to a more tailored time-limited rent freeze under section 6, as well as modifying the rules surrounding notices of termination (Walsh and Hamill 2020, pp. 13-14). In terms of the former, it establishes a scheme whereby tenants who qualify as 'relevant persons' under the Act can self-declare to the Residential Tenancies Board and to their landlord that they are within that category and that, as a consequence, there is a significant risk that their tenancy will be terminated by the landlord. Upon doing so, they can avail of a rent freeze up to 10 January 2021 (subsequently extended to 12 July 2021 with some slight modifications¹⁰). Rent increases that would otherwise

⁹ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2020-09-22/21/?highlight%5B0%5D=fuel&highlight%5B1%5D=allowance&highlight%5B2%5D=2020&highlight%5B3%5D=2020&highlight%5B4%5D=fuel&highlight%5B5%5D=2020&highlight%5B6%5D=allowance&highlight%5B7%5D=fuel&highlight%5B8%5D=allowance#s26> (accessed 10-02-2021).

¹⁰ Notably, the protections are disapplied in certain circumstances, including where rent arrears have built up, or the tenant does not co-operate with the processes required under the new Act, or the protections cause undue financial hardship to the landlord.

take effect in the period cannot be applied, and no increase in rent is payable in respect of that period. The definition of relevant persons applies to tenants who are unable to pay their rent and are, or have been at any time between 9 March 2020 and 10 January 2021 (subsequently 12 July 2021), in receipt of COVID-19-specific welfare supports from the state.

- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: The rent and eviction measures were intended to protect low-income and other tenants in the private-rented sector.
- f) Beneficiaries: It is very difficult to get information on the take-up of the protections afforded to tenants under these measures. The impact of the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 has so far been limited. By early October 2020 (that is two months in), only 159 renters had applied for protection against eviction under the scheme.¹¹
- g) Novelty: The rent freeze and moratorium are hugely novel in the Irish system as they apply to the private sector.

2.6.2 Rent supplements

- a) Short description of the measure: Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment for certain people living in private rented accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources. In response to COVID-19 the qualification conditions for the Supplement were 'COVID-19 proofed' in that people could qualify if:
 - They or their partner are working more than 30 hours per week and have had a reduction in income from work due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.
 - They have been in their current tenancy for more than 4 weeks and could have continued to pay the rent from their own resources, but for the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Provision was also made for the Supplement to be paid immediately to those diagnosed with COVID-19 or suspected of having COVID-19 and are therefore medically required to self-isolate. Since Rent Supplement is income tested and rent dependent, there is no standard amount and figures are not available on average support received.

- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: The new rules were introduced on 13 March 2020 and will be in place until 30 June 2021.
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: It is intended as a short-term income support for people in the private rented sector.
- f) Beneficiaries: It is difficult to piece together information on this. One source reports the numbers of early recipients as follows: as of 11 March 2020, 15,264 households (equivalent to some 4% of all privately-rented dwellings in 2019) were in receipt of Rent Supplement from the Department of Social Protection; as of the 25 May 2020, that figure has risen to 20,400, an increase of 33%.¹² Information given in parliament on 7 October 2020 indicated that since March 2020 10,125 households had been approved for receipt of a COVID-19-related rent supplement, of which 5,823 remained in payment on that date.¹³

¹¹ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/small-numbers-apply-for-rental-protections-to-help-safeguard-against-eviction-39587962.html> (accessed 08-02-2021).

¹² <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/57040> (accessed 06-02-2021).

¹³ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2020-10-07/171/?highlight%5B0%5D=rent&highlight%5B1%5D=supplement&highlight%5B2%5D=covid&highlight%5B3%5D=19> (accessed 08-02-2021).

g) Novelty: There is some novelty here in terms of relaxing the conditions especially.

2.6.3 Ban on utilities disconnection

- a) Short description of the measure: The Commission for Regulation of Utilities issued a ban on disconnections of domestic customers for non-payment to gas and electricity suppliers.
- b) Category: Neither flat nor conditional benefit.
- c) Timing: This was first introduced on 16 March 2020 and was applicable to 16 June 2020. It was subsequently extended to 29 June but was discontinued from that date. It was reinstated on and from 8 January 2021 for an indefinite period (although some suppliers have indicated that they will end it on 30 June 2021).
- d) Amount and duration/range, duration and conditionality: Not applicable.
- e) Targeted population: the low-income population and people who could make a case that COVID-19 has affected their ability to pay for their utilities.
- f) Beneficiaries: No figures are available for the numbers affected.
- g) Novelty: It is novel in its degree of intervention regarding the charging and operating procedures of utility service provision (which is mainly by private companies in Ireland).

2.7 Leave for parents whose children are unable to attend school or a pre-school service by reason of COVID-19

There were no measures of this nature taken in Ireland.

3 Social protection and inclusion responses to the crisis: overall assessment and possible gaps

This third section briefly considers three aspects: the expected cost of the social protection and inclusion measures put in place by the country (Section 3.1), the impact of these measures on the social protection system and on social inclusion policies (Section 3.2), and the possible remaining gaps in the social protection system and in social inclusion policies (Section 3.3). It concludes with a section (3.4) on debates and recommendations.

3.1 Expected cost of social protection and inclusion measures

There is no single source of information on the cost of social protection and job support measures during the period studied for Ireland. They have to be pieced together, often from information given in the parliament (Houses of the Oireachtas). And these are estimates so they need to be treated with caution.

In terms of costs of the income support measures paid through the social welfare system and hence under the auspices of the Department of Social Protection, overall spending on social protection for 2020 was estimated in November 2020 to be €31.6 billion (8.65% of GDP in 2019) (significantly up on earlier pre-pandemic estimates of €21.2 billion (5.8% of GDP in 2019) for the year) (Parliamentary Budget Office 2020b). Recent analysis (published in March 2021) estimates the cost of the income supports introduced to cope with COVID-19 at €10 billion in 2020 and €6.4 billion in 2021 (Conefrey et al 2021). Calculated on the basis of 2019 GDP, these expenditures are equivalent to 2.7% and 1.75% respectively. Revenue measures (including tax deferrals) are estimated at €3.2 billion in 2020 and €0.7 billion in 2020 and 2021 respectively) (ibid). Ireland's increase in public spending in 2020 was the second largest in the Euro area. The Central Bank put the cost of all measures deployed to fight the pandemic in 2020 at €24.6 billion (6.7% of 2019 GDP).

The breakdown overall of the social protection expenditure is roughly divided half and half by expenditure through the Social Insurance Fund and that through the so-called 'vote' (means-tested payments and activation measures). The former comprises the monies received from contributions of employers and employees and the latter is the additional monies that have to be 'voted' on by parliament to cover the non-contributory benefits. Such a division of estimated spending is not a departure from previous years although this is partly because the government wishes to recoup funding on the PUP from the Social Insurance Fund. Looking at the estimated social protection expenditures as a whole, the main increase is for the category 'working age income supports spending' which is estimated to increase by 55% for the year 2020 (the second largest increase (17%) is expected in the 'supplementary benefits' heading - which supports households with costs of fuel, electricity/gas, telephones etc., targeted essentially at people aged 70 years and over) (Government of Ireland 2020).

In terms of individual programmes, spending information is available only for some. Spending on the PUP, for example, constituted the single largest additional item in social welfare expenditure estimated at over €5 billion for 2020 (with €3.1 billion of this prior to August) (ibid). This programme therefore comprises around half the additional social protection spending. The cost of the COVID-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit has been estimated (up to August - that is 5 months) at €36 million.¹⁴ The revised forecast cost of the scheme to the end of 2020 was €133 million, an increase of €26.6 million (38%) on the original provision of €96.4 million for 2020.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2020-09-30/3/?highlight%5B0%5D=enhanced&highlight%5B1%5D=illness&highlight%5B2%5D=benefit&highlight%5B3%5D=covid&highlight%5B4%5D=19&highlight%5B5%5D=covid&highlight%5B6%5D=19&highlight%5B7%5D=illness&highlight%5B8%5D=benefit&highlight%5B9%5D=illness&highlight%5B10%5D=enhanced&highlight%5B11%5D=illness&highlight%5B12%5D=benefit&highlight%5B13%5D=enhanced&highlight%5B14%5D=illness&highlight%5B15%5D=benefit#s7> (accessed 10-02-2020)

¹⁵ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2020-09-22/27/?highlight%5B0%5D=rent&highlight%5B1%5D=supplement&highlight%5B2%5D=rented&highlight%5B>

In terms of spending on the TWSS and EWSS, between March and August 2020, over 65,000 employers received a subsidy under the TWSS with payments worth over €2.8 billion (0.7% of 2019 GDP) paid out on behalf of a total of 663,100 workers. The average monthly cost is around €500m which would be the expected cost per month if the measure were to be retained beyond the end date of 31 August. It is expected that the EWSS (with a July 2020 start) will support around 350,000 jobs into the beginning of 2021 (since projected to increase given the onset of a second coronavirus wave in December 2020 and into April/May 2021). On this basis, it is estimated that the EWSS will cost €2.25 billion in all (€1.35 billion in 2020 inclusive of seasonal workers and €0.9 billion in 2021).¹⁶

3.2 Impact on the social protection system and on social inclusion policies

As can be seen from the foregoing, the pandemic occasioned significant response from Ireland. The country generally responded quickly and relatively generously to the crisis, with relatively few major adjustments needed to the initial measures as time went on (Ahern and Roy 2020). “Within a month of the first recorded case in Ireland, emergency legislation was passed that facilitated an unprecedented level of intervention by the state in the labour market in the guise of TWSS” (Thomas 2020, p. 16). The response which saw unprecedented levels of state activism was especially concentrated on those unable to work. A dual strategy was followed in this regard. First, income support was directed to the individuals affected, mainly through a bespoke payment introduced on a temporary basis at the first lockdown (the PUP). In addition, an Enhanced Illness Benefit (COVID-19) was introduced (a more flexible iteration of the existing Illness Benefit which could be received immediately and was directed towards those who contracted COVID-19 or those who have to self-isolate on a short-term basis).

Second, a system of job support through making payments per employee to employers provided they retain the workers on the payroll was instituted – also very quickly. This was the TWSS and its successor EWSS. Both of these were new as was the strategy of supporting employment. But apart from these, the response was generally through the welfare system, with some innovations. Since all the measures were temporary and intended to be short-term, it is difficult to see them having a long-term impact. But they do shed light on the existing system in Ireland. For example, the PUP was introduced because the existing unemployment support system in Ireland is conditional and largely means-tested (as in Jobseeker’s Benefit and Jobseeker’s Allowance). Hence it could not respond sufficiently quickly and so a relatively conditionless PUP payment was introduced with some post-hoc but generally light-touch checking of eligibility. There are no discussions to make it permanent and in fact the reforms have been mainly in the direction of reducing generosity to bring it in line with Jobseeker’s Allowance and Jobseeker’s Benefit.

Among the strengths of the Irish social protection system during the pandemic are its wide reach in terms of contingencies covered, its strong administrative base and public and government confidence in it (Maître et al 2020). Low-income or poverty targeting can also be taken as a strength of the Irish system. Research generally tends to confirm the progressive nature of the responses in Ireland (O’Donoghue et al 2020). Research on the months of the pandemic to August 2020 reports that household income fell by 3% on average (against a predicted average of 7% across the population) (Doorley et al 2020). The income losses are sharpest at the upper end of the income distribution, for the young,

[3%5D=covid&highlight%5B4%5D=19&highlight%5B5%5D=rent&highlight%5B6%5D=supplement&highlight%5B7%5D=rent&highlight%5B8%5D=supplement&highlight%5B9%5D=19#s29](#) (accessed 08-02-2021).

¹⁶ On the basis of information given in parliament (Dáil) on 9 September 2020. See

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2020-09-09/98/?highlight%5B0%5D=cost&highlight%5B1%5D=wage&highlight%5B2%5D=scheme&highlight%5B3%5D=cost&highlight%5B4%5D=temporary&highlight%5B5%5D=wage&highlight%5B6%5D=scheme&highlight%5B7%5D=scheme&highlight%5B8%5D=supported&highlight%5B9%5D=cost>

(accessed 09-02-2021). All things remaining the same, a tentative estimate of the additional cost if the EWSS were to be extended for the full year 2021 would be in the region of €3 billion.

and for those in certain hard-hit sectors such as hospitality. The impact of Budget 2021, while less costly than the pre-budget measures associated with the pandemic, is similar in pattern, with above average gains for the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution and lower than average gains for those at the upper end (ibid).

Among the weaknesses are the complex routes to qualifying – with more than two-thirds of the support programmes for people of working age being social assistance (and hence conditional) payments/benefits, making the system highly bureaucratic. A second issue raised by the pandemic concerns the degree of integration of the tax and social security systems. With income support for individuals coming through the social welfare system and that for employers organised through the tax system, there were gaps between as well as possible overlaps in who was being supported through which system as well as potential for fraud. There is also, thirdly, the issue of benefit adequacy. Some have commented that the introduction of the PUP can be traced to a concern or recognition on the part of policy makers that existing benefits are paid at an inadequate level (Hick and Murphy 2020), although the relative absence of activity to raise the value of the existing (non-COVID-19 specific) payments undermines that claim.

3.3 Remaining gaps in the social protection system and social inclusion policies

The adoption by the state of an economy-wide and universalist approach to the provision of the employment and income support is also worthy of mention as a strength (Thomas 2020). The TWSS and EWSS were open to all sectors of the economy while the emergency income supports were available to all workers: full time and part time; employees and self-employed; permanent and temporary. Furthermore, there were no administrative or threshold requirements that had to be met in order to qualify for income supports. It has been pointed out that this could open up an interesting debate about the potential for access to social insurance-style protections being based on the broad principle of labour market participation rather than employment status or history (ibid). The matter of a stronger social insurance element to the Irish welfare state has also been raised by the advisory National Economic and Social Council in their envisioning of a future welfare state in Ireland (2020).

Since Ireland has such a wide-ranging income support (and especially social assistance) system, it does not have 'gaps' as such. But mention might be made here of the treatment of one group. This is asylum seekers and refugees, who are catered for in a separate system of so-called 'direct provision' which is a system of meeting only asylum seekers and refugees' basic needs outside of the general welfare and housing systems. One positive development during the pandemic is that migrant workers, regardless of legal status, were given access to both the TWSS and PUP (with an innovative 'firewall' created whereby they could seek healthcare or social welfare services without their personal migration details being shared with the Department of Justice and Equality (Hick and Murphy 2020). Asylum seekers who lost jobs due to COVID-19 were initially approved for the PUP, but those living in direct provision centres were later reverted back to the standard €38.80 per week payment for adult members of this group (they remained eligible for TWSS). This was subsequently reversed as rising infections in meat plants required that workers in the asylum system access necessary payments.

3.4 Debates and recommendations

Inequalities associated with COVID-19 both in terms of infection rates and consequences have been prominent in debate in Ireland (Darmody et al 2020; Dublin City Community Co-operative 2020). As elsewhere, there was emerging evidence on how the pandemic engaged with existing inequalities, exacerbating the situation of sectors of the population which are already vulnerable. Job losses for example have been concentrated among the young and those on low incomes (Coates et al 2020) and the communities most affected tend to be those characterised by existing inequalities and a greater than usual share of minorities (Dublin City Community Co-operative 2020).

The interaction between the job support and unemployment measures has been another major point of debate (Houses of the Oireachtas 2020). Some speak of increasing synergy in this regard (Thomas 2020) but the wider representation is of difficulty in and lack of co-ordination. In particular, issues have been raised around the matter of the respective incentives and disincentives in the different provisions (Hick and Murphy 2020). A recent report (December 2020) of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands (2020) reviewing the PUP made the following recommendation (p. 2):

The Department must immediately review the interaction of the PUP with the wage subsidy schemes operated by the Department of Finance. It is the view of the Joint Committee that it is preferable for employees to maintain their employment income and direct connection with their employer rather than having to avail of PUP. In order to achieve this objective every effort must be made to assist employers in keeping employees on their books rather than forcing them to avail of PUP.

In addition, the matter of the solvency of the Social Insurance Fund has been questioned. The move to define the PUP as a social insurance benefit and thereby recoup PUP expenditure since March 2020 from the Social Insurance Fund following the passage of the *Social Welfare (COVID-19) (Amendment) Bill* in August will see significant reductions in the Fund's reserves and is likely to return it to an annual deficit in the immediate future, placing greater urgency on increasing the pension qualifying age (Irish Congress of Trade Unions 2020).

A further concern is how to phase out the benefits that were introduced on a temporary basis without worsening the situation of many. Following the passage of the *Social Welfare (COVID-19) (Amendment) Bill* in August, PUP claimants are required to be 'genuinely seeking' employment to be eligible for the payment. There is an anomaly here in that these workers are treated as unemployed for the purposes of the PUP but were denied their heretofore right to redundancy by changes introduced on 13 March 2020 (see section 2.2.3 above) (ibid). The Houses of the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 (Houses of the Oireachtas 2020) has advised that the Department of Social Protection should review the imposition of a requirement to 'genuinely seek work' while in receipt of the PUP. It has asked that at the very least, regulations should be introduced setting out how this criterion is to be applied to claimants for the payment which take into account the fact that many claimants are temporarily laid-off and have every expectation of resuming their previous employment or self-employment. The Joint Committee recommends that, in the event of a resurgence of COVID-19 or in the event of another similar major occurrence requiring the introduction of emergency social welfare measures, any such measures are introduced by way of primary legislation so as to provide a clear legislative basis for any such measures and to provide clarity as to who is eligible to avail of any new social welfare scheme.

Housing and support for tenants and renters has been a major issue and point of debate. During the first lockdown period (March to June 2020), Ireland saw a marked reduction in levels of homelessness, an increase in the number of properties available to rent, a reduction in rents in some of the nation's most expensive rental markets, and a prohibition on evictions (Walsh and Hamill 2020). The changes in the levels of homelessness are mainly due to the housing- and rent-related moratoria and the better use of existing beds for homeless people.¹⁷ As Walsh and Hamill (2020) point out, this sudden (even if short-lived) change does give one a sense that for a short time at least the negative features of the Irish housing situation were able to be improved. Of course, the generosity of the measures has since been tempered and their temporary nature confirmed. All of this raises the question of how to address, on a more long-term basis, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Irish rental sector. Prior to the crisis, monthly rents were at or near all-time highs, and vacancy rates were low (ibid; Oireachtas Library & Research Service 2020). As we have seen, significant numbers of tenants were able to avail of Rent Supplement

¹⁷ <https://www.thejournal.ie/simon-community-report-covid-homeless-people-5362070-Feb2021/>; <https://www.focusireland.ie/homeless-figures-and-the-impact-of-covid-19/> (accessed 10-05-2021)

support as one specific response to the pandemic. Research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute showed that in the short-term (that is, the three-month period from mid-March-mid-June 2020), the COVID-19 crisis did not lead to a substantial build-up of rent arrears, due to the high levels of income support provided by the state and the reduced expenditure of households during lockdown (O'Toole et al 2020). However, the latter research flagged significant affordability challenges if the economy reopens without incomes recovering to pre-COVID-19 levels, particularly in hard-hit sectors like hospitality and tourism where employees are more likely to be renters than homeowners. It identified continued income support, increased uptake of rent supplement, better data on rent arrears, and an orderly management of arrears as important policy responses to those challenges.

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