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Foreword from the Taoiseach

This is Ireland's first report on our journey to implementing the European Child Guarantee. The Guarantee was adopted at a challenging time in our history; we were emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, and facing the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, with many coming to our shores seeking temporary protection. In Ireland, and across the EU, children are more likely than adults to live in poverty, but we know that by taking the right decisions we can make a difference.

What this report demonstrates very clearly is that stronger coordination across Government will help us to achieve our vision of making Ireland the best country in Europe to be a child. It is only when all of the pieces of the jigsaw come together that we can really transform lives. The European Child Guarantee offers us the opportunity to focus on the most essential needs of children and provide the conditions where every child has the opportunity to realise their potential.

While the European Child Guarantee is an important part of our wider response to child poverty and well-being, the Government has also established a Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office. Located in the Department of the Taoiseach at the centre of government, this Office coordinates and facilitates a whole-of-government response to child poverty and social exclusion.

The focus of the Programme Office is to prioritise action in the areas that will have the greatest impact for children experiencing poverty. The initial 2.5-year Programme, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, encompasses many of the key measures highlighted under the European Child Guarantee. These include improving access to early learning and childcare; the prevention and mitigation of family homelessness; and reducing the cost of education.

As this report reveals we have made significant progress in ensuring children at risk of poverty and social exclusion have access to the services they need. We have reduced the cost of childcare; expanded free General Practitioner (GP) care to more children; ensured free schoolbooks for students up to the junior certificate; we are expanding the Schools Meals Programme; and in recent years we have supported families in managing the increasing pressures of the cost-of-living crisis. Our most recent data shows that we are moving in the right direction the at risk of poverty rate (14.3%) and the consistent poverty rate (4.8%) for children is lower now than at any other time since we started measuring it in 2004. This is significant progress but there is of course more to do.

The Government is committed to providing every child with the best possible start in life. We must work together to ensure that every child is happy, healthy, and has the opportunity to meet their potential. Implementing the European Child Guarantee plays a key part in ending child poverty, and the supports and actions in this report shows the depth of our commitment to children and their families.

Simon Harris, T.D.

Taoiseach

Foreword from the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

I am delighted to publish Ireland's first report to the European Commission on our progress in implementing the European Child Guarantee. This is a timely opportunity to reflect on the progress made in implementing the Guarantee and to consider the key areas in need of renewed focus as we continue to combat social exclusion for children in Ireland.

In November 2023, my Department published *Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*. This policy framework brings together the implementation of the Guarantee and other key strategies focussed on the rights of children and young people. *Young Ireland* considers actions in the wider societal context, as well as intersectional issues, which can help to improve service delivery in areas not explicitly covered by the Guarantee. *Young Ireland's* enabling environment aims to embed consideration of children and young people as a key part of decision-making across government, which will further strengthen our implementation of the Guarantee in the coming years. The governance structures which are currently being established will drive and coordinate policy implementation and ensure a forum for stakeholders in civil society and for children and young people themselves to engage with this implementation.

The objective of the European Child Guarantee is to prevent and combat social exclusion and to address disadvantage in childhood. I am determined to ensure that every child in Ireland has the best possible start in life. To achieve this, we must do everything possible to ensure access to key services and supports for all children, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

The lasting impact of disadvantage in early childhood can be seen in inter-generational cycles of poverty and social exclusion. We all know that high quality early learning and care and school-age childcare services have an important role to play in children's development and in helping to break these inter-generational cycles. *Equal Start*, a major new model of Government-funded supports to ensure children experiencing disadvantage can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and childcare, has been designed with this in mind. This underscores the importance of ensuring that children from all backgrounds, and most particularly children experiencing disadvantage, can access and participate in early learning and childcare services.

Ireland's at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate for children is steadily improving. Developments in education and Early Childhood Education and Care have had recognised positive impacts. While this is welcome, there is still more work to be done. We must intensify our efforts to ensure access to key services, and improve the lives of the 4.8% of children living in consistent poverty.

I am truly confident that with continued strong and sustained cross-governmental collaboration, we can build on our successes to date and realise the vision of Young Ireland as that of an Ireland where the rights of children are fully respected and realised.

Roderic O'Gorman T.D.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Chapter 1 – Context

The *European Child Guarantee*¹ seeks to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children who are in need to a range of key services. It calls on member states to guarantee for children in need:

- a) effective and free access to high quality Early Childhood Education and Care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, and healthcare; and
- b) effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The *Guarantee* also aims to promote equal opportunity for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. In 2020, nearly 18 million children in

¹ *European Child Guarantee*, European Commission, 2021. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0137&qid=1647980233530>.

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the EU lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion². As referenced in the *Guarantee*, the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*³ suggests a target for the EU to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social inclusion by at least 15 million by 2030 (of which at least 5 million would be children).

The *European Child Guarantee* offers countries guidance on integrated strategies to tackle child poverty and promote children's well-being. It goes beyond welfare and labour market policies to promote access to quality services and the active participation of children themselves. It further highlights the importance of EU cohesion policy in mobilising reform.

Ireland's *European Child Guarantee National Action Plan*⁴ identifies a number of critical barriers to access of services and supports for children and families. These critical barriers are then broken down into a number of measurable actions, which together aim to enact meaningful improvements in the lives of children experiencing social exclusion. The effective implementation of the *European Child Guarantee* involves the active input of several government departments and agencies, working together to address these barriers.

*Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*⁵, launched in November 2023, will support the implementation of the *European Child Guarantee*, and ensure it is collaborative, integrated and impactful. The implementation and monitoring of the *National Action Plan* will be incorporated into the policy framework's governance and monitoring structures, under a broader child and youth umbrella. This will allow these actions to also be considered in the wider social context, and can help to improve service delivery in areas not explicitly covered by the *European Child Guarantee*. The involvement of stakeholders, including civil society, will be an integral part of the governance and implementation of *Young Ireland*.

² "Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion", Eurostat, 2023. Available at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion#Key findings](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion#Key_findings).

³ *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*, European Commission, 2021. Available at:

<https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>.

⁴ *Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/95dcc-irelands-eu-child-guarantee-national-action-plan/>.

⁵ *Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/80ac4-young-ireland-the-national-policy-framework-for-children-and-young-people-0-24-2023-2028/?n=@>.

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While the position of Ireland's European Child Guarantee Coordinator is within Ireland's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the *National Action Plan* is a cross-departmental strategy. The cross-government response to the *European Child Guarantee* will be further strengthened by the recent establishment of the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme in the Department of the Taoiseach.

Underpinning of Ireland's National Action Plan

Ireland's *European Child Guarantee National Action Plan* is underpinned by a wide range of relevant elements of existing policies, strategies and programmes operating in government departments, each with its own set of variables, objectives and analysis. Details of these can be found on the relevant departmental websites, and on www.gov.ie, the main portal for government departments. The main government departments involved in implementing the *European Child Guarantee* are as follows: the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; the Department of Health; the Department of Education; the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; the Department of Social Protection; and the Department of the Taoiseach.

Addressing social inclusion and child poverty in Ireland

Since 1997, Ireland has put in place successive national strategies focusing on the reduction of poverty and social exclusion. These plans have been cross-governmental, with actions chosen for their potential to bring about improved outcomes for people living in poverty and/or experiencing social exclusion, including children and families. The whole-of-government approach recognises the complex and multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion, with a range of interventions required, including: income supports; improved access to affordable services; and measures to support access to good quality, well-paid employment.

In this regard, programmes, policies and responses seeking to improve and expand services and funding in Ireland invariably have an impact on child poverty. Set out below are some of the mechanisms through which the Irish Government seeks to address child poverty and social exclusion.

Roadmap for Social Inclusion

The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments*⁶ is Ireland's national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion. It is a whole-of-government strategy spanning a five-year timeframe with a mid-term review published in 2023. The *Roadmap* aims to reduce the percentage of the population in consistent poverty in Ireland to 2% or less and to position Ireland within the top five countries in the EU under a number of leading social inclusion measures. The *Roadmap* seeks to ensure that social inclusion is at the core of public policy across all government departments and services. In this regard, the *Roadmap* highlights the importance of both income supports and access to services, particularly to basic essential services such as housing, health and education, in addressing poverty and social exclusion. This aligns with the core recommendations contained in the *European Child Guarantee*.

Given the significant changes in context since the publication of the *Roadmap*, 12 additional commitments have been added as a result of the *Mid-term Review of the Roadmap*, with updates made to 17 existing commitments. The *Mid-term Review* reiterated a commitment to focus on the delivery of commitments in relation to the provision of social housing, measures to reduce both energy poverty and food poverty, and implementation of Sláintecare⁷ and other health care services, among other commitments.

The *Third Progress Report on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, and accompanying report card setting out progress in achieving each of the *Roadmap's* commitments for the period July 2022 to June 2023, were published in February 2024⁸. At the end of 2023, 48 of the 81 *Roadmap* commitments were either fully achieved or achieved with ongoing delivery, with a further three commitments in progress on schedule with ongoing delivery, and delivery on 30 commitments in progress.

The *Roadmap* commits to setting a new national child poverty target. The *Mid-Term Review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion* published in June 2023 committed to undertaking a public consultation as part of this process. The public consultation launched on 20 November 2023, with a closing date of 19 January 2024, and some feedback from this process is outlined below:

⁶ *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments*, Department of Social Protection, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ca8bf-roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025/>.

⁷ *Sláintecare*, Department of Health, 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/slaintecare-implementation-strategy/>.

⁸ *Third Progress Report on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion and Third Report Card on the Roadmap for Social Inclusion*, Department of Social Protection, 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ca8bf-roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025/>.

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- Submissions were generally of the view that the consistent poverty measure is a robust and important indicator to track progress on child poverty. This was seen by the majority of respondents to be the most effective measure for a national child poverty target.
- The overall consensus was to set the target on a rate basis while also recording an absolute number as part of the target.
- A recurring theme of the respondents in relation to sub-targets was a preference for indicators linked to different at-risk groups. Lone parents, jobless households and those in social rented housing, children with disabilities and children living longer-term in temporary accommodation, children in care and children known to the care system were all highlighted, as well as the importance of obtaining data relating to groups of children excluded from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) survey, including homeless children.
- Respondents also highlighted issues they consider particularly important to tackling child poverty, including: the introduction of a cost of disability allowance; adequate access to services; impact of cash transfers for low income families; provision of social housing; homelessness; measures for the Early Years and School Age sector; education; food poverty and a new child income support payment.

The development of a new national child poverty target will feed into the wider whole-of-government approach to address child poverty, including the formation of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach and the publication of *Young Ireland* by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The new target is expected to be set in 2024.

Young Ireland

Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028, was launched on 21 November 2023. This framework:

- sets out current issues impacting children and young people, identified by them, as demonstrated by the Children and Young People's Indicator Set and as highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child;
- sets out work to create an environment to ensure that children and young people are a central part of everyone's agenda;

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- announces Spotlight Programmes⁹ to focus on the most significant challenges for children and young people, with resources from across government;
- re-establishes governance structures where the State will work with civil society partners to provide renewed leadership and impetus to realise new and existing policy commitments;
- identifies the priority areas requiring coordinated action across government; and
- identifies a number of complementary actions to address issues that were identified during the development of this framework.

In February 2022, Ireland submitted its *Fifth and Sixth State Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*¹⁰. In January 2023, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and a delegation of officials from relevant departments, attended a Committee Hearing in Geneva to review the progress made on children's rights in Ireland. The Committee's *Concluding Observations*¹¹ were published in February 2023 and these informed the development of *Young Ireland*, along with a public consultation, consultations with children and young people, and targeted consultations with civil society. Ireland's *European Child Guarantee National Action Plan* has been incorporated into *Young Ireland* in its implementation.

Young Ireland was published alongside the Children and Young People's (CYP) Indicator Set¹², which is a comprehensive collection of indicators relating to the lives of children and young people in Ireland. This indicator set was developed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth under Ireland's previous national policy framework for children and young people¹³ and will continue to be used to track progress across each of the national outcomes outlined in *Young Ireland*. Progress in relation to these outcomes would be a good indication that children and young people are doing well in Ireland: that they are active and healthy; achieving in learning and development, safe

⁹ The current Spotlight Programmes under *Young Ireland* are Child Poverty and Well-being; Child and Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing; and Disability Services.

¹⁰ *Ireland's Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic State Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/220136/d2f2ea1b-28af-44f9-8d19-53f707e5abc6.pdf#page=null>.

¹¹ *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland*, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=2600&Lang=en.

¹² "Children and Young People's Indicator Set", Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/03f4b-children-and-young-peoples-indicator-set>.

¹³ The Children and Young People's Indicator Set was previously known as the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Indicator Set, having been developed under the previous national policy framework, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020*.

and protected from harm; have economic security and opportunity; and are connected, respected and contributing to their world.

First 5

The *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*¹⁴ sets out how to develop a system of integrated, cross-sectoral and high-quality supports and services – an effective early childhood system – that will help all babies and young children in Ireland to have positive early experiences. The strategy explains why this system is needed, what it should look like, and most importantly, the necessary actions.

The strategy focuses on babies and young children, and what makes the most difference to them. From birth, young children are active, competent and creative individuals and members of society, with their own distinctive interests, experiences, challenges and points of view. Early childhood is a unique phase of life for the realisation of children's rights, as set out by the United Nations *Convention of the Rights on the Child (UNCRC)*¹⁵. However, children are particularly vulnerable to the violation of their rights, and to poverty, discrimination, family breakdown and other adversities. The *First 5* strategy sets out a number of important actions to help realise these rights, and achieve better outcomes for children.

Progressive universalism, which offers supports and services to all children at a universal level, with extra provision for children with additional needs or challenges, is a key mechanism to ensure that all babies, young children and their families benefit. This is the basis of the *First 5* strategy. It prioritises strengthening services and supports for all (for example in parenting, ELC and health services), includes particular measures for children and families who need additional support, and ensures that services and interventions are proportionate to the level of disadvantage.

¹⁴ *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, Government of Ireland, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/5d81e-about-first5/?referrer=https://first5.gov.ie/>.

¹⁵ *Convention on the Right of the Child*, United Nations, 1989. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.

Pathways to Work

*Pathways to Work 2021-2025*¹⁶ is Ireland's national employment strategy. It is a whole-of-government strategy encompassing a four-year timeframe. The strategy's central aim is to reduce unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, youth unemployment and unemployment among disadvantaged groups such as lone parents and people with disabilities.

While the strategy is targeted at adults, well-paid employment improves outcomes for parents, leading to improved outcomes for children. The Economic and Social Research Institute's report, *Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare*¹⁷, notes that the principal economic status of the head of household is a strong predictor of the likelihood of deprivation. Compared to households where the head of household is working, people living in households where the head is unemployed are over two times more likely to experience the highest level of deprivation.

Pathways to Work focuses on increasing opportunities for people looking for work by increasing the number of training and further education places, adding to the number of work placement and job subsidy places, and by increasing the capacity of the Public Employment Service. Furthermore, the strategy includes specific commitments to improve labour market outcomes for people facing higher barriers to employment. For example, a new 'returners' programme will encourage and support people who left the workforce and have been outside of the workforce for some time, to take up employment.

The *Pathways to Work 2022 Progress Report*¹⁸ notes a changed economic landscape since the strategy was published, with several new challenges, including rising inflationary pressures, increases in energy prices impacting households and businesses, and a tightening labour market. Continued monitoring of economic and labour market trends is needed to meet the aims of *Pathways to Work*.

¹⁶ *Pathways to Work 2021-2025*, Department of Social Protection, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1feaf-pathways-to-work-2021/#:~:text=Pathways%20to%20Work%20Strategy%202021%20-%202025%201,-%20Leaving%20No%20One%20Behind%20...%20More%20items>

¹⁷ *Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare*, Economic and Social Research Institute, 2022. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/headline-poverty-target-reduction-in-ireland-and-the-role-of-work-and-social-welfare>.

¹⁸ *Pathways to Work Progress Report*, Labour Market Advisory Council, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/950eb-pathways-to-work-progress-report-july-2021-june-2022/>.

Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office

The Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office was established by the Taoiseach in Spring 2023 to coordinate government actions that reduce child poverty and foster children's well-being. In establishing the Programme Office, the Taoiseach's ambition is to prioritise action in the areas that will have the greatest impact. The initial 2.5-year Programme, *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*¹⁹, focuses on six areas:

- Income support and joblessness;
- Early Learning and Childcare;
- Reducing the cost of education;
- Family homelessness;
- Consolidating and integrating family and parental support, health and well-being; and
- Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty.

As well as driving implementation of commitments on the six focus areas, the Programme Office will also undertake strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of cross-government responses. This includes work to ensuring a specific focus on child poverty in the annual budget.

Hearing the voices of children and young people

Ireland is a world leader in participation practices, being the first country in Europe to have a dedicated participation strategy for children and young people, the *National Strategy for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* for the years 2015 – 2020²⁰. The strategy examined the challenges that exist in children and young people's lives, and focussed on enabling their participation in decision-making. A successor document, *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024–2028*, was published on 12th April 2024. The *Action Plan* builds on the ambition and achievements of the first *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* and aims to further promote the inclusion of children and

¹⁹ *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025*, Department of the Taoiseach, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/573a7-the-child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office-programme-plan/>.

²⁰ *National Strategy for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020*, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec/>.

young people in decision-making at all levels – in the home, in school, in their communities and at national level.

The successful implementation of this *Action Plan* will, in the short term, result in the views of children and young people being harnessed to inform policy, services, legislation and research that is relevant to their lives. Their views will also be sought in evaluation and monitoring of relevant services and policies.

This participation action plan will drive continued development of participation structures and practice, at local, national and international level, among organisations, sectors, practitioners and government departments and agencies. Through the implementation of these actions, and by using and enhancing existing resources and supports, DCEDIY will continue to innovate and lead the participation of children and young people in decision-making across government and internationally.

Ireland has developed participation structures and mechanisms to ensure the voices of children and young people are heard in decision-making, and is committed to including seldom-heard children and young people in participation structures and initiatives. A dedicated Participation Unit delivers this commitment.

The National Participation Office (NPO) was established in 2021 within the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to deliver youth participation services with the guidance and direction of the Department's Participation Unit. The NPO manages and coordinates the activities of Comhairle na nÓg (youth councils), Dáil na nÓg (youth parliament), the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, the National Youth Assembly of Ireland and other related youth participation initiatives and structures under the oversight and governance of the Participation Unit who lead on policy for child and youth participation in decision-making.

Hub na nÓg

Hub na nÓg was established as a national centre of excellence and coordination, to support government departments, state agencies and non-government organisations to give children and young people a voice in decision-making on issues that affect their lives, with a particular focus on those that are seldom-heard.

Comhairle na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 31 local authorities of the country, which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies. Comhairle na nÓg is designed to enable young people to have a voice on the services, policies and issues that affect them in their local area. One representative from each of the 31 Comhairlí na nÓg is elected to the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, which follows up on the recommendations from Dáil na nÓg to make changes for young people in those areas. The National Executive has a term of office of two years and meets once a month.

National Youth Assembly

The National Youth Assembly of Ireland was established to act as a consultative youth forum on topics of national interest. The National Youth Assembly plays a significant role in including the voice of young people in implementing public policy and prioritising actions for government. The Youth Assembly provides young people with an opportunity to make recommendations directly to government to inform public policy.

Chapter 2 – Target groups

Child poverty in Ireland over time

The Survey on Income and Living Conditions²¹ (SILC) captures rates of consistent poverty, at risk of poverty and deprivation in Ireland.

Percentage of children in Ireland aged 0-17	2021	2022	2023
At risk of poverty	14.5	14.7	14.3
Experiencing deprivation	17.3	18.8	21.4
Consistent poverty	6.3	7.0	4.8

Ireland’s at risk of poverty rate for children has shown a slight improvement since 2021. This figure shows the percentage of children living in households with less than 60% of the median equivalised income.

²¹ “Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023”, Central Statistics Office, 2024. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/>.

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However, Ireland's deprivation rate has increased, which may reflect the current cost of living crisis. The deprivation rate measures the share of children in a household experiencing two or more of the following deprivation items:

- Without heating at some stage in the last year due to lack of money
- Unable to afford a morning, afternoon or evening out in last fortnight for entertainment
- Unable to afford two pairs of properly fitting shoes in good condition that are suitable for daily activities
- Unable to afford a roast joint or its equivalent once a week
- Unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish, or vegetarian equivalent every second day
- Unable to afford new (not second-hand) clothes
- Unable to afford a warm waterproof coat
- Unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm
- Unable to afford to replace any worn out furniture
- Unable to afford to have family or friends for a drink or a meal once a month
- Unable to afford to buy presents for family or friends at least once a year

Ireland's share of children experiencing consistent poverty, which includes those who are both at risk of poverty and experiencing two or more of the deprivation items above, has significantly improved in 2023, suggesting that targeted measures to address this group may be effective.

Another important rate, addressed throughout this report, is the At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion rate (ARPE), which is the percentage of people who are either at risk of poverty, severely materially and socially deprived, or living in a household with a very low work intensity. The work intensity of a household is the ratio of the total number of months that all working-age household members have worked during the income reference year and the total number of months the same household members theoretically could have worked in the same period. A very low work intensity is where this ratio is 20% or less, so working-age household members have worked 20% or less of their potential work time in a year. Severe material and social deprivation here is defined as the proportion of the population experiencing an enforced lack of at least seven of the following deprivation items.

Household level items:

- Capacity to face unexpected expenses
- Capacity to afford paying for one week annual holiday away from home
- Capacity to deal with payment arrears (on mortgage or rental payments, utility bills, hire purchase instalments or other loan payments)

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- Capacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day
- Ability to keep home adequately warm
- Have access to a car/van for personal use
- Replacing worn-out furniture

Individual level items:

- Having internet connection
- Replacing worn-out clothes by some new ones
- Having two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including a pair of all-weather shoes)
- Spending a small amount of money each week on him/herself
- Having regular leisure activities
- Getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month

How do children in Ireland compare to the wider European Union?

The EU Monitoring Framework²² for the *European Child Guarantee* sets out a comparison of member states' outcomes relating to the *Guarantee*. The following section will review Ireland's outcomes in comparison to EU averages, using information in the monitoring framework, unless otherwise stated. The following table sets out a high level look at these comparators, with discussion below. Please note not everything in the framework has been included in this section, due to data availability.

Measure	Ireland	EU average
Children AROPE (2022)	22.7%	24.7%
Children (<16 years) with limitations due to health problems (2021)	5.3%	4.4%
Children aged 15 with low achievements in reading, maths and science and low socioeconomic status (2018)	14.5%	23.5%
Children under 16 AROPE who suffer from the enforced lack of access to regular leisure activities (2021)	15.0%	24.1%
Children under 16 AROPE who suffer from the lack of access to a meal with meat, chicken or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) at least once a day (2021)	5.5%	10.1%
Children under 16 AROPE with "very good" health (2021)	72.9%	62.7%

²² "The European Child Guarantee has a new framework to better monitor children's access to education, healthcare and housing conditions", European Commission, 2024. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10740#:~:text=The%20European%20Child%20Guarantee%2C%20the,%2C%20healthcare%2C%20and%20adequate%20housing.>

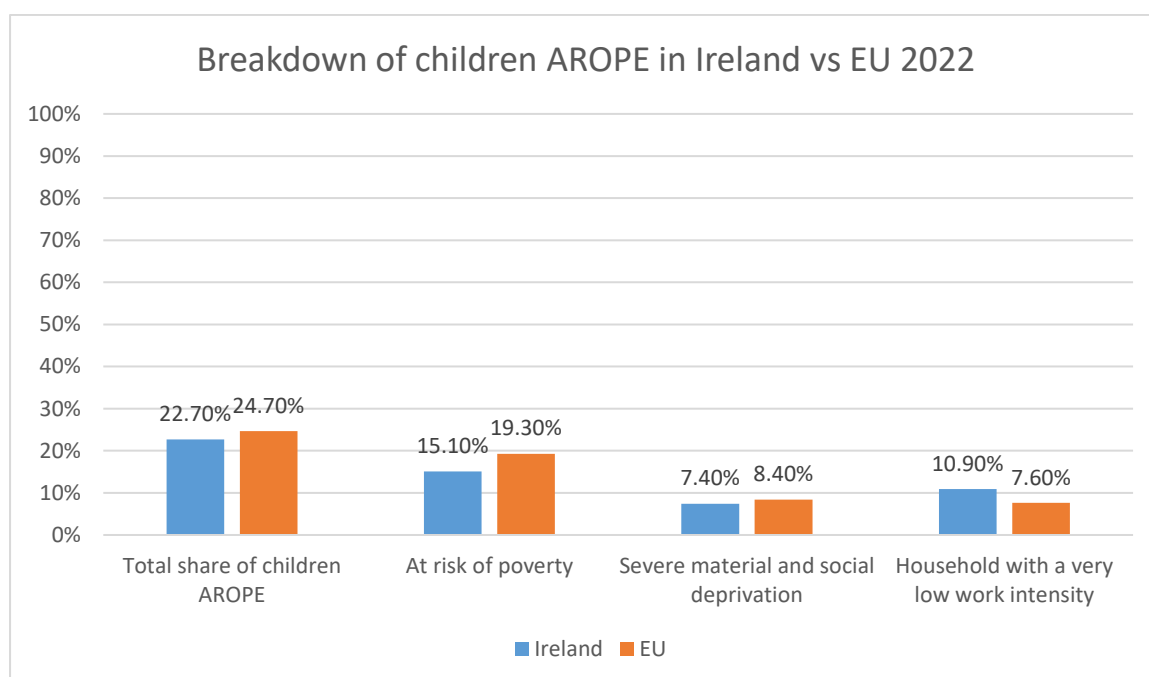
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Children AROPE living in a household unable to keep home adequately warm (2022)	21.8%	24.4%
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Poverty and social exclusion rates

Ireland's overall percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROE) is lower than the EU average. When broken out by their various components, however, Ireland's share of children AROPE who live in households with a very low work intensity is higher than the EU. Ireland's rate of children AROPE in single parent households also compares poorly to the wider EU, though it has improved over the last number of years. Note Ireland's AROPE rate of 0-17 year olds in 2023 was 14.3%, a significant decrease on 2022 figures (22.7%)²³.

The 2022 SILC data on poverty and deprivation showed that the 2020 consistent poverty rate for children aged 0-17 years was 7.2%, and 7.5% in 2022. The 2023 SILC shows that this figure has reduced to 4.8%.



²³ "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023", Central Statistics Office, 2024. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/>.

Formal childcare

Looking at the rate of children attending formal childcare, 1.6% of AROPE children in Ireland under three years of age are using centre-based childcare, and 87% of AROPE children in Ireland aged three to compulsory school age are using centre-based childcare²⁴. Children in Ireland do not have any legal obligation to attend Early Learning and Childcare, or an obligation to be in education until the age of six.

Education

In general, children in Ireland compare favourably to other children in the EU in respect of reading, maths and science, regardless of socio-economic background (see table above). However, more households (both AROPE and those not at risk) reported difficulties paying for formal education than their EU counterparts. More positively, Ireland's children reported better outcomes in relation to access to school trips, school events and regular leisure activities.

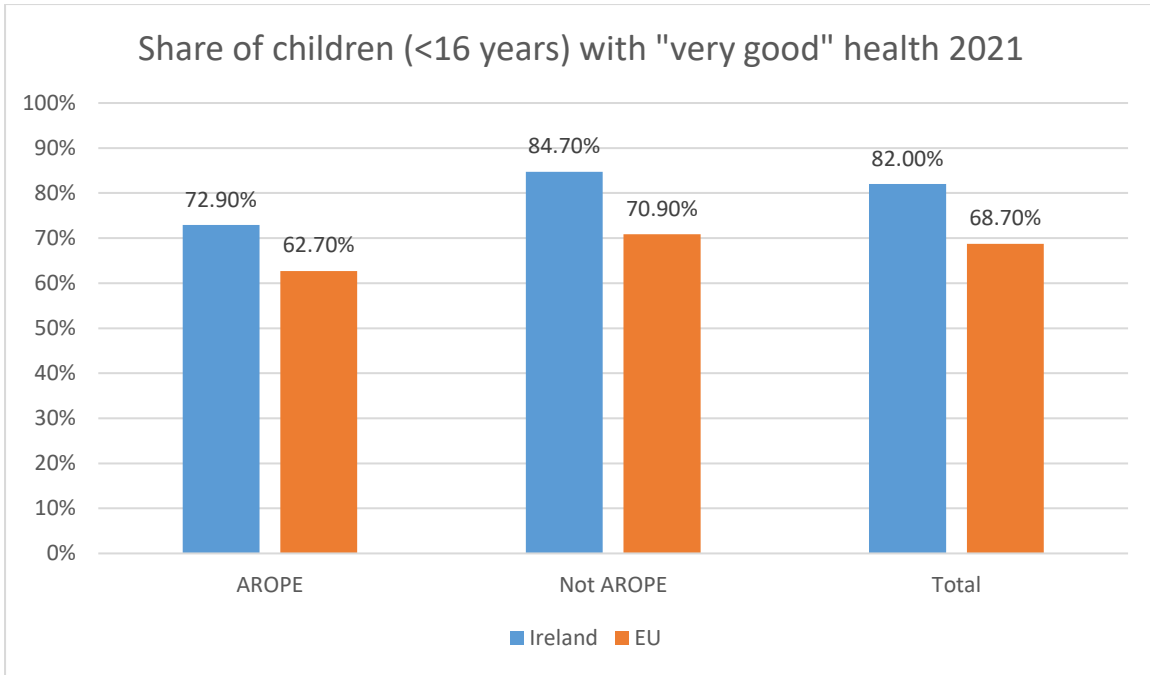
Nutrition

In relation to nutrition, 5.5% of children AROPE in Ireland suffer from a daily lack of access to a meal with meat, fish, or vegetarian alternative (1.3% of all children in Ireland). 6.1% of children AROPE suffer from a daily lack of fresh fruit and vegetables (1.4% of all children). In the wider EU, these figures are 10.1% and 7.6% respectively. Rates of children eating breakfast are under EU averages, regardless of socio-economic status.

Health

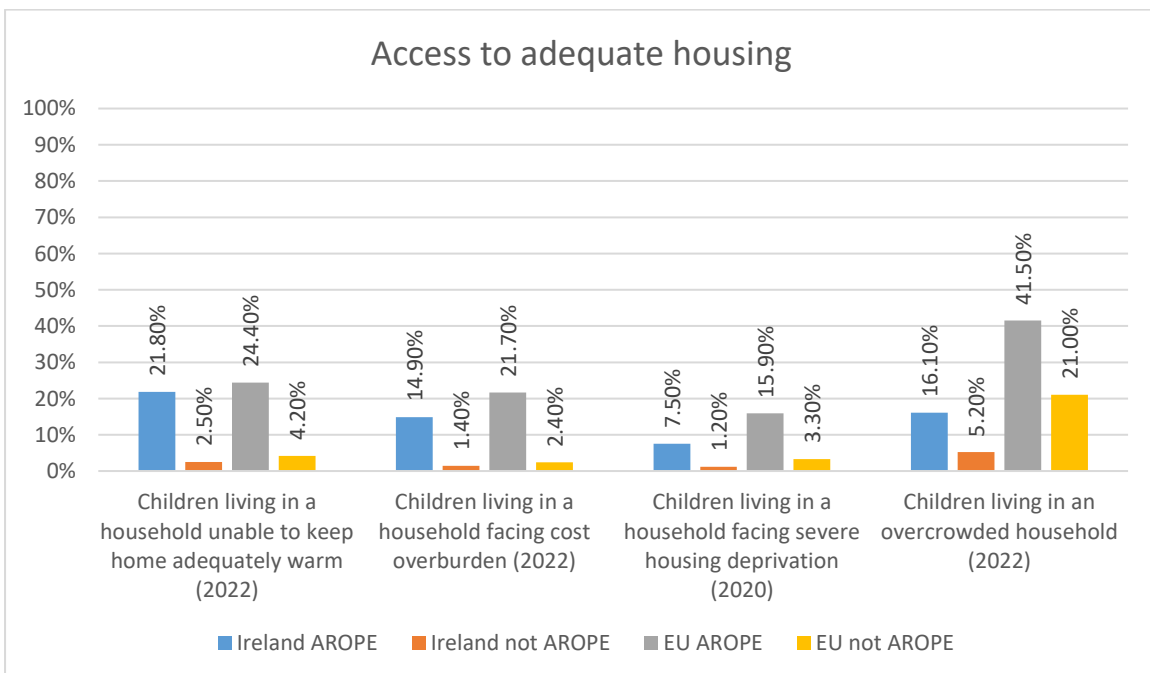
Ireland's children report very high figures of "very good" health. There is a notable disparity however, with children at risk of poverty and exclusion less likely to report this, though these figures remain above the EU average.

²⁴ These figures have a low reliability.



Housing

Housing and associated costs continue to be a challenge in Ireland and the wider EU. While Ireland's housing indicators for children AROPE compare well to EU averages, it is recognised that there are particular challenges for certain groups, including members of the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland.



Specific groups

The following sections focus on disadvantages experienced by particular groups, as identified in Section 11b of the *European Child Guarantee* (note however, we have not discussed children in precarious situations²⁵ due to limited data, and have included LGBTI+ children, as there is strong consensus in international research that LGBTQI+ youth face significant risks of homelessness²⁶ and are overrepresented in the population of homeless young people^{27,28}. Ireland has a number of universal programmes that apply to all children, rather than specifically focussing on certain groups. Complementary to these, we have noted below some targeted interventions, aimed at addressing groups experiencing particular disadvantages. While these groups may not represent the majority of children and young people in Ireland, they have specific needs and challenges that require action.

Homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation

According to the latest *Homelessness Report*, 1,994 families accessed emergency accommodation in the week of 19-25 February 2024, with 4,170 child dependents.

*Housing for All - a new Housing Plan for Ireland*²⁹ is Ireland's national strategy to increase housing supply and reduce levels of national homelessness. Part of this strategy includes prevention and early intervention services to families who are at risk of homelessness, and those in emergency accommodation.

The *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025*³⁰, published in November 2022, is a 3-year strategy working towards ending homelessness for young people aged 18-24 through prevention and exits,

²⁵ 'Children in precarious family situations' means children exposed to various risk factors that could lead to poverty or to social exclusion. This includes: living in a single-earner household; living with a parent with disabilities; living in a household where there are mental health problems or long-term illness; living in a household where there is substance abuse, or domestic violence; children of a Union citizen who has moved to another Member State while the children themselves remained in their Member State of origin; children having a teenage mother or being a teenage mother; and children having an imprisoned parent - *European Child Guarantee*, European Commission, 2021. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0137&qid=1647980233530>.

²⁶ *Risk Factors for Homelessness Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: A Developmental Milestone Approach*. *Children and Youth Services Review* Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., and Hunter, J, 2012.

²⁷ *You're Going to Be Straight or You're Not Going to Live Here: Child Support for LGBT Homeless Youth*, Lolai, D., 2015. Available at: <https://journals.tulane.edu/tjls/article/view/2876>.

²⁸ *Challenges faced by homeless sexual minorities: comparison of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender homeless adolescents with their heterosexual counterparts*, Cochran, B. et al., 2002. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11988446/>.

²⁹ *Housing for All - a new Housing Plan for Ireland*, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/>

³⁰ *Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025*, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69597-youth-homelessness-strategy/>

and improving the experience of young people accessing emergency accommodation. This strategy adopts a whole-of-government approach to tackling youth homelessness. It brings together a multitude of key stakeholders to address fundamental issues in youth homelessness.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is leading on the development of a pilot scheme to provide supported accommodation to families with complex needs experiencing long-term homelessness in Galway City and County. It is anticipated that this pilot will commence in 2024, with a similar pilot also planned for Dublin.

Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) works in partnership with voluntary agencies that provide approved housing, such as Focus Ireland and the Peter McVerry Trust, to ensure care leavers are prioritised for housing. Young people may also be eligible for an aftercare grant to assist with the payment of rent/deposit and costs associated with initial moving home expenses.

Children with disabilities

According to Census 2022, 13% of children and young people in Ireland have a disability. The Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People³¹ (PDS) Programme works to improve the way services are provided across the country to make them equitable and consistent for all.

The *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026*³² is a targeted service improvement programme to achieve a quality, accessible, equitable and timely service for all children with complex needs as a result of a disability and their families. It sets out the overall aim for Children's Disability Services, for every child to have a childhood of inclusive experiences where they can have fun, learn, develop interests and skills, and form positive relationships with others in a range of different settings.

Actions in the *Roadmap* focus on the following key areas:

- Integrated services between Children's Disability Network Teams, Primary Care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Tusla;

³¹ "Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People – The PDS Programme", Health Service Executive. Available at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/progressing-disability/pds-programme/>.

³² *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026 for Disability Services for Children and Young People*, Health Service Executive, 2023. Available at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/progressing-disability/pds-programme/roadmap-for-service-improvement-2023-2026.pdf>.

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- Children's Disability Network Team service access and improvement (including assessments of needs under the *Disability Act 2005*³³;
- Workforce;
- Communication and engagement; and
- Engagement with colleagues in education and support for special schools.

Children with mental health issues

The *Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study*³⁴ showed that, in 2018, 52% of children aged 11-17 felt happy the way they were. The same study showed that only 42.3% of 11-17 year-olds felt very happy with their lives at present. In 2023, the *Healthy Ireland Survey*³⁵ reported that 18.5% of children and young people aged 15-24 had a probable mental health problem on the Mental Health Index (MHI-5).

Efforts to address mental health issues are ongoing, and in Budget 2024, additional investment was provided for mental health services that have a strong focus on youth mental health, including CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). Additional posts will be recruited into CAMHS to improve access to services and reduce waiting lists, targeted at areas where demand is greatest. The extra staff will help to implement the recommendations of major reports and audits, particularly around integrated care and reducing the variance between teams nationally on referral and acceptance rates into services.

In addition, the development of a youth mental health mobile phone application is also planned. This app will incorporate interactive supports to help young people maintain and improve mental health and wellbeing, and provide dynamic signposting for child and youth services in the community. It will act as a type of one-stop-shop for accessing child and youth mental health services in the community.

³³ *Disability Act 2005*, Government of Ireland. Available at: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html>.

³⁴ *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HSBC) Study 2018*, Department of Health and National University of Ireland, Galway, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dc26c4-irish-health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-study-2018/>.

³⁵ *Healthy Ireland Survey 2023*, Health Ireland, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/73c9d-healthy-ireland-survey-2023/#mental-health>.

Children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin

Census 2022 shows the diversity in Irish society. In new categories added to this census, 94,434 people resident in Ireland identified as Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi; 20,115 identified as Arab; and 16,059 as Roma. 17,971 of Irish Travellers and 6,319 of Roma were in the 0-24 years bracket.

The intersectionality of poverty and ethnicity can cause a dual disadvantage for migrant or minority children in Ireland³⁶. Traveller and Roma children face some of the most serious threats because they are more likely to live in unsuitable and overcrowded accommodation than their peers. Additionally, the impact on their physical and mental health and development is at consistent risk. Barriers in accessing services can compound the impact of living in poverty including for those children facing language barriers or living in rural settings.

Travellers have much poorer educational outcomes than the general population, with lower participation, retention and completion rates at all levels. Looking at the group who stated their highest education level and are not currently in education, Census 2022 revealed that for 15.1% of Travellers, the highest level of education completed was upper secondary education. This compares to 27.5% of the general population (all ethnic or cultural backgrounds). A total of 4.7% of Travellers completed third level education, compared to 47.7% of the general population. Further, six in ten male Travellers had no formal education or were educated to primary level at most. Of those in this group who stated the age that they finished education, in 2022, 40.4% of Travellers had ceased full time education by the age of 16 or younger.

With regard to school completion, the available evidence suggests that the Traveller Community becomes increasingly disengaged from the education system as they get older. A 2017 ESRI report³⁷ found that Traveller children and teenagers experience discrimination within the school environment, which may precipitate early school leaving. This finding is echoed by the Fundamental Rights Agency Survey³⁸ (2020), which notes that 27% of parents or guardians in Ireland say their children are bullied in school because they are a Traveller. Across the six EU countries surveyed, 10% of Traveller parents said the hostile school environment or bullying was the main reason for their children dropping out of

³⁶ This intersectionality is acknowledged and incorporated into the *National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: www.gov.ie/anti-racism.

³⁷ *A social portrait of Travellers in Ireland*, Economic and Social Research Institute, 2017. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/a-social-portrait-of-travellers-in-ireland>.

³⁸ *Roma and Travellers in six countries – Roma and Travellers Survey*, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/roma-travellers-survey>.

school before the age of 15, and 5% of those aged 18-24 years for not continuing school. 13% felt discriminated against because of being a Traveller when in contact with school authorities either as a parent/guardian or as a student.

The population of Roma in Ireland as enumerated by Census 2022 is 16,059, of whom 6,319 are children or young people (aged 0-24). This contrasts with previous unofficial statistics, which estimated the number of Roma in Ireland to be in the region of 3,000–5,000³⁹. The 2018 *National Roma Needs Assessment*⁴⁰ was completed and published by Pavee Point, and included Roma researchers at all stages. Currently, it is the key publication providing information on Roma in Ireland. The research process of developing the assessment was both quantitative with questionnaires and qualitative with focus groups and interviews with Roma across Ireland. Males and females took part with most participants aged 18 to 34 years. All participants over 18 were born outside Ireland, but 63.3% of minors were born in Ireland. The report outlined that approximately 5% of adult Irish Roma had Irish citizenship. Findings suggested that 20% of Roma had no social welfare support including child benefit, no housing support including homeless support, and no employment support.

In addition to the strategies already described under previous headings that will impact the lives of those of minority ethnic origin, migrant backgrounds and Traveller or Roma children, additional strategies are in place / underway to serve these communities such as:

- The *National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027*⁴¹;
- *The Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2021*⁴² (note a new *Migrant Integration Strategy* is currently being developed);
- The forthcoming *National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy* is expected to be published later in 2024; and

³⁹ Roma was included as an ethnicity in Census 2022 for the first time. As with figures for Travellers, this increase may reflect increased trust in ethnic data collection, rather than an increase in population.

⁴⁰ *Roma in Ireland - A National Needs Assessment*, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre & Department of Justice and Equality, 2018. Available at: <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/RNA-PDF.pdf>.

⁴¹ *National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: www.gov.ie/anti-racism.

⁴² *The Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2021: A Blueprint for the Future*, Department of Justice and Equality, 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/983af-migrant-integration-strategy/>.

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- The *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*⁴³ (note a new *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy* is currently being developed).

Children in alternative, especially institutional, care

Ireland has a high percentage of children and young people living in community-based foster care. A total of 5,754 children were in care at the end of January 2024. 87% of all children in care are in foster care (including relative foster care), 8% are in residential care and 4% are in “other” care placements⁴⁴. Children placed in care are given opportunities to have their voices heard in relation to their care placements, as well as support to improve their outcomes.

Children can be faced with varying issues when they engage with alternative or institutional care, many of which are based on the background of the children⁴⁵. Often, children encounter difficulties such as poverty, issues with mental and physical health, lack of appropriate care and a limited ability to express their rights. In terms of outcomes, this has a huge impact on educational achievement, and their ability to live happy and fulfilling childhoods.

Care Experiences: Journeys through the Irish care system⁴⁶, is a research and data project examining the lives of children in care and aftercare and those who were in care as children. Since January 2022, the project has been led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in close collaboration with Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) as a key partner. There are four elements to the project including a data project which seeks to improve understanding of pathways through care, a study of young people who left care 10 years ago, a longitudinal study of young people leaving care which will follow those in care at age 16 for ten to fifteen years and a series of bespoke smaller studies which will explore current timely issues.

⁴³ *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*, Department of Justice and Equality, 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c83a7d-national-traveller-and-roma-inclusion-strategy-2017-2021/>.

⁴⁴ *Monthly Service Performance and Activity Report, January 2024*, Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2024. Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Monthly_Service_Performance_and_Activity_Report_Jan_2024_V2.0.pdf.

⁴⁵ *Barriers to the Realisation of Children's Rights in Ireland*, Ombudsman for Children, 2007. Available at: https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2007/05/Barrierstorealisationofchildren_x0027_srights1.pdf.

⁴⁶ “Care Experiences: Journeys through the Irish care system”, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth & Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/3d558-care-experiences-journeys-through-irish-care-system/>.

In hearing directly from the voices of children and young people, the Care Experiences project will provide new knowledge about the challenges, successes and opportunities for those with care experience in Ireland. This new knowledge will be essential to the development and improvement of future policies and services across the continuum of care.

LGBTI+⁴⁷ children and young people

The 2016 *National study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*⁴⁸ noted that school environments needed to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for a diversity of students and how better education around LGBTI identities within school would make it easier for LGBTI people to come out. Many were of the view that education of students from a young age, and education within schools, would go a long way in normalising LGBTI identity for those who are non-LGBTI. According to the 2020 Fundamental Rights Agency survey report: *A long way to go for LGBTI equality*⁴⁹, among young people (18-24), 41% hide being LGBTI at school, while for younger students (15-17), 32% indicated they were hiding being LGBTI at school in Ireland.

The *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State*⁵⁰ noted high levels of depression, anxiety and stress faced by members of the LGBTIQ+ community, including a high proportion of intersex participants reporting levels of severe/extremely severe anxiety. Members of the LGBTIQ+ community have been shown by both national and international research to have increased risk of suicidal behaviour and have been identified as a priority group within *Connecting for Life, Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015–2024*⁵¹. The 2016 *National study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and*

⁴⁷ Note "LGBTI+" is the term used in Ireland's *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy*. Other terms in this section reflect the different terminology used by relevant sources.

⁴⁸ *The LGBTIreland report: national study on the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*, GLEN and BeLong To, 2016. Available at: <https://www.belongto.org/support-our-work/advocacy/lgbtq-research/the-lgbtireland-report/>.

⁴⁹ *A long way to go for LGBTI equality*, European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, 2020. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/eu-lgbti-survey-results>.

⁵⁰ *Independent Review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State*, Inspector of Mental Health Services and Mental Health Commission, 2023. Available at: <https://www.mhcirl.ie/sites/default/files/2023-01/Independent%20Review%20of%20the%20provision%20of%20Child%20and%20Adolescent%20Mental%20Health%20Services.pdf>.

⁵¹ *Connecting for Life: Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2024*, Department of Health, 2015. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7dfe4c-connecting-for-life-irelands-national-strategy-to-reduce-suicide-201/>.

intersex people in Ireland highlighted particular vulnerability among young LGBTI people, and reported rates of self-harm as two times higher, and attempted suicide as three times higher, compared to their non-LGBTI peers. The study noted that 46.8% of young LGBTI participants had scores indicating some level of depression.

In 2018, Ireland was the first country in the world to launch an *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020*⁵² with the goal of creating a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTI+ young people; improving the mental, physical and sexual health and wellbeing of the entire LGBTI+ community; and to develop the research and data environment to better understand the lives of LGBTI+ young people.

This youth-focused strategy was complemented by the publication of Ireland's first *National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021*⁵³. This strategy provides a whole-of-government framework for identifying and addressing issues, which may prevent LGBTI+ people from enjoying full equality in practice in Irish society. The overall vision informing the strategy is of a safe, fair and inclusive Ireland where people are supported to flourish and to live inclusive, healthy and fulfilling lives, whatever their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. Positive visibility and increased non-stereotypical representation of LGBTI+ identities is vital to support long-term attitudinal change.

Reviews of both strategies are currently underway. It is expected that the next LGBTI+ strategy will take a whole-of-lifecycle approach.

Chapter 3 – Roll-out of services

A range of services and supports are available for families and children. While these services are accessed by a large number of people, it is noted that some people can experience barriers to access. Ireland's *European Child Guarantee National Action Plan* has focussed on addressing key barriers to access services and supports. These barriers were identified as being of particular note during the course of the consultation process undertaken to formulate Ireland's *National Action Plan*. The following section discusses actions underway to address these barriers, under each of the six areas covered by the *European Child Guarantee*.

⁵² *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020*, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a6f110-lgbti-national-youth-strategy-2018-2020/>.

⁵³ *National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021*, Department of Justice and Equality, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bab0fe-launch-of-the-lgbti-inclusion-strategy-2019-2021/>.

3.1 – Early Childhood Education and Care

Heading	Services and policies discussed
Financial and non-financial barriers	Early Childhood Care and Education Programme National Childcare Scheme National Action Plan for Childminding
Equal Start	Equal Start
Inclusive education	Early Learning and Care policy Access and Inclusion Model Inclusion Coordinator training
Nurturing skills	Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC
Transport	Transport

Financial and non-financial barriers

There are a number of direct and indirect factors, which identify the financial and non-financial barriers to participation in Early Childhood Education and Care, education and school-based activities for children in Ireland.

A review of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme⁵⁴, which provides two free years of pre-school education, as a precursor to the establishment in legislation of legal entitlement to pre-school, has been completed, and is due to be published in 2024. The future development of ECCE will be informed by the findings of this report, which encompasses children, parents, providers, educators and national and international experts in the field of Early Learning and Childcare.

Numerous enhancements have been made to the National Childcare Scheme⁵⁵ (NCS) over the last three budgets to substantially reduce the out of pocket cost of childcare for all families including the most disadvantaged, and has increased entitlement to NCS subsidies. This includes an increase to the minimum subsidy awarded under the NCS to €2.14 per hour from September 2024.

There has also been an increase in investment in the sponsor referral under the NCS, which is a special arrangement for vulnerable children and families to be referred by certain sponsor bodies so they can receive free Early Learning and Childcare. Record numbers of families are now being supported by the scheme. Between 1 January and 31 December 2023, 182,443 children benefitted from the NCS. 123,457 children benefitted from the scheme during the same period in 2022. This represents an

⁵⁴ “Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme”, Gov.ie, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2459ee-early-childhood-care-and-education-programme-ecce/>.

⁵⁵ “The National Childcare Scheme”, Gov.ie, 2024. Available at: <https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/>.

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increase in uptake of 48%. 7,175 children benefitted from the NCS sponsor referral scheme in 2023, an increase of 38% on 2022 figures.

In addition, Core Funding was introduced in 2022 to support the sector as a whole with direct supply-side funding, in addition to the ECCE programme and the NCS, to create a more stable and sustainable financial environment.

Core Funding improves:

- affordability for parents by instituting a fee freeze in participating Partner Services;
- access by expanding the capacity being offered by the sector, particularly for younger children;
- quality including through improved pay, conditions and career structure underpinned by Employment Regulation Orders; and
- stability and sustainability for providers.

Ireland has seen unprecedented increases in public funding for the sector secured in the last few years, with the *First 5* investment target of €1 billion by 2028 exceeded in 2024 (five years ahead of time). Future capital investment will aim to facilitate the participation of all children in ELC and SAC, and promote settings that are inclusive and accessible to all children, families and educators and practitioners, informed by Universal Design Guidelines.

Data from the 2022/23 Annual Early Years Sector Profile survey⁵⁶ estimated that there were 213,154 children enrolled in Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare nationally. This represents an 8% increase on the previous year and a 3% increase over 5 years from 206,301 in 2018/19. Enrolment figures during 2020/21 and 2021/22 were likely affected by the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the uptake of ELC and in particular SAC during that time period.

Year	Number of enrolments
2022/23	213,154
2021/22	197,210
2020/21	181,565

⁵⁶ "The Early Learning and Childcare Data dashboards", Pobal.ie, 2024. Available at: <https://www.pobal.ie/childcare/earlylearningandchildcaredata/>.

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2019/20	Not available due to data quality issues arising from service disruption during reference period
2018/19	206,301

The *National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028*⁵⁷ commits to extending regulation and supports to paid, non-relative childminders who work in their own homes. Phase One of the *National Action Plan*, which is nearing completion, aims to extend registration to all childminders, giving parents access to subsidised childcare in a childminding setting. This will be achieved through childminder-specific regulations, and draft regulations and minimum standards have been published for public consultation. Phase One also includes the following:

- development and roll-out of new, bespoke training for childminders;
- amendment of primary legislation to enable childminders to register with Tusla (the Child and Family Agency); and
- re-examining the funding and financial supports available for childminders.

Equal Start

Equal Start is a funding model and a set of universal and targeted measures to support access and full participation in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage. The model was approved by Government on 14 May 2024, and launched on 20 May 2024. The model is a strategic priority in *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being* and is identified as a key action in Ireland's action plan for the *European Child Guarantee*.

The design of Equal Start is informed by extensive feedback and consultations with educators, parents, providers and representative organisations. Equal Start adopts a tiered approach, which incorporates universal supports, child-targeted supports and setting-targeted supports.

Implementation will be phased with ongoing engagement with key stakeholders on later phases being a key element of the implementation approach.

⁵⁷ *National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/df207-national-action-plan-for-childminding-2021-2028/>.

Equal Start complements a range of other policies that also support disadvantaged children within ELC and SAC. It forms the fourth element of the Together for Better funding model for ELC and SAC settings, which provides complementary universal and targeted supports through the ECCE programme and AIM, the National Childcare Scheme, and Core Funding.

Through this suite of measures, the Government is delivering on the *Programme for Government* commitment to reform the childcare system to create one that brings together the best of community and private childcare provision, is focused on children's rights and quality outcomes, reduces inequalities, supports staff retention, and substantially reduces costs to parents.

Inclusive education

Ireland has taken an inclusive approach towards all children, including those from minority and migrant backgrounds, in the provision of school places in mainstream education, and in ensuring that all schools are welcoming places for all children. Ireland's Early Learning and Care (ELC) policy also emphasises inclusion and quality ELC for all children (including those from minority groups).

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), a child and parent centred model, was introduced in June 2016 to build inclusive practice in the ELC sector. AIM provides both universal and targeted supports to over 7,000 children with disabilities enabling their full inclusion and meaningful participation in mainstream settings. AIM also provides guidance on the use of inclusive play and universal design guidelines for ELC services.

The universal supports include Inclusion Coordinator Training to enable Early Years educators to become Inclusion Coordinators, providing leadership within the Early Years setting in relation to issues of diversity, equality, and inclusion. The targeted supports include funding for Early Years Specialists who provide expert educational advice and mentoring to pre-school educators to support the inclusion of children with a disability.

An evaluation of AIM was published in early 2024⁵⁸. The findings from the evaluation will inform further development of AIM, as committed to in *First 5*, Ireland's strategy to support babies, young children and their families. Of particular focus will be the expansion of targeted AIM supports to

⁵⁸ *End-of-year Three Evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)*, University of Derby, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/90564-new-report-shows-positive-impact-of-early-years-access-and-inclusion-model/>.

children participating in ECCE beyond 15 ECCE programme hours per week, which will take effect from September 2024.

AIM has had a significant impact on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) through Leadership for Inclusion (LINC), Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) and other training e.g. Hanen, Lámh,⁵⁹ Sensory Processing in Early Learning (SPEL)⁶⁰. Core Funding and other state funding schemes include funding to services to support early years educators to participate in CPD.

Nurturing Skills

*Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028*⁶¹, published in December 2021, aims to strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation for those working in ELC and SAC. The plan includes specific actions for moving to a graduate-led ELC workforce by 2028, establishing a career framework for staff working in the ELC and SAC sector, including role profiles and qualification requirements and the strengthening of career pathways. *Nurturing Skills* commits to promoting diversity and inclusion in the workforce through initially establishing mechanisms to monitor diversity in the ELC and SAC workforce and then examine the scope for targeting potential Early Years Educators / SAC Practitioners from groups that are less well represented in the workforce through traditional and non-traditional entry routes.

Nurturing Skills also includes actions to support the recruitment and retention of staff with the necessary qualifications, and ongoing educator training and development, to create a workforce that feels valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families.

To ensure educators qualifying with ELC awards are aware of their responsibilities for diversity and inclusion in an ELC workplace, qualification quality guidelines for ELC qualifications are set out in the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for NFQ Levels 7 & 8 ELC degree programmes and in the ELC annotated Professional Award Type Descriptors (PATD) for NFQ Levels 5 & 6 ELC. These qualifications guidelines stipulate diversity and inclusive pedagogy is embedded in the curricula at all

⁵⁹ "Hanen and Lámh Course Information", Gov.ie. Available at: <https://aim.gov.ie/homepage/resources/hanen-and-lamh>.

⁶⁰ "Sensory Processing in Early Learning (SPEL)", BetterStart.ie. Available at: <https://www.betterstart.ie/training-events/sensory-processing-in-early-learning>.

⁶¹ *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/97056-nurturing-skills-the-workforce-plan-for-early-learning-and-care-elc-and-school-age-childcare-sac-2022-2028/>.

levels of initial training for Early Years educators, ensuring graduates are prepared to take a democratic and inclusive approach that values diversity in their daily delivery of ELC services.

Transport

The goal in Ireland, under the *First 5* strategy, is to provide accessible and affordable Early Learning and Care to all children. Wherever possible this provision is to be developed within walking distance of the family's home.

Where transport services are provided by Early Learning and Childcare services, the cost of these services are generally integrated into the services overall fee structure. As such, any subsidy to fees paid to services by the State on behalf of parents is in part a contribution to meeting the costs of that transport provision.

3.2. Education and school-based activities

Heading	Services and policies discussed
Access to Education	DEIS programme Higher education
Financial and non-financial barriers to education	Free Schoolbooks Scheme
Ongoing participation in education	STAR Programme Tusla Education Support Service
Additional needs supports	Special education <i>Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy</i>
Education materials	Schools Broadband Programme <i>Digital Strategy for Schools</i> Assistive Technology Scheme
Access to school-based activities	School Transport Scheme Physical education

Access to education

Supplementary to the universal supports available to all schools, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme is a key policy initiative of Ireland's Department of Education to address concentrated educational disadvantage at school level in a targeted and equitable way across the primary and post-primary sector.

Ireland is committed to providing funding to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme by way of per capita grants. The two main grants are the capitation grant to cater

for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance, general up-keep, waste disposal etc., and the ancillary grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff. Schools have the flexibility to use capitation funding provided for general running costs and ancillary funding provided for caretaking and secretarial services as a common grant from which the board of management can allocate according to its own priorities.

In March 2022, the Minister for Education announced the single largest expansion of the DEIS Programme. This benefited 361 schools. The programme now includes in the region of 1,200 schools and supports approximately 260,000 students. 1 in 4 students and 30% of schools are now supported in the programme. This expansion added an additional €32 million to the department's expenditure on the DEIS Programme from 2023, bringing the overall Department of Education allocation for the programme to over €180 million.

The *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028*⁶² echoes this commitment to equity of access independent of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances. Lone and teen parents have been specifically identified as a target group for the plan, under the overarching category of socioeconomic disadvantage. The *National Access Plan* goals are supporting students to study with flexible teaching and learning, fee supports and grants, career guidance and participation in decision-making.

Financial and non-financial barriers to education

As part of Budget 2023, the Minister for Education announced the provision of free books to primary school pupils within the Free Education Scheme from September 2023. Budget 2024 announced additional funding to provide free schoolbooks and classroom resources for Junior Cycle students in post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme for the upcoming school year 2024/2025. The Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme has benefitted over 561,000 pupils in approximately 3,230 primary schools, including over 130 special schools from September 2023.

The Government is committed to an inclusive approach towards all children, including those from minority and migrant backgrounds, in the provision of school places in mainstream education, and in

⁶² *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028*, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022. Available at: <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/>.

ensuring that all schools are welcoming places for all children. The Minister for Education recently restated her position on the importance of inclusive education in her *Statement of Strategy 2023–2025*⁶³, setting out her vision for an education system where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential.

Ongoing participation in education

Ireland's curriculum, at both primary and post-primary level, is for all learners regardless of race, religion, socio-economic background, gender or orientation. It is the aim of the Department of Education that every child has access to equitable education and that each learner feels safe and happy in the school environment, at every stage.

The *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy* sets out education actions aimed at improving inclusiveness and education outcomes, and a pilot programme (STAR) was established to improve attendance, participation and retention for Traveller and Roma young people. An independent evaluation of this is currently underway and, along with other ongoing work in this area, will inform the development of a *National Traveller and Roma Education Strategy*, also currently in progress. The Department of Education is working with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure alignment of this strategy with the next iteration of the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*.

Data show that although school retention rates are low among Traveller children and young people, they are improving. The most recent reports from the Department of Education show that almost 90% of Travellers progress to third year of post-primary school. For the Junior Cycle examination, over 72% of the most recent cohort (2016) sat the exam – up more than 10% in five years. 31.4% of the most recent cohort (2016) sat the Leaving Certificate examination – up almost 10% in six years. Retention figures for the Junior Cycle examination are slightly higher for girls across each year, and in the latest cohort (2016), girls had a retention rate of 76.6%, and boys had a rate of 67.5%.

Year cohort	Junior Cycle examination	Leaving Certificate examination
2011	61.6%	-
2013	64.4%	-
2014	69.3%	22%
2015	69%	27.1%

⁶³ *Statement of Strategy 2023-2025*, Department of Education, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d7691-department-of-education-statement-of-strategy-2023-2025/>.

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2016	72.2%	31.4%
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The Department of Education operates policies of inclusion with respect to all students, including Traveller students. Travellers attend schools in the DEIS Programme in higher numbers than schools not supported through DEIS. Additional measures and supports to combat disadvantage are available to schools in the DEIS Programme, while universal supports available to all schools include special education teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs), and supports from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Funding for previous segregated Traveller provision has been incorporated into schools and overall funding streams in order to provide supports for Traveller pupils in mainstream schools. Additional pupil capitation for Travellers at a rate of €75 per pupil at primary level, and €213.50 per pupil at post-primary level, is provided at a current annual cost of around €1.3 million. Other targeted supports include supports under the STAR Pilot Project, and 10 additional Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator posts in non-DEIS post-primary schools with high Traveller and Roma enrolments.

TESS promotes school attendance, participation and retention. TESS works collaboratively with schools, families and other relevant services to achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people at risk of poor attendance or early school leaving.

The Tusla Education Support Service emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention. TESS has three strands:

- the Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS), which aims to ensure that every child either attends school regularly or otherwise receives a minimum education, and to ensure and secure every child's entitlement to education;
- the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL), which aims to improve educational outcomes for children through supporting parents/guardians; and
- the School Completion Programme (SCP), which aims to retain a young person to completion of the leaving certificate, equivalent qualification or suitable level of educational attainment that enables them to transition into further education, training or employment.

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As of September 2023, 1,497 (46%) Primary & 352 (49%) post-primary schools have completed training in using the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*⁶⁴ to initiate a wellbeing promotion review and development cycle using the School Self-Evaluation six-step process.

Additional needs supports

Ireland has committed to investing over €2.7 billion to support special education, representing a 5% increase for the special education budget this year and 26% of the department's total allocation. Investment in special education has increased from 22% in Budget 2020 to 26% in Budget 2024. Currently, Ireland spends in excess of 27% of its annual education and training budget (€9.6 billion in total) on making additional provision for children with special educational needs. The successful inclusion of students with special educational needs into mainstream education, special schools and special classes remains a priority for Government.

A successor *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy* is currently being developed for all learners in early childhood and care, primary and post-primary schools. It will run for 10 years and is being developed jointly by the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. An extensive research and consultation process has already been undertaken, with the new strategy set to be published in 2024. It will be clearly linked to the curriculum at all levels and to existing policies and strategies such as the *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027*⁶⁵, *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026*⁶⁶, and *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030*⁶⁷.

The Department of Education's *STEM Education Policy Statement*, published in November 2017, sets out the ambitious goals and actions required to achieve and improve the STEM education experience and outcomes for all learners. The *STEM Education Policy Statement* acknowledges that there is a need to increase the uptake of STEM subjects and to enhance STEM learning for learners of all backgrounds,

⁶⁴ *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023*, Department of Education and Skills, 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf#page=nu> II.

⁶⁵ *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027*, Department of Education, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69fb88-digital-strategy-for-schools/>.

⁶⁶ *STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026*, Department of Education and Skills, 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4d40d5-stem-education-policy/>.

⁶⁷ *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030*, Government of Ireland, 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/02952d-national-strategy-on-education-for-sustainable-development-in-ireland/>.

abilities and gender, with a particular focus on uptake by females. The second implementation plan, *STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026*⁶⁸, was published in March 2023. It is a joint plan by the Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The actions identified consider the findings of a robust consultation process and provides for the continued journey in STEM education.

Education materials

Under the Schools Broadband Programme, all schools now have high-speed broadband connectivity. DEIS schools will continue to receive an additional 10% in ICT grant funding in recognition of the role that access to digital technology can play in combating educational disadvantage. A 20% increase is provided for students in special schools or students in mainstream primary education that require specific additional resources.

In April 2022, the Department of Education announced the *Digital Strategy for Schools* which will continue to advance the embedding of digital technologies across teaching, learning and assessment, so that students can gain the skills required to navigate the rapidly changing digital world. Where children with more complex disabilities require essential specialist equipment to access the school curriculum, which they do not already have, or which cannot be provided for them through the schools existing provisions, schools may make an application for such equipment to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) under the terms of the Assistive Technology Scheme.

The Assistive Technology Scheme is provided by the Department of Education to supplement the overall approach to providing funding to schools for digital technology and equipment to support children for education purposes. All equipment provided under this scheme supports children with more complex disabilities who require essential specialist equipment. Assistive technology is a critical enabler for those with special educational needs to gain the maximum benefit from a modern technologically-focused education system and this increased allocation shows the continued commitment to ensuring that a full range of resources, not just teachers and SNAs, are available to support children who most need it⁶⁹. The department is currently reviewing this scheme to ensure

⁶⁸ *STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026*, Department of Education and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4d40d5-stem-education-policy/#stem-education-policy-plan-to-2026>.

⁶⁹ *Assistive Technology/Equipment in Supporting the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs – What Works Best?*, National Council for Special Education, 2016. Available at: <http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NCSE-Assistive-Technology-Research-Report-No22.pdf>.

that it is working for these children and that the resources are allocated appropriately and as efficiently as possible.

Access to school-based activities

Under Ireland's School Transport Scheme, primary school pupils who live 3.2km or more from their nearest suitable primary school can avail of school transport, at a nominal fee. Post-primary students who live more than 4.8km from school are also eligible. Primary and post-primary children with a valid full medical card are exempt from the annual ticket charge. Children with additional needs are also eligible for free transport to and from mainstream schools, special schools and classes that are or can be resourced to meet their special educational needs. If there is no formal school transport in an area (for example, if there are fewer than 10 eligible children in an area), grants are available to supplement associated costs of travel.

A review of the School Transport Scheme⁷⁰, published in February 2024, has recommended expanding access to the scheme so that an additional 100,000 pupils can be carried by 2030. The review recommends a series of changes that will take effect in September 2024:

- New pilot projects to begin in September involving post-primary pupils travelling to school on public bus routes and reduced distance criteria;
- A new way will be introduced of calculating the distance requirement for the School Transport Scheme with more modern mapping technology being introduced in time for the start of the 2025/2026 school year; and
- There will be an increase in the Special Transport Grant, which goes to families who prefer to provide their own transport for their children with special educational needs or where there isn't a service available.

Terms, conditions and pay rates for around 4,000 school bus escorts who travel with children with special education needs on mini-buses or taxis will be reviewed by end 2024.

The Physical Education (PE) curriculum in schools is gender-neutral with equal opportunities for boys and girls to access the curriculum. The emphasis is on participation for all, both in curricular and extracurricular physical activity. The new PE junior cycle specification includes a minimum of 135 hours across the 3 years, aligned to the Junior Cycle Framework. At senior cycle, PE is available as both an

⁷⁰ *Review of the School Transport System*, Department of Education, 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/8a354-minister-foley-announces-the-publication-of-school-transport-2030-the-review-of-the-school-transport-scheme/>.

examinable (Leaving Certificate PE) and non-examinable subject (Senior Cycle Physical Education Framework, which supports teachers in planning quality PE learning for all senior cycle students).

A Summer Programme⁷¹ for schools, aimed at pupils with the most complex special educational needs and those at a high risk of educational disadvantage, has been running in Ireland from 2021 to date. The two-week programme aims to support pupils’ wellbeing through building their confidence and enhancing their sense of connection with their school and their peers. It also strives to support children and young people who are at key transition stages in their education to progress to their planned educational placement in September. Activities include literacy and numeracy summer camps, opportunities for student-centered engagement in learning, active learning opportunities, peer collaboration and learning

3.3 Healthy meal each school day

Heading	Services and policies discussed
School Meals Programme	School Meals Programme
DEIS schools	DEIS schools

School Meals Programme

The Government is committed to improving the availability of healthy meals in schools⁷². Set up in 2003, the School Meals Programme provides funding towards provision of regular, free, nutritious meals to children, to support them in taking full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and educational achievement. Following the expansion of the programme in recent years, some 2,600 schools and organisations, covering 443,000 children are now eligible for funding under the programme.

Within the overarching School Meals Programme, the Hot School Meals Programme was introduced in 2019 as a small pilot of 30 schools. The programme has grown significantly in recent years and was extended to include all DEIS primary schools from September 2023. The programme is currently being rolled-out on a phased basis to all remaining primary schools. In April 2024, children from 900 additional primary schools began benefitting from hot school meals, bringing the total number of

⁷¹ *Summer Programme 2024*, Department of Education, 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5d15a-summer-programme/?referrer=https://www.gov.ie/summerprogramme/>

⁷² “School Meals Programme”, Gov.ie, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/29a3ff-school-meals-scheme/>.

schools eligible for the programme to over 2,000. This expansion means that an additional 150,000 children, 316,000 in total, can now receive a nutritious, hot meal during their school day. It is anticipated that more primary schools will have an opportunity to participate later in 2024.

There are a number of suppliers in Ireland whose services schools can avail of, and schools can choose their own supplier on the open market. Suppliers are chosen via a fair and transparent process in accordance with procurement rules. Food standards are referred to in tender documents and are available to schools on the Schools Procurement Unit's website, and tendering documentation clearly defines the responsibilities and obligations of the successful tenderer. On 30 March 2023, Ireland's Department of Social Protection published an independent evaluation of the School Meals Programme⁷³. The evaluation showed that the programme is very effective, and there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it improves attendance at schools and makes a difference to families, saving them both time and money.

It should be noted that not all children in DEIS schools are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Conversely, not all children at risk of poverty and social exclusion attend DEIS schools. The method of DEIS school designation is discussed further below.

DEIS schools

In order to qualify as a DEIS school, the school must be in a geographic location with a high level of deprivation. This is based on a number of factors such as the socio-economic background of the attending pupils, including social class, education levels, single parent rates and others. This programme provides additional teaching and other supports and resources to schools, aimed at tackling educational disadvantage.

The Pobal HP Index provides a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a small geographical area using data compiled from the national census. It is used by several state agencies for the identification of disadvantage, for example in order to target resources to communities most in need. The criteria used to identify schools for inclusion in the DEIS Programme was based on the percentage of students in a school from small areas that had a HP index of -10 or below, where -10 represents the HP score that is one standard deviation below the mean and the point at which the

⁷³ *Evaluation of the School Meals Programme*, RSM Ireland, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/473a6-evaluation-of-the-school-meals-programme-december-2022/>.

label “disadvantaged” is applied. As of September 2023, there were 240,000 students in 1,200 DEIS schools in Ireland.

3.4. Healthcare

Heading	Services and policies discussed
Early detection and treatment	GP visit cards
Ophthalmology access	Vision screening Optical services
Oral health access	Oral health policy
Vaccination Programmes	National Immunisation Programme
Health promotion and disease prevention	Healthy Ireland
Physical activity	Healthy Ireland
Disadvantaged communities	Sláintecare Healthy Communities
Period poverty	Period poverty

Early detection and treatment

In August 2023, eligibility for the GP visit card on the basis of age was extended to children aged six and seven. As a result, all children under the age of eight are now eligible for a GP visit card, regardless of family income levels. Improved access to GP services for young children helps facilitate early detection and treatment of diseases and developmental issues.

In addition, eligibility for the GP visit card was fully extended to all those who earn up to the median household income from November 2023. The qualifying financial thresholds for an income tested GP visit card were increased accordingly, adding approximately 430,000 individuals to those eligible. It is estimated that an additional 71,000 children aged 8–17 became eligible for a GP visit card under this expansion. In April 2023, public in-patient charges were abolished in all public hospitals, alleviating the financial burden for children accessing hospital care.

Ireland has committed to improving, developing and enhancing mental health services for young people. This includes prevention and early intervention, improved access, increased integrated care and reduced waiting lists in both community-based care and acute in-patient units. Children and youth people’s mental health is a spotlight area in *Young Ireland*.

Ophthalmology access

All children, including those not covered by a medical card, receive a vision screen while in national school from a Public Health Nurse. The Health Service Executive (HSE) provides optical services free of

charge to pre-school children and national schoolchildren referred from child health service and school health service examinations who are discovered to have sight problems. These children are referred to the appropriate consultant for treatment. In such circumstances, these services will continue to be provided until the child has reached the age of 16.

Oral health access

Regarding oral healthcare, work is underway to develop the first tranche of comprehensive oral healthcare packages, for children aged from birth to 2 years, as set out in the *National Oral Health Policy, Smile Agus Sláinte*⁷⁴. This will ensure children can access prevention-focused oral healthcare from birth, for the first time.

Vaccination programmes

In Ireland, all vaccines administered as part of the National Immunisation Programme are provided free of charge. The National Immunisation Programme is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The National Immunisation Programme includes the Primary Childhood (PCIP) Immunisation Programme and the school-based programme that provides vaccines for children. These include the 4 in 1, the 6 in 1, the MMR and the HPV vaccines that protect against a range of diseases, including diphtheria, polio, meningitis, measles and cervical cancer. The Children and Young People's Indicator Set shows that immunisation uptake for children under 24 months who have had the final dose of the Meningitis C (MenC) vaccine was 86%, and the same cohort that had their first dose of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine was 89.5% in 2022.

Health promotion and disease prevention

*Healthy Ireland*⁷⁵ is a Government of Ireland initiative and is coordinated by the Health and Wellbeing Unit at the Department of Health. The *Healthy Ireland* vision is for a "Healthy Ireland, where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential, where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone's responsibility". The *Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025*⁷⁶ was published in May 2021 and sets out the priorities up until 2025.

⁷⁴ *Smile and Sláinte: the National Oral Health Policy*, Department of Health, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/90687b-smile-agus-slainte-national-oral-health-policy/>.

⁷⁵ "Healthy Ireland", Gov.ie, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/healthy-ireland/>

⁷⁶ *Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025*, Government of Ireland, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/441c8-healthy-ireland-strategic-action-plan-2021-2025/>.

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The *Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025*⁷⁷ and *Strategic Action Plan* include additional policies, action plans, strategies, programmes and interventions under their remit. These include policies on the promotion of physical activity, addressing obesity, tobacco and alcohol, and sexual health. Many of these policies contain specific recommendations for children and young people.

Physical activity

The promotion of physical activity (PA) for health in children and young people is a specific target of the *National Physical Activity Plan*⁷⁸, published in 2016. A range of initiatives to promote PA are supported by Healthy Ireland, such as Active School Flag, the Daily Mile, Junior Parkrun and GAA Healthy Clubs.

Disadvantaged communities

The Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme is a cross-government initiative, with annual funding of €13m from the Department of Health. The programme is a partnership with the HSE, local authorities, local communities, statutory, voluntary and community groups to deliver targeted interventions in the areas of healthy eating, tobacco cessation, parenting and mental health. This programme benefits both adults and children.

Ireland is committed to developing a dedicated child health workforce. A population-based approach will be used initially, in areas of high population density and disadvantage, though it is noted that this approach will require additional resources. While this initiative was delayed as a result of COVID-19, this remains a priority, and work has recommenced in this area.

Period poverty

Period poverty refers to inadequate access to menstrual hygiene, including period products (e.g. sanitary towels and tampons), washing and waste management facilities and education. A report on period poverty in Ireland was published in 2021⁷⁹ and contained a range of recommendations to

⁷⁷ *Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025*, Government of Ireland, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e8f9b1-healthy-ireland-framework-2019-2025/>.

⁷⁸ *National Physical Activity Plan*, Government of Ireland, 2016. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/b60202-national-physical-activity/>.

⁷⁹ *Period Poverty in Ireland*, Period Poverty Sub-Committee of the National Strategy for Women and Girls Strategy Committee, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/264f4-period-poverty-in-ireland-discussion-paper-period-poverty-sub-committee-national-strategy-for-women-and-girls-20172020-february-2021/>.

address this issue which are now being progressed by an interdepartmental working group chaired by the Department of Health.

The Department of Health has been allocated funding for period poverty mitigation through its own sector and partnerships. The most urgent focus is on reaching those most in need (e.g., the homeless, those living with addiction, minorities including Traveller and Roma women, and those experiencing consistent poverty). This is being undertaken via partnerships with local authorities, the Family Resource Centre National Forum, the HSE National Social Inclusion Office, Community Health Organisations and NGOs. Funding of €0.71m was allocated for this in Budget 2022 and was increased to €0.81m in 2023. Given high demand for the scheme, this has been increased again to €0.91m in 2024.

Initiatives include supply of products through local authority, family resource centres and charity partners, focus groups and local public awareness campaigns, and equipping publicly accessible, national and local government run buildings and facilities (e.g. libraries) with no-cost dispensers and free products in bathrooms.

3.5. Healthy nutrition

Heading	Services and policies discussed
Food poverty	Food poverty research
Nutritional standards for schools	School Meals Programme Obesity policy Early Learning and Care
Nutritional information	Classroom learning Community food and nutrition officers
Healthy Ireland	<i>Strategic Action Plan</i> Nutritional guidelines for food parcels

Food poverty research

A working group in the Department of Social Protection, chaired at Ministerial level, has commissioned research to analyse the prevalence of food poverty, the drivers of it and the actions to address it, in selected case study areas. It commenced in 2022 and will focus on people experiencing food poverty, including children and families. Under the auspice of the All Island Poverty Network, nutrition standards for food parcels were developed to ensure that foods of high nutritional value are distributed to vulnerable families by agencies.

Nutritional Standards for School Meals

The *Healthy Ireland Nutritional Standards for School Meals* and *Nutritional Standards for Hot School Meals*⁸⁰, produced under the *Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025*⁸¹, set the standards that all food providers must meet. All participating schools must submit a sample menu with their application for School Meals funding and provide detailed records at the end of each school year, to obtain funding to source and provide meals that meet the *Nutritional Standards*. These standards were developed by a working group led by the Health and Wellbeing Programme, in consultation with Safefood and the Healthy Eating and Active Living Programme in the Health Service Executive.

Responsibility for sourcing the meals is a matter for the Board of Management of each school, but to secure funding they must first agree to apply the standards set out by signing a Service Level Agreement which clearly sets out the school's responsibilities and obligations in terms of nutritional standards. Healthy eating policy toolkits have also been published for primary and post-primary schools, which aim to support schools in developing their healthy eating policies.

The Department of Social Protection participates on a regular basis as a member of the Department of Health's Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group (OPIOG), which provides strategic oversight, coordination, and direction for cross-departmental and cross-sectoral actions in this area. The Department of Social Protection will engage further with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to ensure that meals provided comply with all relevant food safety legislation.

Confectionary or foods that are high in salt, sugar and fat are not recommended in the *Nutrition Standards* and not covered for reimbursement under the School Meals Programme. *Healthy Ireland* officials have engaged with Coimisiún na Meán (Media Commission) in relation to developing codes for the restriction of the advertisement of junk food and beverages to children as part of their commitments under the *Obesity Policy and Action Plan* and will continue to engage as necessary going forward.

Ireland participated in the EU Joint Action Best ReMaP, which finished in 2023. The project aimed to develop and implement policy proposals in three major nutrition areas with significant impact on shaping healthier food choices for children; food reformulation activities, reducing harmful food

⁸⁰ "School Meals", Gov.ie, 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/29a3ff-school-meals-scheme/>.

⁸¹ *A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025*, Department of Health, 2016. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c778a9-a-healthy-weight-for-ireland-obesity-policy-and-action-plan-2016-202/>.

marketing to children and quality-based food public procurements. The tools designed to reduce marketing of foods high in fat, salt and sugar and other outcomes from the project will be considered for future policy development.

*Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services*⁸² were launched in May 2023 based on *Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 Year Olds*, which reflect specific dietary requirements in children during the crucial Early Years. These standards aim to inform the development and implementation of Healthy Eating Policy and practice in Early Learning and Care Services, to ensure agreement on the promotion of healthy foods and drinks in main meals, snacks and celebrations in partnership with children, parents, service providers and the wider community. The standards will become a requirement as part of the Quality and Regulatory Framework for Early Learning and Care services.

Nutritional information

The issue of promoting healthy eating is addressed in schools through subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and Home Economics, as well as in Physical Education. SPHE is delivered on a mandatory basis throughout primary level and at junior cycle. The aim is to equip students with such skills and knowledge to enable them to make appropriate choices for healthy lifestyles.

Incredible Edibles is a healthy eating project for primary schools, with 1,600 schools and 80,000 children participating in 2023. The aim of the project is to educate students about growing fruit and vegetables and to increase their knowledge of food origin and quality. Food Dudes is another school-based project that encourages children to eat more fruit and vegetables. Over 3.1 million portions of fruit and vegetables were delivered as part of the project in the school year 2022-2023. The START Campaign is a public awareness campaign for parents that provides advice on healthy snacks, treats, menu planning and a selection of recipes.

Community Food and Nutrition officers have been recruited across 19 community areas as part of the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme. They are working with local stakeholders - public bodies and communities - to develop and implement evidence-based effective responses to improving the food environment in communities, with a view to addressing food poverty and reducing health inequalities.

⁸² *Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4b9dd-nutrition-standards-for-early-learning-and-care-services/>

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Healthy Ireland partners have developed *Nutrition Guidelines for Food Parcels*⁸³ to help facilitate partnerships and organisations such as Sláintecare Healthy Communities, Food Cloud, Community Food Initiatives and the Department of Social Protection plan nutritious food parcels.

Healthy Ireland

The *Healthy Ireland Framework* is a roadmap for building a healthier Ireland. It is based around four key goals:

- to increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life;
- to reduce health inequalities;
- to protect the public from threats to health and wellbeing; and
- to create an environment where every individual and sector of society can play their part in achieving a healthy Ireland.

The *Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan* provides a clear roadmap of how we can continue to work together to bring about good health, access to services, healthy environments, the promotion of resilience and to ensure that everyone can enjoy physical and mental, health and wellbeing, to their full potential.

3.6. Adequate housing

Heading	Services and policies discussed
<i>Housing for All</i>	<i>Housing for All</i>
Homeless accommodation	Funding local authorities Family hubs Income eligibility
Preventing homelessness	National Homeless Action Committee <i>Youth Homelessness Strategy</i> Tenancy sustainment supports Housing Assistance Payments
Social housing	Traveller Accommodation Expert Group

⁸³ *Nutrition Guidelines for Food Parcels*, Healthy Ireland, Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/235166/85107551-d69a-4692-bed6-33c234694037.pdf#page=null>.

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Housing for All

Ireland has committed, along with other member states, to work towards ending homelessness by 2030. Under *Housing for All*, the Government's housing plan, 300,000 homes will be delivered between 2021 and the end of 2030 including 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable homes and 18,000 cost rental homes. The latest Progress Report (Q4 2023) on *Housing for All* is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/53a08-housing-for-all-q4-2023-progress-report/>.

Homeless accommodation

Ireland's Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provides funding to local authorities on a regional basis towards the operational costs of homeless accommodation and related services. All local authorities are encouraged to seek out suitable capital projects to extend their offering of homeless accommodation and decrease reliance on private emergency accommodation and commercial accommodation. A number of projects have been brought on line or are in progress. As of February 2024, 10 active projects have received funding approval and are progressing. It should be noted however that Capital Emergency Accommodation projects often encounter delays, due to planning difficulties, objections from local communities, and challenges in renovating buildings.

Ireland has 37 family-focussed facilities or hubs operational nationally, offering 878 units of family accommodation. Family hubs offer a greater degree of stability to families than is possible with hotels, with access to more appropriate living and storage space as well as cooking and laundry facilities. Families in hubs are supported by the relevant local authorities and their service delivery partners to identify and secure a tenancy. Where need is identified, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will support the development by local authorities of further family hubs.

Family hubs provide more appropriate emergency accommodation for families. Family hubs allow more intensive supports to be provided when they are needed in terms of welfare, health and housing service. While these facilities provide more security and stability for homeless families than is possible in hotel accommodation, the fundamental objective remains to provide homes for the families concerned. As supply becomes available, families will move into houses and apartments that will be provided under the various social housing supports.

Preventing homelessness

Ireland is committed to enhancing family support, prevention and early intervention services for children and their families experiencing homelessness through a multi-agency and coordinated response, disseminating innovative practice. Ireland's National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC)

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considered early intervention for children and families, and made recommendations relating to domestic violence, tenancy sustainment, Tusla (the Child and Family Agency), and the Health Service Executive. These recommendations are at various stages of progression.

Ireland's *Youth Homelessness Strategy* was published in November 2022. The strategy aims to work towards ending homelessness for young people aged 18-24 through prevention and exits and improving the experience of young people accessing emergency accommodation.

Three of the actions within the strategy are now complete and work on a further 22 actions has commenced. Most notably, the process of developing a pilot model of a housing-led intervention for young people is well underway. The Supported Housing for Youth Pilot will launch in 2024. 20 young people will be moved out of homeless emergency accommodation and into their own accommodation with wraparound supports to help them move towards independent living.

Ireland's Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is leading on actions to identify and provide enhanced tenancy sustainment supports to families experiencing long-term homelessness, to help them exit from homelessness and maintain their homes, including those families that have complex support needs. As part of this, a pilot scheme is in development, to provide housing-led supported accommodation to families with complex needs in Galway City and County. A Steering Group was established in June 2023 to develop this scheme, comprising representatives from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Galway City and County Councils, and local representatives from the Health Service Executive and Tusla (the Child and Family Agency). A consultation with key stakeholders was held on 3 October 2023. It is anticipated that the Pilot will commence in the first half of 2024.

Ireland has committed to ensuring that Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) (a form of social housing support provided by all local authorities) levels are adequate to support vulnerable households, while the supply of social housing increases. HAP is a demand-led housing support operating within the private rental sector. The 2024 Budget allocation will enable continued support of approximately 58,000 existing tenancies and anticipates 8,800 new households to be accommodated in HAP supported tenancies. Approximately one third of exits from HAP are to other forms of social housing. The level of support provided is kept under review in the evolving circumstances of the rental market. Since July 2022, each local authority has statutory discretion to agree to a HAP payment up to 35% above the prescribed maximum rent limit or up to 50% in the case of homeless households in the

Dublin region and for new tenancies to extend the couple's rate to single person households. This will secure more tenancies and prevent new entries to homelessness. Local authorities exercise this discretion on a case-by-case basis.

From 1 May 2023, when a HAP tenant defaults on their differential rent payment to the local authority, they will be offered the option of a payment plan to assist them in maintaining their tenancy and allow the HAP payment to the property owner to continue. If the tenant defaults on payment of differential rent or the payment plan, under the Landlord Payment Guarantee, the HAP payment to the landlord will be guaranteed for a 12-month period (or earlier if the tenancy ends). The implementation of this measure should encourage landlords to remain in the private rental market and make properties available for HAP tenants.

Social housing

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has commissioned detailed research (which is nearing completion) examining the existing social housing income limits in the context of current market and population conditions. When it is available, the department will undertake a further review, including consultation with stakeholders. This will facilitate the preparation of options for consideration in Q4 2024, as set out in the *Housing for All Action Plan* update. Government also agreed to increase the baseline income thresholds by €5,000 for all local authorities from 1 January 2023.

Housing for All also committed to reviewing income eligibility for social housing. A review was completed and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage approved implementation of its recommendations, including scoping and developing options for a new social housing income eligibility model. The new model will seek to support, inter alia, disadvantaged and other vulnerable households unable to source adequate accommodation from their own resources. Government also agreed to increase the baseline income thresholds by €5,000 for all local authorities with effect from 1 January 2023.

Traveller accommodation

A Traveller Accommodation Expert Group was established by the department in 2018 to review the Traveller Accommodation Act 1998 and other legislation impacting on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. The Expert Group presented its report, *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review*, in July 2019. The report sets out an integrated set of recommendations intended to

improve the effectiveness of the arrangements for providing accommodation for members of the Traveller community. A Programme Board, on which Travellers are represented, has been established to oversee the implementation of recommendations of the Traveller Accommodation Expert Group, which include revised and increased budgets and the inclusion of an identifier for members of the Traveller Community on the social housing support application form. A total of €21.1 million was spent on Traveller-specific accommodation in 2022, which included budgetary provision of €18 million for Traveller-specific accommodation and an additional capital amount of €2.6 million arising from savings elsewhere in the department. €29.8 million was spent on Traveller-specific accommodation in 2023.

The Programme Board, established to drive implementation of the recommendations in the *Expert Review Report*, has reported on progress here: <https://www.gov.ie/ga/foilsuichan/37910-traveller-accommodation-expert-review-programme-board-update/>. Of the 32 recommendations made by the Expert Group, the Programme Board have reported that 10 of these are now complete, with progress made on a further 17 actions. The remaining five actions have been identified for future work programmes. Completed actions to date include the introduction of an ethnic identifier on social housing applications, as well as a review and guidance issued to local authorities on funding for Traveller-specific accommodation.

3.7 – Other Relevant Actions

The following actions underway are of relevance to implementing the *European Child Guarantee*, but are not confined to any one particular recommendation. These actions are part of Ireland's response to the overall objective of ending child poverty.

Local Area Child Poverty Plans

Ireland's *National Action Plan* commits to establish child poverty action plans at local area level in Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) areas. Pilot sites will be identified to implement local plans, maximise learning, and assess the feasibility of actions in both rural and urban areas. Other factors that will be considered in the selection of the pilots are population density, deprivation levels, local service provision, and diversity of service users. These pilots are expected to commence mid-2024.

Online Safety Code

Ireland's Coimisiún na Meán has prepared a draft *Online Safety Code*, which is expected to be published in 2024. The Code is intended to ensure that video-sharing platform services and providers

take appropriate measures to protect children from harmful content, including illegal content and age-inappropriate content. It is also intended to protect the general public from content which amounts to incitement to violence or hatred, provocation to commit a terrorist offence, dissemination of child sex abuse material, offences concerning racism or xenophobia as well as certain commercial communications.

Raising awareness of services covered by the European Child Guarantee

Planning for a national mapping of all Tusla parenting support services is underway. The objective of this project is to make access to parenting support services easier for parents, and signposting to these services easier for practitioners. Tusla are currently conducting a pilot to gather the necessary data on local services. This pilot data will be used to build a geospatial mapping of parenting services. Consolidating and integrating public health, family and parental assistance, and well-being services is also a key focus on the new 2.5 year *Programme Plan on Child Poverty and Well-being*.

Chapter 4 - Indicators, targets and monitoring

Overarching targets

The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion* commits to setting a new national child poverty target. A public consultation as part of this process launched on 20 November 2023, with a closing date of 19 January 2024. Ireland's new national child poverty target is expected to be set in 2024.

The development of a new national child poverty target will feed into the wider whole-of-government approach to address child poverty, including the recently established Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach.

Development of EU Monitoring Framework

A monitoring framework for the *European Child Guarantee* is being developed by the Indicators Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee and the European Commission. This framework aims to track, through concrete statistical indicators, how the *European Child Guarantee* is being implemented by member states. The monitoring framework is based on a set of Eurostat indicators as well as national sources. The first version of the monitoring framework was published in December 2023.

Children and Young People's Indicator Set

To measure progress towards the National Outcomes outlined in *Young Ireland*, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth) has developed a Children and Young People's

Indicator Set, which helps to track progress in the lives of children and young people aged 0-24. It tracks progress across each outcome, using relevant indicators which, taken together, give an idea of how children and young people are doing. The indicators identify and combine data from a range of sources including administrative survey and census data. An updated version of the Indicator Set was published alongside *Young Ireland*. Over the lifetime of this policy framework and the *Child Guarantee*, this resource will be further developed, so everyone has access to timely and relevant data on the lives and outcomes of children and young people.

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI)

*Growing Up in Ireland*⁸⁴ is the national longitudinal study of children and young people, a joint project of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Since 2006, the study has provided government with an evidence base to make informed policy decisions on a wide range of issues based on data from children and young people living in Ireland.

For over 15 years, the study has followed the progress of two groups of children: 8,000 9-year-olds (Cohort '98) and 10,000 9-month-olds (Cohort '08). The members of Cohort '98 are now 25-26 years old and those of Cohort '08 are around 16 years old. In 2023, the study launched a new third cohort of babies who will be 9 months old in 2024.

State of the Nation's Children

The *State of the Nation's Children (SONC)* report⁸⁵ provides a comprehensive picture of children's lives by presenting key information on children's health, behavioural and educational outcomes as well as their relationships with their parents and their friends. It also presents data on supports and services available to children. *SONC* provides the most up-to-date data on the National Set of Child Wellbeing indicators. The report charts the wellbeing of children in Ireland, tracks changes over time, and benchmarks progress in Ireland relative to other countries.

The most recent *SONC* report was published in January 2024. Since 2020, Ireland has transformed and modernised the delivery of the report by moving to a web version, with links provided to the underlying data tables, in the CSO's Open Data Portal, PxStat. This new format has many benefits for

⁸⁴ "Growing Up in Ireland", Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/699d8f-growing-up-in-ireland/>.

⁸⁵ *State of the Nation's Children*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1f703-state-of-the-nations-children/>.

users, including that users always have access to the most up to date version of the data and have access to previous data and additional analysis of the data not reported on in the report. In line with the Government's Open Data Initiative the data is available in an open, machine-readable format.

Young Ireland Monitoring Framework

The monitoring framework for *Young Ireland* is currently being developed. The Technical Support Instrument (TSI) is an EU programme that provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU member states to design and implement reforms at the national level in line with EU priorities. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth successfully applied for technical support under this initiative in 2022.

Entitled, *Towards a new governance framework for children and youth policies in Ireland*, the project is aligned with the aims of the *European Child Guarantee* and examines child poverty in Ireland by providing research and expertise towards the implementation of this policy framework. The EU Commission appointed the OECD to this technical support role and function. Interim outputs from the project have already informed the design and content of *Young Ireland*, and the final report was published in April 2024. This will inform the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for *Young Ireland* as a whole, including the *Child Guarantee*.

Chapter 5 - Financing

Ireland's spend on *European Child Guarantee* measures is not easily differentiated. Some measures require the involvement of multiple departments, and the remit of departments can vary with changes of government. This section gives an overview of some of Ireland's spend on issues affecting children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, as well as universal measures. While these measures meet and complement the recommendations of the *European Child Guarantee*, they are not all being implemented specifically in response to this, as some actions were already underway prior to the Commission's Recommendation. The funding allocated for implementation is not therefore specifically for implementation of the *European Child Guarantee*.

The following section gives a high level look at some of Ireland's spend, broken out into the different areas covered by the *Guarantee*, as well as other spend outside of these areas that impacts on child poverty.

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Early Childhood Education and Care

- Core funding for the Early Childhood Education and Care sector has increased significantly to €287 million;
- Funding for the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has increased by approximately 40%;
- €4.5 million has been allocated to the introduction of Equal Start, which seeks to promote equitable participation for all children in early learning and school aged care settings, with a particular focus on children experiencing different forms of disadvantage;
- The sponsor rate under the NCS for children aged one and over has increased to €5.30, from a minimum of €4.31-€5.00, depending on the age of the child;
- Tusla has been given increased funding of €50 million in 2024 for residential care placements for children (up 8%) – this will support increased demand, as well as fund the opening of 16 new residential care units in 2024;
- €1.1 billion has been allocated to Early Learning and Care in 2024, to provide access to safe, high-quality, developmentally-appropriate, integrated ELC and school-age childcare for children up to the age of five; and
- A Childminding Development Grant of €250,000 in 2023 is in place to assist childminders who are providing a childminding service in their own home.

Annual investment in childcare

Year	Investment Total	Investment Increase	Investment narrative
2018	€485 million	€20 million	Full second year of ECCE free pre-school introduced. This builds on the 2018 development which extended the scheme from 38 weeks, to an average of 61 weeks for children, depending on their date of birth and age starting school. <i>First 5</i> launched in November 2018.
2019	€574 million	€89.6 million	In Budget 2019, an additional €89.6 million was allocated to Early Learning and Care and school-age childcare – representing more than 18% of the public investment target.
2020	€638 million	€63.5 million	Further progress was made in Budget 2020 with an additional allocation of €63.5 million to the sector - a cumulative 31% of the public investment target. The 2020 allocation for ELC and SAC was €638 million.

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2021	€638 million	N/A	<p>Maintaining 2020 funding levels for childcare:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet the full year costs of additional hours of subsidised income-based childcare, which were introduced in September of this year. • Utilise savings on ECCE to improve service delivery of programmes including the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for children with a disability. • Continue to support all childcare providers through access to the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme until at least end of March 2021 at an estimated cost of €60m.
2022	€716 million	€78 million	<p>Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2022, approximately €1 billion in State supports was allocated to the ELC and SAC sector.</p> <p>Separately, Budget 2022 secured an additional €78 million for ELC and SAC (including once off funding for ELC and SAC of €37 million to bridge the gap between the end of COVID-19 supports and the introduction of a new funding scheme – Core Funding).</p>
2023	€1.025 billion	€346 million	<p>Budget 2023 secured €1.025 billion for the ELC and SAC sector – achieving the <i>First 5</i> investment target five years ahead of time.</p>
2024	€1.1 billion	€83 million	<p>Investment package worth €1.1 billion for early learning and childcare for 2024, building on the substantial investment in Budget 2023 and delivering a 70% increase in total State investment in the sector since 2020.</p>

Education and school-based activities

- State examination entry fees will be waived again in 2024, at an estimated annual cost of €11 million. Over 135,000 students sat state examinations in 2023;
- The DEIS Programme has been allocated €180 million for 2024, supporting approximately 260,000 students;
- €200 million has been allocated to provide devices for learning platforms, software and overall digital technology infrastructure development to all recognised primary and post-primary schools, under the *Digital Strategy for Schools*;
- DEIS schools will continue to receive an additional 10% in ICT grant funding in recognition of the role that access to digital technology can play in combating educational disadvantage;
- A similar increase is provided for students in special schools or students in mainstream primary education that require specific additional resources;
- €5.7 million has been provided to schools under the *Assistive Technology Scheme* in 2022 and 2023 towards the cost of computers and specialist equipment for educational purposes, for children with complex disabilities who need this specialist equipment;

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- Funding of €50 million in 2023 and €68 million in 2024 has been allocated to provide books and resources to students, aimed at eliminating education costs, and benefitting 561,000 children;
- €196.8 million has been allocated to the Youthreach Programme from 2021-2027, which provides two years of integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers with no qualifications or vocational training aged 15-20;
- The Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), which promotes school attendance, participation and retention, was allocated €18 million in 2024; and
- The School Completion Programme (SCP), which aims to retain a young person to completion of the leaving certificate, equivalent qualification or suitable level of educational attainment, was allocated €35 million in 2024.

Healthy meal each school day

- Funding of €376.3 million in 2022-2024 has been allocated to provide regular, free, nutritious meals to 443,000 students, to help them take advantage of their education. This includes an increase of €42.5 million in the national budget for 2024 to facilitate the expansion of the programme.

Healthcare

- The Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme delivers targeted interventions in the areas of healthy eating, tobacco cessation, parenting and mental health, at an annual cost of €13 million;
- The abolition of public in-patient charges in all public hospitals in April 2023 aims to alleviate the financial burden for children accessing hospital care;
- In August 2023, eligibility for the GP visit card on the basis of age was extended to children aged six and seven, meaning that all children under eight are now eligible;
- Eligibility for the GP visit card was fully extended to all those who earn up to the median household income from November 2023, meaning that approximately an additional 71,000 children are now eligible; and
- Young Parent Support Programme - €7.2 million has been allocated for 2023-2027 to promote and enhance the well-being of pregnant and parenting teens and their children. This was co-funded as part of Ireland's ESF+ Programme for 2021-27: Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST).

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Healthy nutrition

- An additional €0.3 million was given to the Healthy Communities Programme in Budget 2024, to recruit four further Community Food and Nutrition Officers (CFNO);
- To ensure that the meals provided under the School Meals Programme meet the *Healthy Ireland Nutritional Standards*, schools must submit a sample menu when applying for funding, and provide detailed records at the end of each school year. This ensures that school meals are nutritious and fit for purpose; and
- Food Dudes is another school-based project that encourages children to eat more fruit and vegetables. Over 3.1 million portions of fruit and vegetables were delivered as part of the project in the school year 2022-2023.

Adequate housing

- CYPSCs (Children and Young People's Services Committees, which bring together all major organisations and agencies working locally on behalf of children and young people to ensure effective interagency co-ordination and collaboration), have been allocated €1.5 million, an increase of €200,000, to develop, enhance and expand services to children and families in International Protection accommodation;
- A further €11 million to assist arrivals (including children) from the Ukraine and International Protection Applicants; and
- Funding of €242 million in 2024 has been allocated to provide homelessness prevention services, emergency accommodation and other supports for families experiencing homelessness.

Child poverty

- €60.9 million has been allocated in 2024 to increasing the payment rate for qualifying children in most social welfare payments;
- €37 million has been allocated in 2024 for a once-off cost of living lump sum for each qualifying child in social welfare payments;
- €4.7 million has been allocated in 2024 to developing an International Protection Child Payment;
- A €1.5m increase in funding has been allocated in 2024 to enhance and expand services to children and families in international protection accommodation;

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- €4.2 million has been allocated for 2023-2027 to provide a standardised pathway for family support within Tusla, to support parents and children in the International Protection system (under ESF+);
- For families in employment, from January 2024 the Working Family Payment (WFP) threshold will be raised by €54 per week, regardless of family size;
- A €300 cost of living lump sum which will be paid to all households in receipt of Fuel Allowance in 2024, at a cost of €123 million;
- A €12 increase in the weekly rates of payment for Working Age Social Welfare Schemes in 2024 will contribute to reducing child poverty where children are living in these households;
- Child poverty action plans at local area level have been allocated €100,000 each, to develop and implement local plans, maximise learning, and assess the feasibility of actions;
- The funding to the Youth Justice Programme (comprising Youth Justice Projects; research evidence into policy, programmes and practice; Greentown; and the Bail Supervision Scheme) has been increased by 17.4% in Budget 2024;
- Funding for SICAP, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, has increased by €4.6 million in 2024;
- Funding of €7 million has been provided in 2024 for SSNO (Scheme to Support National Organisations), which provides core funding to national organisations delivering programmes and services, including several which focus specifically on reducing child poverty and promoting well-being, and often operate in a range of service areas; and
- Income disregards for Carer's Allowance have increased in Budget 2024 (from €350 for a single person and €750 for a couple to €450 and €900 respectively in June 2024), which will increase the disposable income available to poorer families, some of whom have children, as those with caring responsibilities may bear additional costs related to disability.

[Impact of investment in social transfers and childcare on child poverty](#)

Many studies have shown the direct and indirect impacts of investment in childcare and social transfers on child poverty. For instance, enabling access to Early Childhood Care and Education through increased investment can improve labour market participation rates among parents, which in turn can have a significant impact in reducing poverty rates among children and their families. Data from the 2023 SILC shows that if all social transfers were excluded, the overall at risk of poverty rate would have been 34.1%, compared to the actual rate for that year of 10.6%.

The Economic and Social Research Institute's report *Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare*⁸⁶ found that social transfers that target children (including Qualified Child increases, and changes to Working Family Payments) have the greatest impact on poverty in Ireland. This is true for the overall population but particularly for children and people living in rented accommodation, groups that are the most exposed to poverty. Reform of the Working Family Payment by increasing the earnings limit was found to be particularly effective in reducing income poverty. According to the report, broader policies to reduce costs of living can have a large impact on families with low levels of resources, including actions on affordable housing, affordable childcare, and access to healthcare.

Labour market participation can be a strong indicator of economic status, and likelihood of deprivation. The Economic and Social Research Institute's report, *Extending the National Childcare Scheme to Childminders: Cost and Distributional Effect*⁸⁷, estimates that a 10% decrease in childcare costs would lead to mothers of young children in Ireland increasing their labour market participation by 1.2%, and increase their hours of work by 0.9%. Recent extensions of the National Childcare Scheme were found to have increased both the participation rate and full-time employment rate of mothers of young children. The report estimates that incentivising one adult in each jobless household to join the labour market could decrease the overall at risk of poverty rate from 13.6% in 2022 to 11.5%. Increased participation in the labour market by women could also have a significant effect, decreasing the at risk of poverty rate to 10.7%.

In a study of seven European countries, Leventi et al. (2019)⁸⁸ find that, in most countries, the measures that reduce poverty most cost-effectively are increasing child benefits and social assistance. While increasing child benefit would see a very limited impact on overall poverty reduction due to its universal nature, increasing Qualifying Child payments has a significant impact on child poverty.

The report found that a small impact on poverty rates overall could translate into a more substantial decline in consistent poverty.

⁸⁶ *Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare*, Economic and Social Research Institute, 2022. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/headline-poverty-target-reduction-in-ireland-and-the-role-of-work-and-social-welfare>.

⁸⁷ *Extending the National Childcare Scheme to childminders: Cost and distributional effect*, Economic and Social Research Institute, 2023. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BP202403_0.pdf.

⁸⁸ *Improving poverty reduction in Europe: What works best where?*, Leventi, C., Sutherland, H. and Tasseva, I. V., 2019. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928718792130>.

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Finally, the Economic and Social Research Institute's *Technical Paper on the Measure of Basic Deprivation and Consistent Poverty in Ireland*⁸⁹ highlighted the role of non-cash benefits such as medical cards and childcare support in addressing material deprivation. Ireland's continued investment in childcare support and targeted social transfers should have a significant positive impact on the lives of children and families experiencing poverty or deprivation.

Impact of cost of living measures on child poverty in 2023

The Central Statistics Office reports that recent temporary cost of living measures announced by government reduced the at risk of poverty rate for children (0-17) from 16.0% to 14.3% in 2023. Similarly, the measures resulted in a fall in the consistent poverty rate for children from 5.4% to 4.8%. The at risk of poverty rate for people living in households with at least one child under 18 years, who are among the most vulnerable household compositions, decreased from 24.7% to 19.2%. The same group's consistent poverty rate decreased from 9.3% to 7.1% as a result of the introduction of cost of living measures. These measures included a €400 lump sum payment paid to households in receipt of the Fuel Allowance payment, and a double Child Benefit payment in late 2022⁹⁰.

In their report *Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*⁹¹, UNICEF note that Ireland leverages child-related measures to address poverty, and the report ranks Ireland 12th in the EU and OECD for successfully lowering its child poverty rate since 2012.

Budget 2024

In Budget 2024, the core spending package amounted to €6.4 billion, while an additional €2.7 billion was allocated to the temporary cost of living measures, building on the strong cost of living theme in Budget 2023. In their Preliminary Review of Budget 2024, the Parliamentary Budget Office calculated that households in the lowest income decile would benefit most, experiencing income increases of 7.0%, while households in the highest income decile will experience increases of 1.2%⁹². According to

⁸⁹ *Technical Paper on the Measure of Basic Deprivation and Consistent Poverty in Ireland*, Department of Social Protection, 2021. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/202902/95a51237-bead-451c-9d4a-b42ef1a34009.pdf>.

⁹⁰ "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023: Impact of Cost-of-Living Measures on Poverty", Central Statistics Office, 2024. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/impactofcostoflivingmeasuresonpoverty/>.

⁹¹ *Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*, UNICEF, 2023. Available at: [UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-18-Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ireland/media/1000/Child-Poverty-Amidst-Wealth-2023.pdf)

⁹² *Preliminary Review of Budget 2024*, Parliamentary Budget Office, 2023. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2023/2023-10-10_preliminary-review-of-budget-2024_en.pdf.

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the Economic and Social Research Institute, tax and welfare measures introduced under Budget 2024 will insulate most households from rising prices, and reduce the at risk of poverty rate of most groups, including children, in 2024. However, it notes that this is accomplished mainly through temporary measures and calls on government to introduce permanent measures to achieve long-lasting, significant improvements to the living standards of lower-income households⁹³.

Role of inflation

In nominal terms, there have been substantial increases in net income between 2021 and 2024 for each of the family types assessed by the Parliamentary Budget Office. This is particularly the case for National Minimum Wage earners due to the significant increases in their hourly pay from €10.50 to €11.30 under Budget 2023, and rising again to €12.70 under Budget 2024. The Preliminary Review of Budget 2024 notes that, given the period of high inflation from 2021, take home pay is up substantially less in real terms. For example, a single child carer earning the National Minimum Wage will see a nominal increase of 22.7% in earnings between 2021 and 2024, but a real change of 4.1%, once inflation is taken into account. Similarly, the increased payment for a qualified child (under 12) rose 9.5% between 2023 and 2024, and 21.1% between 2021 and 2024, but the real change in these periods was 6.1% and 2.7% respectively.

Child budgeting

Young Ireland identifies child budgeting as a key action in the enabling environment of the policy framework. In its first year, the Programme Office on Child Poverty and Well-being developed and applied a cross-government approach to providing a focus on child poverty in Budget 2024. This process culminated in the publication of the report, *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2024 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being*⁹⁴. The report captured new and increased budget spending across 12 government departments, and revealed how the new budget focus is accelerating and deepening collective ambition for children.

⁹³ "Budget 2024 tax and welfare measures likely to increase real income next year", Economic and Social Research Institute, 2023. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/news/budget-2024-tax-and-welfare-measures-likely-to-increase-real-income-next-year>.

⁹⁴ *Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2024 to Reduce Child Poverty and Promote Well-being*, Department of the Taoiseach, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d399e-budget-2024/>.

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In 2022, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published a pilot study⁹⁵ that sets out a transparent, easy-to-understand methodology to calculate state expenditure that benefits children. Further development of the use of child budgeting will examine the allocation and outcomes assessment across the five National Outcomes. Child budgeting analysis will be expanded in 2025 to include government departments with the highest level of expenditure benefitting children (the Departments of Education; Health; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Justice; Rural and Community Development; and Social Protection).

Commitments are also included in *Young Ireland* to examine how child expenditure is allocated, and if the balance of expenditures is similar to other developed countries, as well as assessing outcomes for children in terms of how effective this expenditure is in improving the well-being of children. Ireland aims to publish an estimate of the Government's expenditure on children by the end of 2024.

Income support

It is widely recognised that in order to fully address the issues surrounding poverty and social inclusion, adequate service provision across several policy domains, coupled with appropriate levels of income support, are necessary⁹⁶. Ireland's Department of Social Protection seeks to alleviate and prevent child poverty by providing a range of income supports for families with children, as well as labour market activation initiatives. Recent budgets have provided for improvements to many of these measures, which are targeted at low-income families and children.

These supports (details of which can be found on the government portal www.gov.ie) include:

- Child Benefit (universal payment in respect of children);
- Increase for a Qualified Child (to primary social welfare payments);
- Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance;
- One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseekers Transitional Payment (targeted supports for lone parents);
- Working Family Payment (a payment for employees with children on low incomes);

⁹⁵ *The Irish Government's Expenditure on Children in 2019: A Pilot Study of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs*, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/22313-spending-review-the-irish-governments-expenditure-on-children-in-2019/>.

⁹⁶ *Technical Paper on the Poverty Indicators for Social Inclusion in Ireland*, Economic and Social Research Institute, 2023. Available at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/technical-paper-on-the-poverty-indicators-for-social-inclusion-in-ireland>.

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- Back to Work Family Dividend (a payment to help people with children move from welfare to employment);
- Maternity Benefit, Paternity Benefit, Parent's Benefit, Adoptive Benefit and Health and Safety Benefit; and
- Domiciliary Care Allowance (monthly payment for a child with a severe disability who requires ongoing care and attention, substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age).

In addition, there are other payments that, while not specifically targeted at families with children, may be available to those families depending on their circumstances, such as Carer's Benefit, Carer's Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Disability Allowance is also payable to eligible recipients aged 16 years or older.

International Protection Child Payment

The introduction of an International Protection Child Payment (IPCP) is a key commitment in the White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service⁹⁷. The IPCP will contribute towards the cost of raising a child, protect against child poverty, and enable participation in Irish society. The IPCP is an important commitment to help address the high rates of poverty experienced by this group of children in keeping with the particular focus on child poverty in Budget 2024.

The IPCP will be payable to an adult who is awaiting a decision on an IP application and is residing in IPAS accommodation in respect of each dependent child, up to the age of 18, in their care.

An allocation of €4.7m was secured to provide for the IPCP in 2024. Sanction for the new measure has been received from the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform in line with the rules and procedures governing public spending.

The Department of Social Protection have agreed to administer the payment on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Integration and Youth. Work is ongoing between the two departments to operationalise the payment with a target of payments being place during quarter two 2024.

⁹⁷ *White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service*, Department of Children, Equality, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5f68b-white-paper-on-ending-direct-provision/>.

Chapter 6 - Lessons learned and further development

The next few years of Ireland's implementation of the *European Child Guarantee* will build on the work already underway, and focus on delivering better outcomes for children at risk of poverty. This will involve a continuous learning from the experiences of the past, as well as drawing on ongoing research and data, and consulting with stakeholders including children and young people.

Research and data

The use of research to inform policy making for children and young people has been developing over the past two decades. Under a National Goal that 'children's lives will be better understood', the first *National Children's Strategy*⁹⁸ from 2000 to 2010 emphasised the development of research and information to support policymakers, operational managers, professionals and others providing services to children to make informed decisions. Under this strategy, *Growing Up in Ireland* was established, child well-being indicators were identified, and the first *State of the Nation's Children* Report was published. Since then, research and data on children has further progressed, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth now has the benefit of a research and evaluation unit and a data and analytics unit. New initiatives are being established such as the Care Experiences Project, in partnership with the Central Statistics Office, to provide much needed insights into the lives of children in alternative care.

In the context of this well-developed landscape of research and data, there is a need to examine the gaps and how we ensure we have better data on vulnerable or disadvantaged cohorts of children. There is also a need to better understand the intersectionality of inequalities, where in some cases suffering from one form of disadvantage can make other negative outcomes more likely. For example, mental health problems can contribute to some young people becoming homeless, and homelessness can exacerbate mental health problems.

To address these gaps and enhance Ireland's data and research capacities, *Young Ireland* sets out an action to develop a Cross Government Children and Young People's Research Programme, beginning with a research landscape and gap analysis. The analysis will be used to inform the breadth and scope of a new research programme from 2024 to 2028 and the prioritisation of actions within this

⁹⁸ *Our Children – Their Lives: National Children's Strategy 2000-2010*, National Children's Office, 2010. Available at: <https://hubnanog.ie/our-children-their-lives-national-childrens-strategy-2000-2010/>.

programme. *Young Ireland* also situates children's data within broader equality data, and the *Equality Data Strategy* is due to be published this year. The *Equality Data Strategy* will advance the collection, standardisation, use and monitoring of all equality data, including data relating to children and young people, to highlight inequalities that may otherwise remain hidden. Studying children and young people's data as part of a focus on equality will also improve our understanding of how these characteristics can interact, and help to address the resulting inequalities and disadvantage.

We will also examine the *SONC* report and the Children and Young People's Indicators Set⁹⁹ (CYP indicator set). There are 32 indicator areas that feature in both pieces of research, including demographics, early life, disability, poverty, risky health behaviours, education, obesity and physical activity, bullying, self-harm and mental health, the locality, youth diversion, home life and care status. We note that there is some overlap between the indicator sets, and both must be updated annually, which takes time and resources. There have also been some shortcomings noted on the usefulness of either indicator set given their size. As a result of this, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has commissioned a research project in order to:

- Consider the overlaps and the potential merit of merging both pieces of research into one new indicator set;
- Develop a condensed and updated indicator set for the CYP indicator set (or a combined indicator set) to ensure its continued use in policy development; and
- Consider new indicators related to other areas of relevance that were not as prominent when the predecessor to the CYP indicator set was created (e.g. impacts of environmental issues on children and young people).

Furthermore, we know that government is not the only collector or user of data on children and young people. Through their work, our non-statutory partners also collect and use data to understand and address the needs of their service users and improve provision. In 2023, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth launched a fund to support civil society organisations to develop their data capacities, and this fund will be evaluated in 2024.

There is also a need to understand the effectiveness of programmes for children and young people. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth launched the What Works

⁹⁹ "Children and Young People's Indicator Set", Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/03f4b-children-and-young-peoples-indicator-set/>.

Evidence Hub¹⁰⁰ to increase access to effective prevention and early intervention programmes, by making the best evidence on what works available to policy-makers, service commissioners, providers and other audiences.

Coordination

We recognise that there is a need for improved coordination in support and access to services for children and young people, and ensuring that they have the right service available to them when they need it. The *Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Plan* points to interagency coordination as vital in achieving good outcomes for children. This was also a strong theme in consultations carried out in the development of *Young Ireland*. There are a number of innovative and impactful practices for service coherence, such as in the areas of parenting supports, multidisciplinary teams in educational settings, and Tusla's Meitheal Programme. There is a need to further enhance a national approach by building on established good practice. Enhancing service integration is one of the six key priority areas for the Programme Office, and as well as monitoring progress across the system, the Office will aim to accelerate the emergence of a culture and practice of service integration, by undertaking a number of specific focused actions:

- Support the development of a framework for existing data to map both service needs and service availability at local level (working with Central Statistics Office);
- Profile good practice in interagency cooperation and highlighting transferable learning from these initiatives;
- Profile and encouraging innovation to enhance integrated services and monitor the impact of new integration initiatives (including exploring the impact of innovations such as local area coordination, legislative basis for service integration, pooled budgets, shared targets and accountability, protocols for cooperation and data sharing, use of shared services);
- Encouraging institutional support and leadership through the designation of high-level organisation leads with responsibility for coordination of all child-relevant activity; and
- Development of an indicator to measure service integration and its impact on children and families.

There is a need for stronger coherence at the level of cross-departmental policymaking. Ireland has many policies and strategies that directly or indirectly impact on children and young people, as set out in the Appendix to this report. This raises challenges in avoiding duplication and addressing gaps, as

¹⁰⁰ "What Works Evidence Hub", Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023. Available at: <https://whatworks.gov.ie/hub-search/>.

well as the administrative challenges of ensuring robust governance and monitoring. One of the first steps in recognising and addressing this challenge has been the decision to incorporate the *European Child Guarantee* into the overall governance and monitoring structures of *Young Ireland*. This will also facilitate the development of a robust and efficient monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure progress.

The challenges outlined above are discussed by the OECD in their report *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework*, published on 9 April 2024¹⁰¹. This report makes recommendations in respect of streamlining inter-departmental and inter-agency coordination, promoting evidence based policymaking and services, reinforcing accountability frameworks, and implementing *Young Ireland* and promoting policy coherence.

Ensuring children and young people are at the centre of decision-making

Young Ireland sets out a number of systemic actions to place the consideration of children and young people at the centre of decision-making by developing tools for policymakers across government. Embedding children's rights across departments and agencies through the use of these tools will bring a common focus on the impact of all policymaking on children and young people. These tools include the development of child right impact assessments, child budgeting, child rights training, and guidance for the production of child friendly materials.

Ireland recognises the importance of listening to the views of children and young people in decision-making and has developed strong structures and mechanisms to support this principle, and we will continue to build on this work. Ireland's *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024-2028* will be launched on 12 April 2024.

The voices of very young children should also be heard in decision-making. To progress this objective, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Hub na nÓg established an Early Years Working Group comprised of stakeholders from the policy, academic, creative, and early-years sectors with expertise in the area. The resulting toolkit (yet unnamed) will be a practical resource and a reflective tool for staff and volunteers working with children aged 0-5, with activities and

¹⁰¹ *Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework*, OECD, 2024. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/ireland/together-for-children-and-young-people-in-ireland-12f4dfb2-en.htm>.

methods that can be adapted for a wide range of Early Years settings. It will include guidance on adapting practical methods and activities to ensure that they are consistent with good practice.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions

The *European Child Guarantee* aims to place all children in the European Union on an even footing, with opportunities to reach their potential, regardless of who they are and where they come from. Ireland is fully committed to realising this ambition.

There is currently a strong drive and momentum to addressing child poverty in Ireland. The publication of Ireland's *National Action Plan*, the establishment of the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach, and the publication of *Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People* represent an ambition to ensure that all children are supported to be well and happy. This means addressing poverty and deprivation if such an ambition is to be successful.

Ireland has made significant progress in recent years. Developments in education and Early Childhood Education and Care have had recognised positive impacts. Feedback from civil society organisations such as the Children's Rights Alliance in their *Annual Report Card*¹⁰² acknowledges progress, particularly in Early Childhood Education and Care and Education. However, there is much more to be done in respect of housing, homelessness, mental health services, and children in international protection. A key challenge is the recruitment and retention of qualified personnel to work with and support children and families, an issue recognised in the *Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Plan* and in *Young Ireland*.

There is also a strong recognition that addressing child poverty and its underlying factors requires a cross-government approach – it cannot be resolved by one department alone. Intersectional issues can compound disadvantages, making it harder to lift some children out of poverty. Ireland needs to build and sustain efforts to improve coordination and, where appropriate, integration of measures at every level, from policy development to implementation and service provision. The enabling environment described in *Young Ireland* aims to embed the consideration of children and young people as a key part of decision-making across government, further strengthening a cross-government

¹⁰² *Annual Report Card 2024*, Children's Rights Alliance, 2024. Available at: <https://childrensrights.ie/reportcards/report-card-2024/>.

approach. It is through strong and sustained cross-governmental efforts that Ireland can build on its successes to date and continue to see improvements in outcomes for children and young people.

Appendix: List of policies, strategies and programmes underpinning Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan

Overarching Policies and Strategies

- Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020
- From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Well-being 2023-2025
- LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020
- National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027
- National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021
- National Strategy for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making for the years 2015–2020
- National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021
- Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024–2028
- Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025
- Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028

Policies and Strategies in Education

- Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027
- Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (forthcoming)
- Minister for Education Statement of Strategy 2023–2025
- National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030
- National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020
- STEM Education Implementation Plan to 2026
- STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026

Policies and Strategies in Early Years

- First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028
- National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028
- Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028

Policies and Strategies in Health and Nutrition

- Connecting for Life, Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015–2024
- Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025
- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025
- National Oral Health Policy, Smile Agus Sláinte 2019-2026
- National Physical Activity Plan
- Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025
- Sláintecare

Policies and Strategies in Housing

- Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland to 2030
- Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025

Policies and Strategies in Income Support

- Pathways to Work 2021-2025

Overarching Programmes

- Meitheal Programme (Tusla)
- Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)
- STAR (Supporting Traveller And Roma) Pilot Programme
- The Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People (PDS) Programme
- Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice
- Young Parent Support Programme

Programmes in Education

- Assistive Technology Scheme
- Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme
- Free Education Scheme
- Free Primary Schoolbooks Scheme
- Junior Cycle Framework
- School Transport Scheme
- Schools Broadband Programme
- Senior Cycle Physical Education Framework
- Special Transport Grant
- Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)
 - Statutory Educational Welfare Service (EWS)

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- Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL)
- School Completion Programme (SCP)

Programmes in Early Years

- Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)
- Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme
- Equal Start
- National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

Programmes in Health and Nutrition

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- Health and Wellbeing Programme
- Healthy Eating and Active Living Programme
- Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 Year Olds
- Hot School Meals Programme
- National Immunisation Programme
- Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services
- Nutritional Standards for School Meals
- School Meals Programme
- Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme

Programmes in Housing

- Housing Assistance Payment

Programmes in Income Support

- Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance
- Back to Work Family Dividend
- Child Benefit
- Domiciliary Care Allowance
- Fuel Allowance
- Increase for a Qualified Child (to primary social welfare payments)
- International Protection Child Payment
- Maternity Benefit, Paternity Benefit, Parent's Benefit, Adoptive Benefit and Health and Safety Benefit
- One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's Transitional Payment
- Working Family Payment